



## Evening in the Palace of Reason

By James R. Gaines  
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### Introduction

How could the meeting of two men be so important to the intellectual climate of their time? Why should this seemingly unimportant encounter be talked about centuries later?

When Bach and King Frederick the Great of Prussia met, they brought together two conflicting worldviews. Bach had been trained in the classical tradition; he was a baroque composer through-and-through. King Frederick the Great was not only the rival of Bach's own patron, the Elector of Saxony, he was a flashy dictator and stood for all that was new in European politics and music. Bach was a Lutheran; Frederick a lapsed Calvinist. Bach spoke German; Frederick spoke barely any German and instead relied on French, the language of his court.

Yet Bach traveled two days and a night to meet the king, suffering all the while from the infirmities of old age. Bach's own son worked for Frederick the Great, which was reported as the ostensible reason for the trip. At the time he went, Bach had other worries as well: his musical legacy was questionable, his own son's accomplishments threatened to eclipse his.

On his arrival, Bach was given a tour of the King's palace and invited to try all of the King's opulent collection of musical instruments. The two men moved from room to room as Frederick showed off his wealth and encouraged Bach to demonstrate his musicianship.

But something else happened that night. Frederick challenged Bach to a contest. This is the story of the King's challenge to Bach, a challenge steeped in the growing culture wars of 18th century Europe. **James R. Gaines** takes us on a tour of 18th century Germany and shows us how all of the prevailing ideas were wound together into this one meeting.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Bach and Frederick the Great embraced very different views of human nature and very different musical tastes. What effect did their different philosophies of human nature have on their taste in music and compositional styles?
2. How did Bach's Calvinism and Frederick's Lutheranism affect their aesthetics?
3. What affect do you think his friend's beheading had on Frederick's conduct as king?
4. How was it that J.S. Bach's music rose to such prominence if it had become largely forgotten at the time of his death?
5. How do you think that Frederick's upbringing influenced his dual personality: his warlike nature, and love of the fine arts and culture?
6. Was Bach a rebel in his own right, as suggested some of his contemporaries, or was he merely an artist giving the public what they wanted?
7. Samuel Johnson once called Frederick the Great "Voltaire's foot-boy." How accurate do you think this statement is?
8. What was Bach's greatest contribution to music? What's your favorite of Bach's pieces?
9. Ultimately, why do you think Bach went to meet Frederick?
10. Why was Bach at first unable to complete Frederick's challenge?

### About the Author

A native of Dayton, Ohio, James R. Gaines is a journalist who served as the managing editor of *People*, *Life*, and *Time* and who describes himself as an "enthusiastic amateur" pianist. He published two previous books, **Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table** and **The Lives of the Piano** and now lives in Paris with his family.