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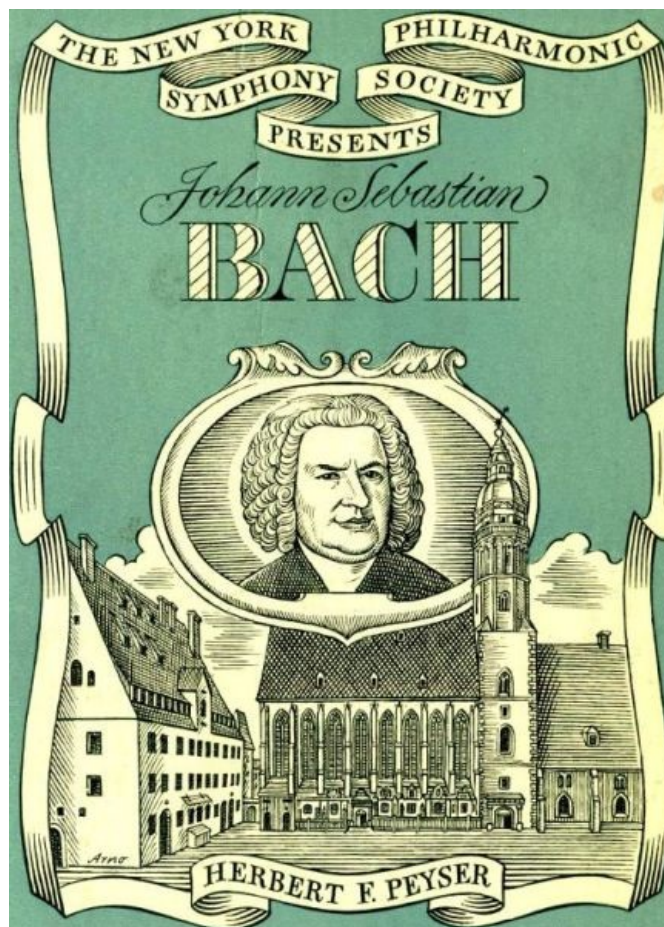
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH ***





Johann Sebastian Bach in early youth.
From an old engraving

[2]

Johann Sebastian Bach

BY
HERBERT F. PEYSER



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Foreword

Compared with the unimaginable richness of his inner life as the overpowering volume and splendor of his works reveal it, Bach's day-to-day existence seems almost pedestrian. It had none of the drama and spectacular conflicts that marked the careers of men like Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner. His travels, far less extensive than those of his great contemporary, Handel, were confined to areas of a few hundred miles at most in central and northern Germany and were undertaken chiefly for sober professional purposes. The present volume, which advances no claim whatever to any new or original slant, aims to do no more than furnish for those who read and run a meager background of a few isolated highspots in Bach's outward life and a momentary sideglance at a tiny handful of his supreme creations. Its object will have been more than accomplished if in any manner it stimulates a radio listener to deepen his acquaintance with Bach's immeasurable art. [5]

H. F. P.

Johann Sebastian Bach

In families of unusual longevity and fruitfulness, observed Goethe, Nature has a way of bringing forth in her own good time one figure who unites all the greatest and most distinctive qualities of his various forebears. The poet of *Faust* alluded to this mystic process of genealogy with reference to Voltaire. Actually, he might with quite as much reason have been speaking of Bach. For Bach combined and brought into sharpest focus the musical talents and predilections of almost three antecedent generations, as well as their physical and moral sturdiness, their spirituality, their robust clannishness. Yet the miracle of Johann Sebastian Bach transcends even this amazing fusion of ancestral traits. It is hardly excessive to look upon him as the consummation and fulfillment of all the musical trends that went before him and, in a manner of speaking, the origin of all those that came after. [6] [7]

There is probably nothing in the history of music to compare with Bach's ancestry from the standpoint of fertility, complexity, and endurance. There can be no question of tracing here its multiple ramifications and cross currents. Enough that we obtain our earliest glimpse of Sebastian's great-great-great-grandfather as far back as the latter part of the sixteenth century. The direct line of the great composer did not die out till 1845. Seven generations thus stretch between the extremes of this genealogical phenomenon. The Thuringian countryside around Arnstadt, Erfurt, Wechmar, Eisenach, and other communities of the region cradled the different branches of the family. Two traits, at least, all of them had in common—their love of music and their attachment to one another. Some became organists, some cantors, some town musicians, and their devotion to their craft was so proverbial that, for years after, all musicians in the town of Erfurt came to be known as "the Bachs" even if totally unrelated. The real Bachs felt each other's company so indispensable that, if the members of the family could obviously not all live in the same place, they made it a point to hold periodic reunions. After prayers and hymns they spent the day in feasting and jolly recreation. One of their favorite amusements was to extemporize choruses out of popular songs and these lusty medleys (or, as they called them, "quodlibets") they would bellow for hours on end with great good humor, while the listeners laughed till their sides ached. [8]

