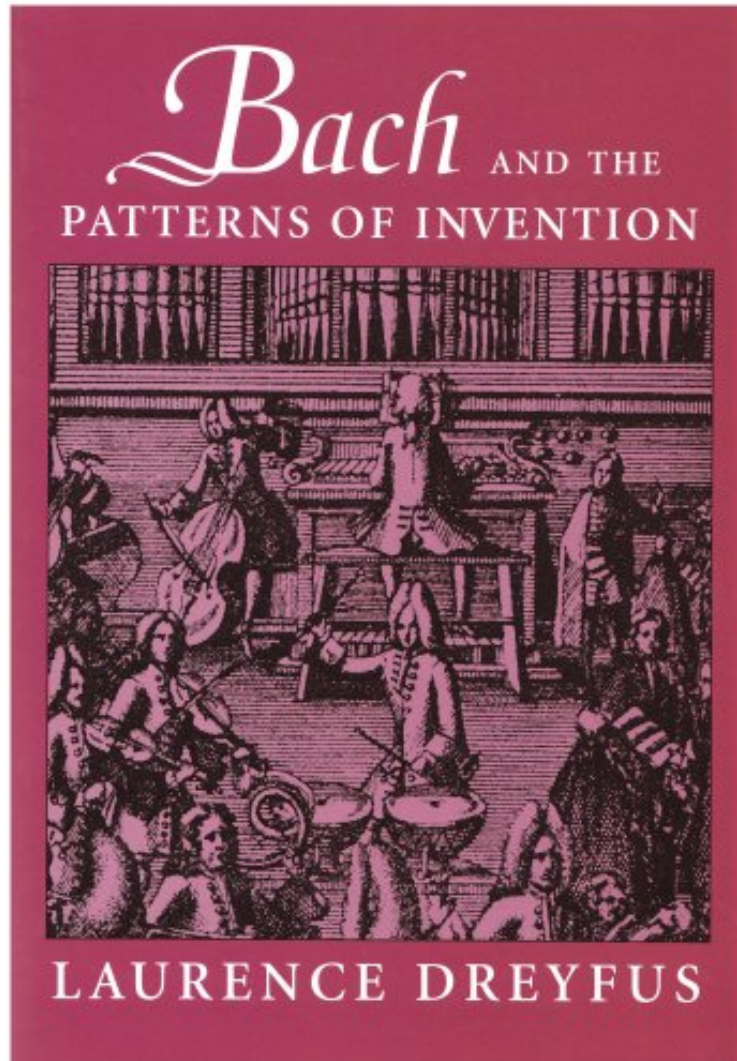


## Bach and the Patterns of Invention

*Laurence Dreyfus*

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**Laurence Dreyfus : Bach and the Patterns of Invention** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Bach and the Patterns of Invention:

112 of 116 people found the following review helpful. The Human BachBy A CustomerJ. S. Bach would have been astounded by the amount of materialwritten on him since his death 250 years ago. And as the number ofbooks and articles on his life and works passes the 15,000 mark it becomes increasingly difficult to discover from among this morass the truly rewarding and insightful writing on 's Composer of the Millenium. But there is one book that stands out: Laurence Dreyfus's Bach and the Patterns of Invention is a landmark both in the study of Bach's music and in music criticism more generally. This is certainly one of the best books on Bach ever written ... Dreyfus's book

accomplishes the dual and seemingly paradoxical goal of removing Bach from his lofty pedestal while at the same time rendering his musical achievements all the more impressive. Dreyfus de-mythologizes Bach, and by humanizing him allows us to grasp in a new way the nature and meaning of his creative acts. The book examines, often in great detail, Bach's mental processes, the problems he posed for himself while composing and the solutions he chose, sometimes from among many options; the possibilities that Bach's musical ideas yielded and the methods he used in arriving at his ultimate choices from among these possibilities are the "patterns of inventions" of Dreyfus's title. Thus Dreyfus's first chapter on Bach's C Major Invention, a piece marvelled at and agonized over by generations of piano students young and old, lays out for our inspection the basic musical unit--the "invention"--Bach devised and then manipulated in order to craft this most engaging of miniatures. Dreyfus's real contribution comes in describing Bach's elegant and often demanding methods of constructing the piece; while elucidating Bach's creativity and the clarity of his thought, Dreyfus points out the repeated flashes of brilliance that make this seemingly disarming Invention the beloved masterpiece that it is. Given the complexity of much of Bach's music it is not surprising that the author's treatment of the subject is often exacting in its demands on the reader. Bach's music is rarely easy, and neither is this book. But like Bach music, it is both challenging and immensely enjoyable. And although a basic knowledge of music theory and the ability to read music is certainly helpful, the insights of the book are also available to all those interested in Bach. The book's welcoming attitude is achieved mainly by Dreyfus's enviable prose--some of the most beautiful and sensitive writing about music of any kind--and partly by the wide range of literary sources and aesthetic themes Dreyfus deals with, as in the final chapter which places Bach's work in the context of important philosophical debates of the early Enlightenment and concludes by relating this dynamic to our own historical perspective. *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* is a scholarly work--awarded the Best Book of the Year in 1997 by the American Musicological Society--but never a dryly academic one. Like his predecessors in the field of Bach studies, Dreyfus considers Bach a far greater composer than contemporaries such as his friend Telemann. However, Dreyfus elevates Bach not by clinging to the shibboleths of Bach criticism, but rather, by examining in depth the marvelous mechanisms of Bach's creative process and by comparing his unrelenting drive to get the most from his musical material with the less demanding standards of the wider musical culture. Thus while the book is not a biography we gain a much more intimate knowledge of the man behind the works, the artistic personality of the composer at his desk.

