

John Eliot Gardiner

Music in the Castle of Heaven—A portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach. Allen Lane, London 2013/2014, 672 pp. ISBN 9780713996623 (hb.) and ISBN 9780141977591 (pb.). £30/ £10.99.

One of the fascinating aspects of music from the past (pre-recording era) is that it is transmitted to us in encoded language (sc. music notation) and that reliable indications about the way to interpret it get scarcer the more ancient the music gets. We think we understand romantic composers; baroque composers are from a different era. But the code has to be cracked, for music on paper alone is no music. There have to be sounds. Every performing musician has to decide which sounds to produce to make that music ‘happen,’ to give it a real presence in our lives today. The score is not the music, the performance is. But how can the performer be sure that his decoding is correct, that he is playing ‘Bach’ and not something else? What is correct? And can we know? These are the questions musicologists deal with and on which they hardly ever agree. However, one thing is certain: when music happens the subjectivity of the performer is a crucial factor in the event. In an intricate interaction with the audience (also subjective in its listening) the score is interpreted and music is made and heard. This inter-subjectivity plays a key role in all performances of the work, even in the first creation. The presence of so many variables, the only constant being a code (the score), makes clear that performing music is an adventure and that making valid esthetical judgments about music is a very complex matter, not to be undertaken lightly.

Gardiner is fully aware of this complex state of affairs: he is a musician, a practitioner, prominently present on the shop floor for more than half a century, a trend-setter, even. In a footnote to his preface he includes a caveat related to this state of affairs: “Peter Williams [...] warns: The exquisite world of imagination opened up by any powerful music is itself problematic, for it tempts listeners to put into words the feelings it arouses in them and so to visualise a composer’s priorities and even personality. There must be few people who have played, sung, listened to or written about Bach’s music who do not feel they have a special understanding of him, a private connection, unique to themselves, but ultimately coming from their idea of what music is and does. This might be quite different from the composer’s” (Peter Williams, *The Life of Bach* [Cambridge, 2004], p. 1). Gardiner adds: “He is of course quite right.”

Gardiner’s tragedy is that despite this endorsement, this is exactly the trap he falls into. How could this happen? It is because he is fascinated by Bach’s music and feels the need to get to know Bach “as a man and a musician.” This urge is too strong to resist. He begins his quest for the real Bach by criticising the

hagiographical biographies of Bach from the past. They did not sketch a human being but the *Idealtypus* the author had in mind, oscillating between the Christian Lutheran Hero of Faith and the Pythagorean Master of Conceptual music. He applauds the deconstruction of these graven images, as executed by twentieth century literary and historical criticism, but he also deplores that the last generation of biographers seems to have abandoned the idea of writing a full human biography of Bach, because of the lack of factual knowledge. An example of such a scholarly biography is Christoph Wolff, *The Learned Musician* (Oxford, 2000). It offers a 'summa' of the results of half a century scholarly research into Bach. Multidisciplinary and as complete as possible, but very cautious when it comes to conclusions about the intention or the personal feelings of Bach himself, satisfying for the historian but probably disappointing from the 'human interest' point of view.

With this book Gardiner is trying to fill this lacuna. He embarks on his project by telling his own Bach story. He relates what it means for a young boy to grow up under the 1748 Hausmann portrait of Bach, and how Bach's motets were sung at home with family and friends, independent from the then mainstream Bach. He evokes the now gone world of English Bach performance (the King's College Choir singing 'Jesu Joy'—never louder than lovely). He tells how he first performed Monteverdi's *Maria Vespers*, about his lessons with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, his disappointment when he heard Karl Richter etc. In those days (the sixties/seventies) Gardiner was one of the 'angry young men,' doing everything different, breaking the rules. The rest of the story is known. He who was a rebel once is now a 'sir.' For the new generation historically informed performances are the standard and Stokowski's Bach is exotic. Rules and exceptions can easily change position.

This personal introduction serves to give credibility to the real thing: this Gardiner, so familiar with Bach, is going to use his—albeit subjective, but real—inside knowledge of Bach's music to find the real Bach, the "man and the musician." He is going to use his own lifelong experience as a performer of Bach's music as a heuristic tool to advance Bach-studies. Whether this is possible is highly debated in the field of modern musicology. Gardiner sides with Robert L. Marshall who launched an appeal 'Toward a Twenty-First-Century Bach Biography' in 2000,¹ not limited to another analysis of scores or an extra footnote with regard to historical and musicological data, but taking as a starting point the event of music making itself, not shying away from some analyt-

1 Robert L. Marshall, 'Toward a Twenty-First-Century Bach Biography,' *The Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000), 497–525.