SON OF A COURT MUSICIAN

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach on March 21, 1685, according to the Old Style reckoning, which is ten days behind the Gregorian calendar. His father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, had married an Elisabeth Lämmerhirt nearly twenty years earlier in Erfurt, where he was town player. Probably he became Court musician to Duke Johann Georg, at Eisenach, whither he had removed. His plea to return to Erfurt was disallowed by his noble employer and so it came that Johann Sebastian saw the light in Eisenach. Not, however, in the rambling house on the Frauenplan as traditionally supposed. Comparatively recent investigation has shown that the actual birthplace is a short distance away, in a street named after Martin Luther. A rather unromantic looking dwelling, it was occupied till just before the Second World War by a barber.

There is a certain symbolic propriety that Bach should have been born in Eisenach rather than in the more prosaic Erfurt. Eisenach had powerful religious and romantic associations. Luther had been entertained by Frau von Cotta in one of its gabled houses while the Reformer was still a boy. High above the city towered the Wartburg, where Luther translated the Bible, threw his inkwell at the Devil, and composed some of his sturdiest chorales. Up there, too, had dwelt the saintly Elisabeth, while in its halls knightly Minnesingers had competed in tourneys of song. In the remoter distances rose the fabled Hürselberg, where according to legend Dame Venus held her unholy court and ensnared the souls of unwary men. Just what impression these things made on the child Bach we cannot say. At any rate he could not remain untouched by the currents of music. The boy had a pretty treble voice and at the local school he sang in the so-called Currende choir, making a few pennies now and then on feasts and holidays, at weddings and at funerals, in company with his schoolmates. He may even have sat in the organ loft of St. George's Church, [9]

pulling out the heavy stops for his uncle, Johann Christoph Bach, who had been the organist there for many years.

Nevertheless, we have no elaborate record of Johann Sebastian's boyhood. His father, indeed, taught him the rudiments of violin and viola, and Terry credits the youngster with "patient concentration" in the pursuit of these instrumental studies. We do know that he became before long an uncommonly proficient violinist but took particular delight in playing viola when he participated in ensemble work. Like Mozart in after years, the youthful Bach loved to find himself "in the middle of the harmony."

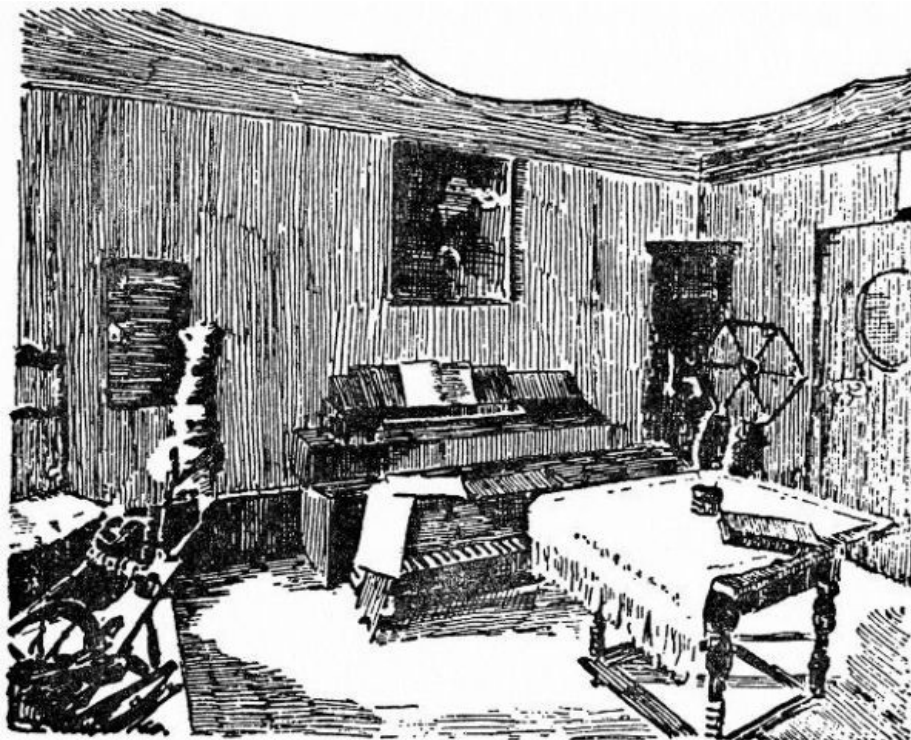
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EARLY YEARS AT SCHOOL

