

Abundance of knowledge in a conversational tone

Everything the Bach fan needs to know: Lehmstedt has published "Bach. A Pictorial Biography" by music scholar and Bach Festival director Michael Maul

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There are few scholars who know Bach as well as Michael Maul, the director of the Leipzig Bach Festival, born in 1978. Before entering the international festival business, he was just as active internationally as a scholar; he still is, and the knowledge he has gathered in his comparatively young life as a researcher absolutely qualifies him to write a new Bach biography.

For this Bach biography, however, the overabundance of knowledge could also stand in the way. For the "pictorial biography" just published by Lehmstedt is not addressed to Maul's learned colleagues all over the world, but to the international Bach community, to all who love the music of the greatest of all Thomaskantors – in other words, to pretty much everyone. And it does so with the greatest possible enthusiasm in all due brevity.

Michael Maul has collected 141 documents, primarily by and about Bach, for this splendid volume and, with short texts, has assembled them into a mosaic, from which, as he explains in the preface, the picture of a personality emerges "whose contours stand out, but who remains a silhouette." Which on the one hand is true – but on the other hand is remarkably deep. For it could not be more detailed, the silhouette of the family history, the life, work and aftermath of Johann Sebastian Bach. For Michael Maul understands like few others the high art of eloquent brevity.

141 snapshots inspired by historical documents, paintings, engravings, documents, manuscripts – and the number alone is not accidental. Just as with Bach nothing was accidental and with Maul, too, nothing is fundamentally left to chance: "I have limited the number of texts and images to 141," he writes, "the axisymmetrical reflection of Bach's number 14" – the sum of the letters of Bach's name in the numerical alphabet: B=2, A=1, C=3, H=8, $2 + 1 + 3 + 8 = 14$. A number that in the most diverse guises runs through Bach's oeuvre in an almost mystical manner and which Maul uses here for a deep bow to his fifth evangelist.

However, he does not do it full of devotion through swathes of incense, but with playfulness and without shying away from mistakes. For when viewed in the light of day, the documentation surrounding the composer of the Baroque period is astonishingly meager, so that scholars can only deduce a great deal through chains of circumstantial evidence – or immediately become entangled in speculation.

Maul does not leave this out, writes clearly, where science currently does not know any further, draws his own conclusions, leans quite self-confidently far out of the window. He is allowed to do this because he can. And because he marks it clearly.

And so the 141 snapshots round out to form a surprisingly complete picture. It shows the highly gifted musical family from which Johann Sebastian Bach came, and the long journey from Eisenach to Leipzig, which the musician, who obviously knew of his extraordinary abilities very early on, took with great self-confidence and something like a career plan in his head. It shows what makes Bach's music so unique, so great, so unrivaled, and how much it overwhelmed many contemporaries. It shows that Bach had grandiose opportunities in Leipzig – and yet was never satisfied, shows a driven man, a man of family, mind and pleasure, who could, however, also become quite unpleasant.

Michael Maul forces this cosmos in an informal conversational tone between book covers that are only 310 pages apart and, moreover, contain all texts in German and in English. And this relaxed condensation probably represents, on balance, the greatest achievement of his Bach pictorial biography, from which not only the Bach lover learns just about everything he needs

to know about the great Johann Sebastian, but in which even the expert still comes across suggestions.

(Translated from the German by Günter Müller.)