In this major new interpretation of the music of J. S. Bach, we gain a striking picture of the composer as a unique critic of his age. By reading Bach's music "against the grain" of contemporaries such as Vivaldi and Telemann, Laurence Dreyfus explains how Bach's approach to musical invention in a variety of genres posed a fundamental challenge to Baroque aesthetics. "Invention"--the word Bach and his contemporaries used for the musical idea that is behind or that generates a composition--emerges as an invaluable key in Dreyfus's analysis. Looking at important pieces in a range of genres, including concertos, sonatas, fugues, and vocal works, he focuses on the fascinating construction of the invention, the core musical subject, and then shows how Bach disposes, elaborates, and decorates it in structuring his composition. *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* brings us fresh understanding of Bach's working methods, and how they differed from those of the other leading composers of his day. We also learn here about Bach's unusual appropriations of French and Italian styles--and about the elevation of various genres far above their conventional status. Challenging the restrictive lenses commonly encountered in both historical musicology and theoretical analysis, Dreyfus provocatively suggests an approach to Bach that understands him as an eighteenth-century thinker and at the same time as a composer whose music continues to speak to us today.

[*Bach and Patterns of Invention*] stands head and shoulders above anything else in the field of post-war Bach criticism....Dreyfus believes that the human side of the compositional process is what must interest us about Bach, the sense of an intelligence adhering strictly to the rules he considered God-given, while freely abusing those that his contemporaries held dear. In this way we might attain a sense of the very historical nature of Bach's music--not merely the generic and formal similarities within the idioms of his age (often the principal object of modern scholarship), but particularly the way in which the composer went against the grain of his age. (John Butt *Early Music*) Laurence Dreyfus's *Bach and Patterns of Invention*...is the first study in some time to deal above all with the reasons that music lovers ought to listen to him or play him. Dreyfus's writing is clear and entertaining..and the advantage of [his] approach to Bach is that it makes us listen to his work as he himself listened to the music of his contemporaries, and as they would have listened to his. It does not claim to read the composer's mind, but it reconstructs some of the processes through which he had to go to compose in each case, and it does so by referring to aural experience, leaving questions of ideology and doctrine temporarily on the side. (Charles Rosen *New York of Books*) An original and detailed appraisal of Bach's achievement...Much of this book is concerned with detailed analysis that tries to illuminate, and at least to some extent to recreate, Bach's processes of composition. The result is the uncovering of processes that appear somewhat messy but are convincingly real. This is a fundamentally imaginative approach to analysis...Dreyfus's ideas should be of interest to anyone interested in exploring new ways of understanding 18th-century music. (Barry Mitchell *Times Higher Education Supplement*) Dreyfus's new analytical study of Bach's

processes of composition...challenges received ideas about what constitutes a style, a form and a genre in Bach's music, showing how the composer's individuality stems largely from his writing 'against the grain'. Dreyfus's book is not always easy, and neither is Bach's music, but few readers--even the more general--of the former will be left without a better understanding of the latter. (Malcolm Boyd BBC Music Magazine) Johann Sebastian Bach is not the easiest of composers to write about, for his music can often seem so perfect that it renders description irrelevant. But Bach and the Patterns of Invention, by Laurence Dreyfus, a...totally absorbing study of Bach's processes of composition, is written with a clarity appropriate to a discussion of his music and with an enthusiasm that immediately communicates itself. (Charles Osborne The Daily Telegraph) This brilliant book sets out to answer one of the enduring mysteries of music namely, what was the compositional method that allowed Bach to write such a vast quantity of music of such surpassing quality?...It's a moving and convincing picture of Bach, and a thoroughly original one, delivered in lucid prose in which close argumentation is often capped by an illuminating metaphor. Like Bach's music, it is rhetorical in the best sense. (Ivan Hewett The Music Times) An original and detailed appraisal of Bach's achievement...Much of this book is concerned with detailed analysis that tries to illuminate, and at least to some extent to recreate, Bach's processes of composition. The result is the uncovering of processes that appear somewhat messy but are convincingly real. This is a fundamentally imaginative approach to analysis, involving as it does speculations about the order in which the inventions of the piece were composed and the role of procedures that were started by the composer but destined for only partial success due to the grammar of tonal music...Dreyfus's ideas should be of interest to anyone interested in exploring new ways of understanding 18th-century music. (Barry Mitchell Times Higher Education Supplement) Dreyfus is concerned with how Bach thought in music, but from that deduces some idea of how he thought about music. A stimulating book. (Early Music 2004-12-01) About the Author Laurence Dreyfus is Professor of Music at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Magdalen College.