At the Eisenach "Gymnasium" he learned reading and writing, catechism, Biblical history, and the Psalms. And when only a little over eight he was fairly immersed in Latin conjugations and declensions. In Eisenach was laid the foundation of that learning which distinguished his whole life, though he never enjoyed the advantage of a college education such as he afterwards gave his famous sons. Yet his school attendance at this early stage showed a good deal of irregularity, due, perhaps, to illness or bereavement. He was only nine when he lost his mother. In a short time his father married again but his death terminated that union scarcely four months later.

The Eisenach household having broken up, Johann Sebastian was sent in 1695 to the home of his married brother, Johann Christoph, who lived at Ohrdruf, some thirty miles away. A pupil of the great Johann Pachelbel, the Ohrdruf Bach functioned as organist at the Church of St. Michael's.

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Bach's study in Weimar, where many of his greatest works, including *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, were composed.

Johann Christoph, an accomplished musician, lost no time in giving his young brother his first lessons on the clavier. Presumably he supplemented them with instruction on the organ. In any case the boy seems to have had access to a large quantity of good music. He was an extraordinarily capable student with a voracious appetite for musical learning and no sooner had he mastered one difficult task than he plagued his brother for another more difficult still.

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At this period occurred that celebrated incident for which Johann Christoph has been very harshly judged by posterity. A collection of clavier pieces by masters like Froberger, Kerll, Pachelbel, Böhm and Buxtehude, lay in a book case with a latticed front. Johann Sebastian's pleas to study them met with a stern refusal. So the youngster resorted to stratagem. By thrusting his hands through the lattice and rolling up the music he managed to extract it when his brother's back was turned. Not being allowed a candle he copied out the various works by moonlight, a job which occupied him for six months and probably laid the foundation for those eye troubles which toward the last were to rob him of his sight. Nor did he enjoy the fruit of his labors. Johann Christoph found the copy and promptly confiscated it. Before blaming him, as is usually done, it may be well to reflect that Bach's brother was not necessarily moved by an impulse of cruelty but more probably felt the need of curbing somewhat an audacious and immature young genius, who threatened to get out of hand.

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During the five years he spent in Ohrdruf Bach attended the town school which enjoyed an unusually high reputation throughout Thuringia. His studies, naturally, ranged much further afield than at Eisenach and his scholastic progress appears to have been rapid. His high, clear voice and instinctive musicianship not only assured him a place (and rather substantial rewards) in the chorus of the institution but in proper season gained him the friendly interest of Elias Herder, a young musician summoned to replace Johann Arnold, a highly unpopular teacher who

had been dismissed as a “pest of the school, a scandal of the church and a cancer of the community.” Through the good offices of Herder young Bach found an opportunity to join the select choir (*Mettenchor*) of St. Michael’s Church in Lüneburg, more than two hundred miles to the north.

STUDENT AT LÜNEBURG

The time was ripe, at all events, for Johann Sebastian to leave Ohrdruf. His brother’s family was increasing apace and the organist’s quarters had been growing uncomfortably cramped. Furthermore, Bach was now fifteen, an age at which boys were expected to start earning their living. So the chance to remove to Lüneburg proved a stroke of luck. [14]

But there were more fascinating advantages to it than even the possibilities of bed and board. Easily accessible were several sources of musical and cultural inspiration. In Lüneburg itself the Church of St. John had as its organist none less than Georg Böhm, one of the outstanding personalities in German music of the era preceding the full unfoldment of Bach’s grandeur. Thirty miles off lay Hamburg, which harbored the venerable master of the organ, Adam Reinken; and the operatic life of that city had burst into bloom under the leadership of Reinhard Keiser. Up in the direction of the Danish frontier the town of Lübeck sheltered still another giant, the organist Dietrich Buxtehude. Sixty miles in an easterly direction lay Celle, whose Duke, Georg Wilhelm, had married a beautiful and spirited French Huguenot, Eleanore Desmier d’Olbreuse, and turned his court into a miniature Versailles, where French musicians in particular were royally welcomed. Naturally, a little opera house formed part of this island of Gallic charm, elegance and culture, enlivened by a continual succession of ballets, operas, and other musical diversions. Whether Bach obtained admission to the auditorium or whether he was smuggled into the orchestra pit by some friendly player we do not know. But of one thing we are certain: his love for the music of the French masters and his intimate acquaintance with it was in large degree the result of what he heard and learned at the gracious ducal court of Celle. [15]

