

FROM OHRDRUF TO MÜHLHAUSEN:
A SUBVERSIVE READING OF
BACH'S RELATIONSHIP TO AUTHORITY¹

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In his essay "Toward a Twenty-First-Century Bach Biography" Robert Marshall bemoans the failure "of most of the ocean [of Bach] literature . . . to humanize Johann Sebastian Bach."² Especially in the light of the new findings of the last decades, he suggests, we must resist our tendency to act as apologists for Bach and, overcoming our intimidation, start scrutinizing also his "less than attractive" character strains. One of the issues that cries out for more explanation is, in Marshall's view, Bach's "repeated pattern of belligerence, distrust, and defiance" of authority.³

Marshall suspects that Bach's tendency toward insubordination and the "harsh edge to his personality" are rooted in a "basic distrust," which Marshall attributes to Bach's status as an orphan.⁴ Even though I agree with Marshall's assumption that Bach's orphanage by the age of ten needs to be a cornerstone in any deeper understanding of his personality, I do not believe that Bach's distrust of authority can be directly related to the early loss of his parents. I rather think that there is at least one important link missing in Marshall's argument. In my essay, I will endeavor to trace the developmental line between Sebastian, the bereaved ten-year old, and

¹This essay is an extended version of a paper entitled "From Ohrdruf to Arnstadt: A Subversive Reading of J. S. Bach's Relationship to Authority" presented at the biennial meeting of the American Bach Association in April 2004 at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N. J.

²See Robert Marshall, "Toward a Twenty-First-Century Bach Biography," *Musical Quarterly*, 84/3 (2000), 500.

³Marshall, 503.

⁴Marshall, 502.