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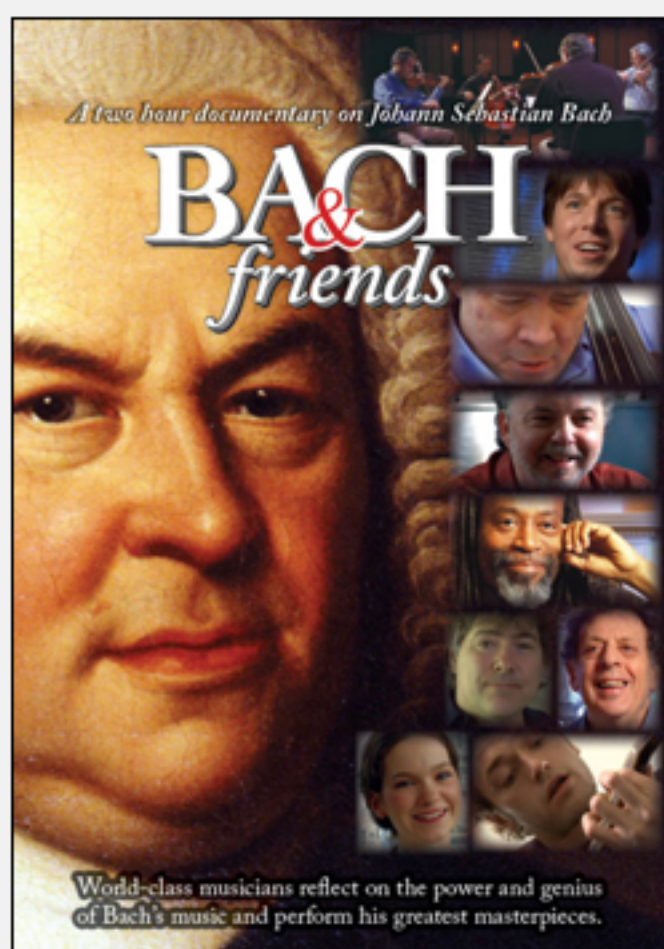
Updated Review: *Bach & Friends*

Posted on [July 12, 2010](#) by [Nick Fitzgerald](#)

I owe a gentleman by the name of [Michael Lawrence](#) a long-outstanding debt. He's a critically-acclaimed documentary filmmaker, and about five months ago he [contacted](#) me and asked if I'd be interested in doing a review of his latest project, entitled [Bach & Friends](#).

The film has been reviewed by several big-time outlets already, [including the Huffington Post](#), so for Mr. Lawrence to reach out was a little unexpected. And, as these things often do, work and life got busy, I put a hold on blogging, and I hadn't written up my thoughts on the film.

For this I'd like to apologize personally to Mr. Lawrence — and to finally give the documentary its due.



"Bach & Friends," Michael Lawrence Films (2010)

Bach & Friends is a top-notch tribute to the life and music of Johann Sebastian, done through a series of interviews with soloists, musicians, scholars, and others. There are some big names on the docket — [Joshua Bell](#), the [Emerson String Quartet](#), [Hilary Hahn](#), [Bobby McFerrin](#) (of "Don't Worry, Be Happy" fame), [Phillip Glass](#), and even [Chris Thile](#) of [Nickel Creek](#).

There were also some less-familiar musicians interviewed for the project as well, but who are still worth noting — namely, [Simone Dinnerstein](#), whose debut recording of the Goldberg Variations ([iTunes link](#)) is a real rarity, and twenty-four-year-old organ virtuoso [Felix Hell](#), who was just in D.C. recently for a recital.

While two hours is pushing it a bit for a documentary, Lawrence's

piece is a unique one. Rather than being strictly biographical — it's not really a documentary about Bach, per se — the various interviews examine Bach's music and versatility through the stories and experiences of the individuals on screen. The interviewees all speak about Bach in a way that is both personal and intimate, but still accessible to others.

This is part of what makes the documentary so good — Lawrence's direction really brings out thoughts and emotions from a sincere, honest place.

The film also does a great job of stressing Bach's love of and development through improvisational technique, while also underscoring his utilitarianism. In other words, Bach loved to jam out a melody over a groovy bassline (not unlike modern jazz musicians today) using pretty much the instruments that were available to him. (Of course, I'm not saying that everything Bach wrote was so up-in-the-air — but the man did have a very real streak of free-spiritedness in his performance, and the world-renowned stories of his fugal improvisations are just one example.)

Communicating this idea was accomplished in a rather ingenious way — not only by interspersing live performances of Bach's works on the instruments for which they were originally written, but to also play them in ways and on instruments that you'd never imagine they'd be any good on.

So, not only does Joshua Bell perform the [blistering d-minor Chaconne](#), Chris Thile rocks the hell out of J.S.' opening prelude to the third violin partita — on his mandolin:



Thile's got great screen presence, and the way he plays Bach you'd think the 18th-century German composer grew up in 1940s Kentucky.

There are a multiple examples of this, but the takeaway here — especially for people like me, who are wedded to historically accurate performance — is the fabulous illustration of this music's true versatility.

Bach would have enjoyed hearing his violin sonatas played on the mandolin, or his cello suites on the banjo — in fact, given what we know about him, we can say confidently that he would have loved it. And Lawrence gets that.

Additionally, this musical versatility is expressed so well by Lawrence's camera and editing work, which is outstanding throughout (although his direction on Hell's organ performance was spectacular — capturing Felix's footwork was a thrill to watch).

And an incredibly poignant moment came with the interspersing of Joshua Bell's performance of the d-minor Chaconne with Mike Hawley's organic recitation and expression of Bach's hardships throughout his life — the death of his wife and of many of his infant children during birth — all with the haunting Chaconne filling the emptiness Hawley's narration creates. Beautifully done.

Simply put, Lawrence hits the documentary out of the park. Accessible to both Bach-lovers and classical-music newbies alike, fabulous direction, innovative performances, and sincere interviews make this film an absolute must-see.