Bach spent almost three years in Lüneburg, where St. Michael’s Church and its conventual buildings were his home. He continued his studies at the *Partikular Schule* of the church, sang with the *Mettenchor* and was a member of the *Chorus Symphonicus*, of which the choir formed the nucleus. He developed, gradually, into a capable organist and came under the healthy influence of Georg Böhm at the Church of St. John, whose impress can be detected in some of Bach’s early organ works. Böhm was a pupil of Adam Reinken and undoubtedly urged the young man to hear the aged master, though one can readily imagine that Bach would sooner or later have sought out Reinken of his own volition. The summer vacation of 1701 found him traveling afoot to Hamburg. The patriarch had been organist of St. Katherine’s Church half his life and though now nearly eighty continued to be famous for his virtuosity and his extraordinary skill in improvisation. Nor was it his executive powers alone which captured his young listener. Reinken’s compositions fascinated him and their influence is perceptible in certain of Bach’s clavier pieces twenty years later.



Johann Sebastian Bach in 1735. [16]



Bach performing at the newly invented pianoforte for Frederick the Great during his visit to the court in 1747—an event which Bach regarded as one of most notable episodes in his career.

This first trip to Hamburg was by no means Bach's last. And thereby hangs a tale—a fish story, if you will, but nevertheless true and related a number of times by Bach himself. Tired and hungry on his long jaunt back to Lüneburg, the boy sat down for a moment's rest outside the kitchen of an inn whose open windows exhaled tempting savors. Suddenly there fell at his feet the heads of two herrings, a fish prized as a great delicacy in his native Thuringia. Eagerly picking them up he found inside of each a Danish ducat obviously put there by some kindly soul who had caught sight of the famished young wanderer. Whether or not Bach ate the heads, he suddenly found himself with money enough for an ample dinner and sufficient also to defray the expenses of another visit to Hamburg. [18]

ORGANIST AT ARNSTADT

It may be taken for granted that Bach planned an eventual journey to Lübeck to hear the mighty Buxtehude. In any case this trip was deferred. Hard as he had studied at Lüneburg and greatly as his musical powers had grown, it was becoming clear that he must put his talents to practical use. He had been earning a living of a sort with his singing and likewise as a violin and viola player. But his voice had changed and was no longer of great use as a source of revenue. His powers as an organist, on the other hand, were expanding prodigiously, a fact which had become known not only in Lüneburg but far away in his native Thuringia. He began to long for an organ post of his own and the steady income it would assure. [19]

Late in 1702 the news spread that a new organ was being completed at the Church of St. Boniface in Arnstadt, one of the ancestral seats of the Bach family and rich in its traditions. Doubtless Arnstadt had its eyes on the promising disciple of Böhm and Reinken, young as he was. Bach, too, felt it wise to watch the situation at close range. So he returned to Thuringia. The new instrument of St. Boniface was not ready nor was it completed till the summer of 1703. Sangerhausen offered a possibility, but that was thwarted by the machinations of high-placed people with influence.

Yet by Easter Bach found himself enrolled in the service of Duke Johann Ernst, brother of the reigning Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Weimar. His stay in Weimar on this occasion was brief though it seems to have earned him some honors, including the useful if misleading title of "Princely Saxon Court Organist." But scarcely three months later he was back in Arnstadt, where the St. Boniface organ was ready for its test. That Bach should have been entrusted with so responsible a task indicates how high must have been his reputation already. He examined the instrument, reported favorably on it and, to demonstrate his satisfaction, played an inaugural recital which impressed the Consistory to such a degree that on August 9 he was officially appointed organist. [20]

It was not long before he was at odds with the authorities. He had, in addition to his organ

playing, the disagreeable job of training the choristers, a shiftless, good-for-nothing rabble from the local school who, as the city council complained, "behave in a scandalous manner, resort to places of ill repute and do other things we shrink from naming." Bach, for his part, had already developed that obstinate, uncompromising nature that grew more violent the older he became and brought him into no end of difficulties throughout his life. When his mind was fixed on achieving a certain end nothing would swerve him from it. He could be as hardheaded and intransigent a fighter for what he considered his rights and as ruthless in combating opposition as were Beethoven and Wagner in later generations.

