

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

The Musician's Bookshelf: J. S. Bach

Francis Knights

There are several hundred books available on Bach in English alone, with important new volumes coming out every year, and it can be difficult to choose from among these. The following list recommends books of both a general and a specific nature, to help keyboard players find their way around, and to draw attention to the best recent publications. For those feeling overwhelmed by the variety of choices, recommended starting works are marked with an asterisk.

Life and Works

The traditional chronological life-and-works biographical format remains the best entry point for understanding the relationship between Bach's music, career and environment. Among the finest are the books by Malcolm Boyd, *Bach* (Oxford, 2006), Davitt Moroney, *Bach: An Extraordinary Life* (London, 2000), *Peter Williams, *Bach: A Life in Music* (Cambridge, 2012) and Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Oxford, 2005), while anyone wanting more detail will find Richard Jones, *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach*, 2 volumes (Oxford, 2007, 2013) exemplary. John Butt (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge, 1997), is a series of expert essays by a dozen or so authors that covers similar ground, but in a themed way. In addition to the Peter Williams volume above, there is a later contribution from the same author, *Bach: A Musical Biography* (Cambridge, 2016), which is a massive and dense work that builds a narrative from the 1754 Bach Obituary by C. P. E. Bach and Agricola, including many penetrating observations about his life and music.

Keyboard and Organ

Fortunately there are two easy choices for books on the clavier and organ music: *David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* (Routledge: New York, 2/2006) and *Peter Williams *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge, 2/2003); both discuss the instruments, performance practice issues and the individual works in detail. Joel Speerstra's *Bach and the Pedal Clavichord: An Organist's Guide* (Rochester, NY, 2005) is also strongly recommended. Several important monographs cover specific works, including Russell Stinson, *Bach: The Orgelbüchlein* (Oxford, 1999) and *J. S. Bach's Great Eighteen Organ Chorales* (Oxford, 2003), Peter Williams, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* (Cambridge, 2001), David Ledbetter, *Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: The 48 Preludes and Fugues* (New Haven, 2002) and Ralph Kirkpatrick, *Interpreting Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: A*

Performer's Discourse of Method (New Haven, 1987). Specific to the pedals is David Yearsley, *Bach's Feet: The Organ Pedals in European Culture* (Cambridge, 2017), and there's an illustrated guide to the actual instruments Bach knew in Christoph Wolff and Markus Zepf, *The Organs of J. S. Bach: A Handbook* (Urbana, 2012).

Performance

Much more has been published about performance issues in Bach's clavier than his organ works; Paul Badura-Skoda, *Interpreting Bach at the Keyboard* (Oxford, 1993) and Richard Troeger, *Playing Bach on the Keyboard: A Practical Guide* (Pompton Plains, NJ, 2003) both explore issues around interpretation, while Colin Booth, *Did Bach really mean that? Deceptive notation in Baroque keyboard music* (Westbury-sub-Mendip, 2010) offers further insights into Bach's notational practices, all concentrating on the music for harpsichord and clavichord. Some relevant organ performance issues are included in Jon Laukvik, *Historical Performance in Organ Playing* (Stuttgart, 2010).

Bach research

All of the books mentioned here are in English, but of course most of the research findings from the last century have been in the pages of academic journals, and many of those were published only in German. Fortunately, a substantial new volume provides an up-to-date summary of the state of Bach research, digesting all the evidence from around the world and presenting an invaluable historic narrative to developments in Bach studies: Robin A. Leaver (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach* (Abingdon, 2017). The 18 authors cover all aspects of Bach, including David Yearsley on the keyboard music. For the original documents about Bach's life, including Forkel's 1802 biography, see Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (eds), rev Christoph Wolff, *The New Bach Reader* (New York, 1998), and for a useful encyclopedia of all matters Bachian, see Malcolm Boyd (ed), *Oxford Composer Companions: J. S. Bach* (Oxford, 1999).

Bach in context

Finally, for those wanting to explore the wider musical and social environment within which Bach worked, two recent books are especially helpful: Raymond Erickson (ed), *The World of J. S. Bach* (Milwaukee, 2009) and Andrew Talle, *Beyond Bach: Music and Everyday Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Urbana, 2017).