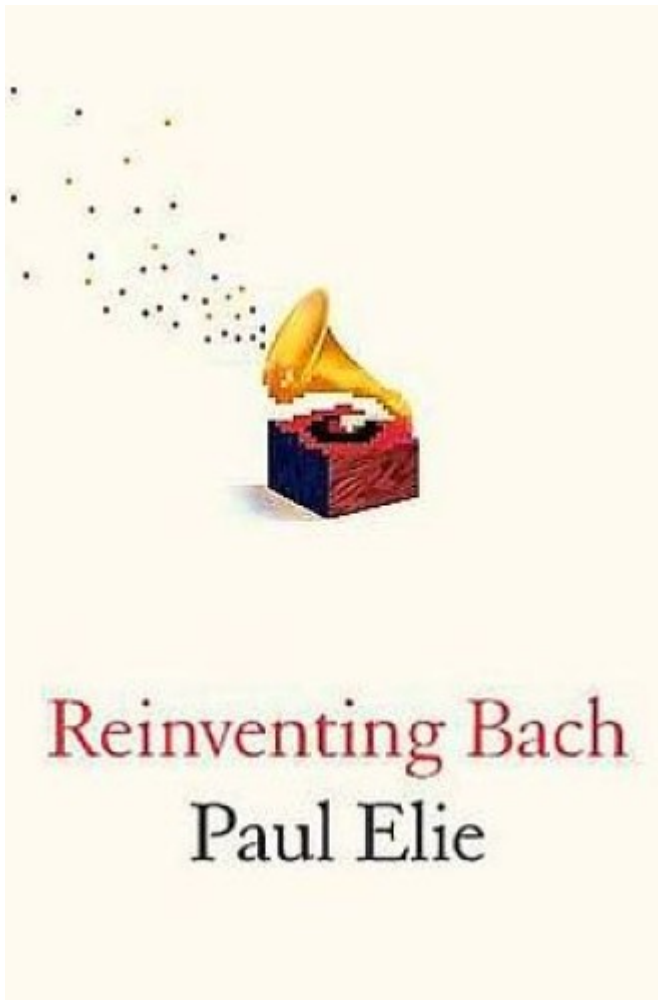


Reinventing Bach, by Paul Elie

Books in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Reinventing Bach

By Paul Elie

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Elie (*The Life You Save May Be Your Own*) has the ability to weave together many small stories to narrate a big story. In *Reinventing Bach*, he tells the story of how Johann Sebastian Bach became in the minds of many people the greatest composer

ever. The story Elie tells is less about Bach himself than about the reception and advancement of his music in the 20th century. Bach was nearly forgotten by his immediate musical descendants. He had a brief revival in the 19th century, thanks to the composer Felix Mendelssohn. In the 20th century the polymath Albert Schweitzer, cellist Pablo Casals, conductor Leopold Stokowski, pianist Glenn Gould and, later, cellist Yo-Yo Ma all had a role in elevating Bach's status. More than anything, it was the invention of the gramophone and subsequent audio devices that gave Bach's work the recognition it deserved. Elie's narrative is like a well-crafted oratorio.