His extraordinary talents did not prevent him from attracting a number of enemies which progressively increased. One of the most bitter of these was a bassoonist named Geyersbach whom Bach on more than one occasion had to reproach for his musical incompetence. Matters came to a head when the organist, escorting a lady home one night, was set upon by the ruffian accompanied by a brawling rout of students who attempted to cane him. As tough a fighter as the best of them, Bach took to his sword when Geyersbach shouted, "Hundsfoth" ("Cowardly rascal"), and with a roar of "Zippelfagottist" laid about him so furiously that the "nanny-goat bassoonist" escaped manhandling only by the prompt help of his cronies. The incident caused considerable agitation among the townsfolk.

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Scarcely had it subsided than Bach upset the Consistory by requesting a month's leave to make that pilgrimage to Buxtehude in Lübeck which he had been unable to carry out at Lüneburg not long before. He secured as a substitute in his absence a cousin, Johann Ernst, whose efficiency he guaranteed. Grudgingly the authorities complied, unwilling to risk an issue with so valuable, if testy, a servant. While Bach did not make the whole journey of three hundred miles on foot he undoubtedly walked a fair part of the way. He timed his trip to arrive in Lübeck for Buxtehude's famous *Abendmusiken*, at the Marienkirche, which had been celebrated for a generation and which were continued under the veteran's successors until the nineteenth century. These evening musicales, in which instrumentalists as well as choristers participated, were carried out on a scale larger than anything to which the young organist had been accustomed. One thing this Lübeck visit did was to give Bach a heightened idea of music in its relation to public worship, an idea he strove to carry out for the rest of his life, but realized only fully when he was at the height of his tremendous powers in Leipzig.

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INSPIRATION FROM THE MASTER, BUXTEHUDE

One may be sure that the immense inspiration he received from Buxtehude was as potent and influenced the current of his genius as fully as had Böhm and Reinken a little earlier. That he exhibited his own powers on the Lübeck organ and profited by the example and suggestions of Buxtehude is clear. Forgetting the flight of time and his obligations in Arnstadt, Bach let the winter months slip by. It is even possible that he weighed the question of stepping into the shoes of the seventy-year-old master. But there was a condition attached to that which made him hesitate as it had Handel and Mattheson before him. Whoever wanted Buxtehude's job had to take Buxtehude's daughter in the bargain. The lady, it appears, was not especially well favored and she was all of twenty-eight—scarcely the most alluring prospect to a young man only twenty, and one which involved the further possibility of having to house the father-in-law for as long as the Lord might choose to spare him!

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Bach at the organ.

From a contemporary engraving by Rudolf Schäfer

The year of 1706 had dawned before Bach turned reluctantly toward Arnstadt once more. He took occasion to make a few side trips on the way, stopping over at Hamburg and Lüneburg to greet old associates and friends. By the end of January he was back in the organ loft of St. Boniface. His return was not exactly a love feast. The congregation and Consistory were looking for a capable, mild-mannered organist, not a disquieting virtuoso. But in a relatively short period Bach had become just that. He was plainly above the musical heads of the townsfolk. There were murmurings of discontent which were duly brought to his attention. He paid not the slightest heed, till finally the Consistory proceeded to lay down the law. The authorities had quite a

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number of bones to pick with their refractory young genius. They had given him a leave of one month, not of four. He answered that he imagined his substitute was competent to fill his shoes for the extra time. Far from being placated the worthy elders then reproached him for accompanying the church hymns with all sorts of brilliant and audacious improvisations, full of unexpected harmonies and variations which left the congregation groping blindly for the melody. When people had remonstrated that his preludes, interludes and postludes were too long, he had gone to the other extreme and made them too short. And there was worse to come: when he was practicing at St. Boniface, people had been scandalized to overhear the voice of a "strange maiden," singing to his accompaniment! Such things could not be tolerated any more than an organist whose relations with his choir were so bad that he refused to rehearse it. So he could take his choice—either do what the Consistory required or else.... [25]

Bach did neither one thing nor the other but lived for a while in an uneasy state of compromise. He was not in the least minded to renounce the company of the "strange maiden"—probably the same one he was seeing home the night Geyersbach and his rowdies attacked him. She was none other than his cousin, Maria Barbara, and daughter of Bach's uncle Michael from nearby Gehren. It was not long before he proposed to the musically talented girl and was accepted—the first case of intermarriage between two of the Bach stock. In the fullness of time she became the mother of two of Bach's most gifted sons.

