

**ARTS & LETTERS**

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What do these Soviet authors all share? "Their decision," says Eberstadt, "to address themselves to the events of Russia's recent past, to look back at the carnage and perversions of justice on which the Soviet state was founded."

*Bach's Secret*

"The Body of Bach" by Edward Rothstein, in *The New Republic* (June 24, 1985), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The lives of musical geniuses are supposed to be filled with drama: brilliant outbursts undermined by alcoholism, mania, and syphilis. Or so the legends go.

But Johann Sebastian Bach, whose 300th birthday the world celebrated this year, is a genuine exception, contends Rothstein, music critic for *The New Republic*. "Bach's life is considered stupefyingly ordinary," although his work is "divine."

"The private man is . . . irrelevant," maintains Rothstein. "He worked hard, married twice, and in domestic harmony fathered 20 children." But his professional career was extraordinary. Born on March 21, 1685, into a family of musicians living in Eisenbach, Thuringia (now in East Germany), Bach sang in a choir at Luneburg at age 15, was the organ-master at a Protestant church in Arnstadt at 17, and became the court organist for Wilhelm Ernst at Weimar by 23. His reputation already established, Bach was invited in 1717 to direct music in the court of Prince Leopold of Kothén. There he composed chamber and orchestral music, most notably *The Brandenburg Concertos* (1721) and *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722).

Life was good at Kothén, notes Rothstein, until the Prince married "a rather unmusical woman." Then Bach's status at the court plummeted. Disgruntled, Bach sought employment elsewhere. When the director of church music for the city of Leipzig suddenly died, Bach applied for the post. But he was offered the job only after it was turned down by two other composers, Georg Philipp Telemann and Christoph Graupner. "To the councilors," observes Rothstein, "Bach was a mediocrity." To Bach, Leipzig was "a compromise."

At Leipzig, he had to rise before dawn to teach school, squabble with bureaucrats who called him "incorrigible," please a rector who was his "bitter enemy"—and all for one-quarter of his former salary. (He resorted to free-lancing at weddings and funerals.) Nonetheless, between 1723 and 1746, he produced an incredible volume of work: five complete cycles of cantatas (about 200), *St. John's Passion* (1724), *Mass in B Minor* (1733), and the *Goldberg Variations* (1742). In 1747, he performed for Frederick II the Great at Potsdam. By 1749, he was blind. On July 28, 1750, he died.

What was the secret behind Bach's genius? Rothstein speculates that Bach linked "the most mundane and the most spiritual." Bach's own explanation: "I was obliged to work hard. Whoever is equally industrious will succeed just as well."