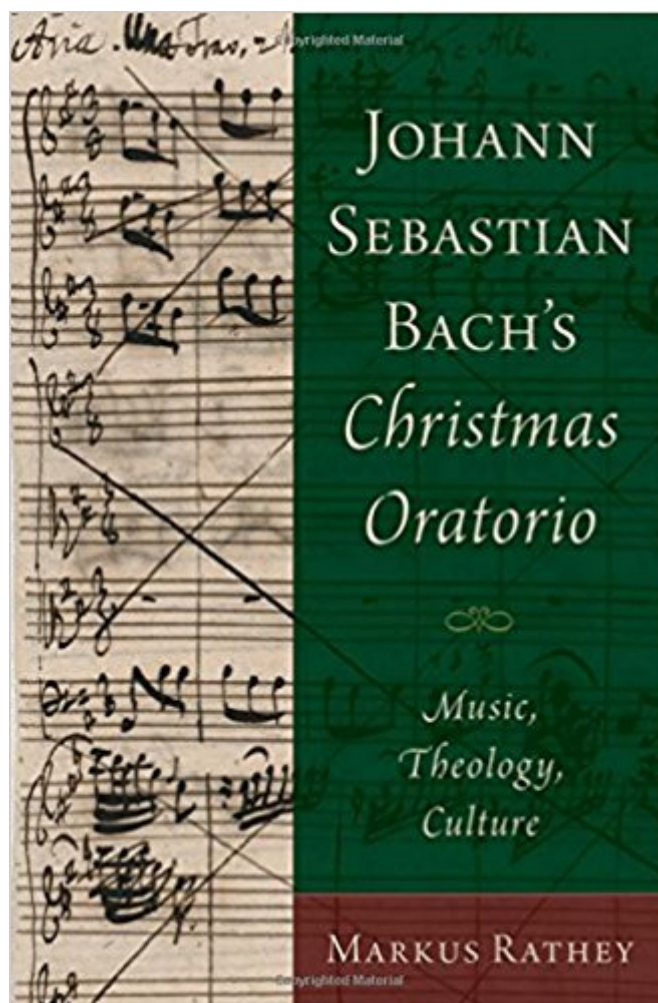


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Johann Sebastian Bach's Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture



Synopsis

In the last decades of the 17th century, the feast of Christmas in Lutheran Germany underwent a major transformation when theologians and local governments waged an early modern "war on Christmas," discouraging riotous pageants and carnivalesque rituals in favor of more personal and internalized expressions of piety. Christmas rituals, such as the "Heilig Christ" plays and the rocking of the child (Kindelwiegen) were abolished, and Christian devotion focused increasingly on the metaphor of a birth of Christ in the human heart. John Sebastian Bach's Christmas Oratorio, composed in 1734, both reflects this new piety and conveys the composer's experience living through this tumult during his own childhood and early career. Markus Rathey's book is the first thorough study of this popular masterpiece in English. While giving a comprehensive overview of the Christmas Oratorio as a whole, the book focuses on two themes in particular: the cultural and theological understanding of Christmas in Bach's time and the compositional process that led Bach from the earliest concepts to the completed piece. The cultural and religious context of the oratorio provides the backdrop for Rathey's detailed analysis of the composition, in which he explores Bach's compositional practices, for example, his reuse and parodies of movements that had originally been composed for secular cantatas. The book analyzes Bach's original score and sheds new light on the way Bach wrote the piece, how he shaped musical themes, and how he revised his initial ideas into the final composition.

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"A noted Bach scholar, Rathey (Yale) presents a masterful holistic study that includes both in-depth musical analyses and in-depth investigations of the environment in which the oratorio was created. Rathey carefully explains Bach's considerable use of the parody technique, in which he reworked music he had written for earlier cantatas. Offering a detailed study of many contemporaneous writings about the role of Christmas in the Lutheran theology and culture of Bach's world, the book provides crucial understanding of Bach's musical and spiritual interpretations of the text. This important study is a must for students of music and will also be helpful for the study of German theological and cultural history." --Choice

"A seldom seen--and marvelously successful--integration of cultural, theological, musical, and paleographical research. No Bach lover should be without this magisterial yet broadly accessible book." --Michael Marissen, author of *Bach & God*

"This is a major achievement by a leading Bach scholar--a work of impressive erudition. Rathey's study moves seamlessly from minute philological details to broad contextual issues. Its profound and skilled engagement with historical theology is especially important. But the book is so full of ideas that it will undoubtedly provide much food for thought for many years to come." --Stephen A. Crist, Emory University

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