We have not alluded so far to the compositions which had their origin during Bach's Arnstadt sojourn nor are they, obviously, among his most memorable. One, however, occupies a place of its own among his clavier works. It is the famous *Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother*, a piece of program music clearly based on the example of the *Bible Sonatas* of Johann Kuhnau. The occasion of the *Capriccio* was the forthcoming journey of Bach's brother, Johann Jakob, to take service with Charles XII of Sweden, then campaigning in Poland. The work, in four movements, is of a pricelessly humorous character. The first part represents the traveler's friends, a nervous company apparently, who try to dissuade him from an adventure which they regard as full of hazards. In the second movement one person after another points out the assorted dangers he anticipates and does so in a fugue of delightfully comic effect. This is followed by a slow movement, *Adagissimo*, built over a pathetic ground bass, in which sobbing chromatic phrases lament the inability of the friends to change the wanderer's mind. As they groan and wail Bach drowns out their noisy sorrows in a lively fugue on the postillion's horn; and the "beloved brother" is off on what promises to be a wholly pleasant and profitable journey. [26]

Bach's Arnstadt days were drawing to a close. This is not to intimate that when he left it or any other town in which he had filled positions he never returned to them. Throughout his life he traveled repeatedly over familiar ground, either to participate in family meetings, to inspect organs, give recitals or engage in other social or professional activities. To be sure these wanderings were limited to a few hundred miles in Central and Northern Germany. But such as they were he took them often and gladly, either alone or with members of his family. [27]

YEAR AT MÜHLHAUSEN

At Mühlhausen, in Thuringia, the death of Johann Georg Ahle, in December 1706, left a void in the organ loft of the Church of St. Blasius. It was not long before Bach was asked on what terms he would take over the post of his renowned predecessor. He asked a larger sum than the salary paid to Ahle but substantially the same as he had been earning at Arnstadt; also, a quantity of firewood "to be delivered at his door," some corn, and a conveyance to move his household goods. By June 1707, the appointment was his, the town obviously so eager to secure him that it wasted no time in negotiations. Conceivably the Arnstadt Consistory was not dissatisfied to be so conveniently rid of an irascible and troublemaking hothead.

Mühlhausen had an impressive background of musical traditions but Bach entertained nobler aims for the Church of St. Blasius than the more easygoing ideals of Ahle. For this purpose he went to a not inconsiderable private expense to improve the organ and enlarge the musical library of Mühlhausen's churches. The town council seconded his efforts in many ways even if some people resented the independence and progressive though disturbing projects of a young man of twenty-two. At this period he inherited a respectable sum of money from a maternal uncle in Erfurt, and the chances are that the magnificent cantata numbered 106 and entitled *God's Time is the Best*, was composed for the funeral of this Tobias Lämmerhirt, which Bach dutifully attended. Soon afterwards he retraced his steps to Arnstadt and there, on October 17, 1707, in the neighboring village of Dornheim he married Maria Barbara. Their honeymoon was devoted to visiting different members of the Bach family scattered through the neighboring countryside. [28]

The good will of the community made it possible for Bach to demand repairs and improvements on the organ of St. Blasius. Moreover, he was called upon to compose a work for a highly important Mühlhausen civic function, the annual election of the town councilors. It was for this event that he wrote a grandiose *Ratswahl Kantate*, whose music exhibits the influence of Buxtehude heightened by his own incomparable genius. In a burst of generosity the city fathers voted to publish the work. It was the only one of Bach's cantatas printed in his lifetime. Otherwise, there is no record that, aside from the cantata *God is my King*, a single such work of his was given in the Mühlhausen churches, though from the creative standpoint he can scarcely have been idle. [29]

Despite the high esteem Bach enjoyed in Mühlhausen he remained there only a year. The municipal heads and the authorities of the Church of St. Blasius regretted his going but were unable to prevent it. He conceded frankly that he wanted to improve his material position. Yet, a

deeper reason lay at the back of his departure. It was at the bottom the byproduct of a religious question. For some time a reaction had been developing against certain dogmatic formularies in the Lutheran body. The dissidents, known as Pietists, gradually came to sword's points with the orthodox sect, and Mühlhausen, especially, became a hotbed of Pietism, whose adherents strongly opposed the use of music in public worship. This, of course, flew violently in the face of Bach's ideal, which was the betterment of music in the church and its heightened employment to sacred ends. It became solely a question of time when such a situation would render his position at St. Blasius untenable. The Consistory was so well disposed to Bach that it promptly agreed to a variety of modifications in the organ which he had recommended. Before these were carried out he had given notice of his departure and his employers realized they could do nothing about it. He promised, however, to come over to Mühlhausen from nearby Weimar in order to see how the alterations were being executed. [30]

WEIMAR

Weimar, to which he now removed, became Bach's home for the next ten years, and here were created some of his mightiest works, particularly those for organ. The town was, even at that period, a cultural center. Its Duke, Wilhelm Ernst of Sachsen-Weimar, a pious, serious-minded ruler, engaged Bach not only as organist, but also as *Kammermusikus*, i.e., as a member of his household orchestra. A close friendship also developed between Bach and the young but shortlived Johann Ernst, son of Bach's earlier Weimar patron. Exceedingly musical, the youth was a talented violinist, took lessons from the *Kammermusikus*, and composed several works of conspicuous merit, three of which Bach later transcribed for clavier and which, for a long time, passed for violin concertos by Vivaldi. The acquaintances and close friendships Bach formed at the Weimar court were numerous and valuable, with musicians, writers and educators prominent among them. The ducal "Kapelle" varied in size and constitution according to circumstances. Sometimes, when opera was performed, it included singers. The instrumentalists proper seem to have numbered eleven. The conductor was one Johann Samuel Drese; the concertmaster, from 1714 on, Bach. [31]

One of the concertmaster's duties was to provide cantatas for a variety of occasions and, beginning in 1714, he wrote a number of them. His choir consisted of twelve singers. Wilhelm Ernst had from the first been impressed by Bach's powers as an organist. The musician's diverse labors were gratifyingly recompensed and in nine years he had doubled his income. At its smallest it was twice as large as at Mühlhausen. It is claimed that never in his life did Bach have at his disposal an organ truly worthy of his powers and even at Weimar the instrument was inferior to that in Mühlhausen. Nevertheless, the organ works he composed at Weimar exceeded anything he had ever done before in sumptuousness of inspiration, imaginative grandeur, and technical exaction.

One hears comparatively little of Maria Barbara. Bach's wife appears, however, to have been a fitting helpmeet to her busy husband, handling his household and his numerous pupils with tact and discretion and bearing him children with regularity. Some of these died early, others lived till a ripe age. In 1710 was born his oldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, a genius in his own right and ever his father's favorite, but all his life wayward and something of a black sheep. At this stage one might as well mention two other musically outstanding sons of Bach among the twenty children he was to beget. The more prominent of these was Carl Philipp Emanuel, who served Frederick the Great and whose reputation as a pianist and composer was such that, whenever in the latter part of the eighteenth century, it was a question of Bach, people usually meant Philipp Emanuel. Another, Johann Christian (Bach's son by his second wife), lived and died in London, composed operas, and became an intimate of the youthful Mozart. [32]

During the years of his Weimar residence Bach made three journeys which are conspicuous among the brief ones that punctuated his life. One was to Cassel toward the end of 1714, presumably to examine a new organ. Possibly, too, he accompanied his ducal master on a ceremonial visit. Like Weimar, Cassel had a reputation for culture and evidently the Duke would have been pleased to exhibit the prowess of his own court organist. A reference to Bach's incredible virtuosity on this visit has come down to us. "His feet, flying over the pedals as though they were winged," wrote an observer, "made the notes reverberate like thunder in a storm till the prince, confounded with admiration, pulled a ring from his finger and presented it to the player. Now bethink you, if Bach's skilful feet deserved such bounty what gift must the prince have offered to reward his hands as well?" Other stories of his miraculous playing had long circulated throughout the country. People said it was a habit of his to climb into the organ loft of an inconspicuous rural church and so astound people with his improvisations that the cry would go up: "That must be Bach or the Devil!" The tale, one can depend on it, is a myth. [33]

Another trip was to Halle, birthplace of Handel. True, he did not go there in search of his greatest contemporary (though he made several sincere yet ineffectual attempts to meet him) but to examine a new organ. His playing created so profound an impression that the Collegium Musicum made an earnest effort to secure him for Halle. Bach was flattered but, because of his Weimar connections, unable to accept. The Halle council, believing he was seeking higher pay, was irritated. Nevertheless, a little later it summoned Bach in company with Johann Kuhnau and Christian Friedrich Rolle to inspect the organ of the Church of Our Lady. The officials omitted nothing that might please their distinguished guests. A staff of servants and coachmen was placed at their service, a reception was held at which the chief musical personages of the town were summoned to meet them and, after the organ had been examined in great detail, the visitors were entertained at a banquet whose culinary abundance and gastronomic quality may [34]

be judged from the following bill of fare which has come down to us:

1 piece of Boeuf à la mode
Pike with anchovy butter sauce
1 smoked ham
1 dish of peas
1 dish of potatoes
2 dishes of spinach with sausages
1 quarter of roast mutton
1 boiled pumpkin
Fritters
Candied lemon peel
Preserved cherries
Warm asparagus salad
Lettuce salad
Radishes
Fresh butter
Roast veal

As Bach returned safely to Weimar, it may be assumed he passed up a few of the courses! He was even paid a fee for the little outing. It came to \$4.50.

The third trip carried him to Dresden. There, under the rule of Augustus II, musical life flourished. In 1717 a season of Italian opera was in full blast. It was not opera, however, which fascinated Bach. He looked upon it with gentle condescension and, even in later years, was in the habit of chaffing his son, Friedemann, with the question: "Well, shall we go over to Dresden and listen to the pretty little tunes?" What did attract Bach was the presence at the Saxon court of the celebrated French clavecinist and organist, Louis Marchand. Bach had studied his compositions closely and admired them. A gifted but intolerably arrogant person, Marchand had fallen into disgrace in Versailles and found it prudent to emigrate. An official of Augustus II conceived the idea of summoning Bach from Weimar and arranging on the spot a musical contest between the two. Such is, at least, the traditional story. Whatever the exact truth may have been, Bach arrived on the scene of the proposed contest at the specified hour but Marchand, afraid of a rival whose prowess he well knew, left Dresden secretly and let the match go by default. Bach thereupon performed alone, stirring his hearers to unlimited admiration. Marchand returned to France where he lived, apparently none the worse for his ignominious failure, till 1732. [35]

Things, however, were shaping for a change in the life of Bach. In 1716 the conductor of the ducal orchestra, Johann Samuel Drese, died. For two years Bach had filled the post of concertmaster and seems to have felt that he was next in line for the conductorship. It went, on the contrary, to Drese's son, a man of mediocre attainments. Bach was hurt and further embittered by the fact that no more cantatas of his composition were being ordered, and his notorious temper speedily got the better of him. He had made the acquaintance of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, whose sister had married a younger member of Weimar's ducal family. Intensely musical, that sovereign in the summer of 1717 had asked Bach to become his Kapellmeister. Bach shortly afterwards sent an application for his release to Wilhelm Ernst, apparently mincing no words. The Duke flew into a rage. We read in the diary of one of the court secretaries: "On November 6, 1717, Bach, till now Concertmaster and Court Organist, was put under arrest in the justice room for obstinately demanding his instant dismissal." The infuriated genius remained a jailbird only till December 2. His detention appears to have been profitably employed for it enabled him to begin work on his *Orgelbüchlein*. About a week later he left Weimar for Cöthen, eighty miles to the northeast, with his wife and four children. [36]

KAPPELLMEISTER WITH PRINCE LEOPOLD

At Cöthen he began a new life. For one thing, he no longer filled the post of organist. The court of Prince Leopold was of the Calvinistic faith. Church services, being of a particularly austere nature, required no organ playing of a virtuoso type or the production of sacred cantatas, such as Bach had hitherto been turning out in quantity. Yet Leopold was an ardent music lover, whose tastes ran to instrumental composition. He maintained an orchestra of eighteen of which Bach now became Kapellmeister. Such cantatas as he wrote in Cöthen were secular ones, chiefly in honor of his employer. For the most part his creative energies were now concentrated on concertos, suites, sonatas, and clavier works including some of his very greatest. [37]



Contemporary score for three minuets by Bach.

[\[PDF score.\]](#)

[\[Listen.\]](#)

Instrumental music before Bach's day had scarcely achieved what might be called an independent life. In the creations of his Cöthen period we discover, in effect, the most vigorous roots of our symphonic literature—especially in the four suites (or "overtures," as Bach called them) and the six "Brandenburg" Concertos! Scholars have been unable to decide definitely whether the former were composed in Cöthen or in Leipzig. At all events they were performed before the Duke and also before the Telemann Musical Society in Leipzig, of which the composer was subsequently director. The third suite, in D, is the one comprising the exalted and incomparable *Air*; which achieved, long afterwards, a popularity of its own in the transcription of it for the G string by the violinist August Wilhemj. Yet every movement of each suite constitutes a priceless jewel of instrumental music. [38]

The Brandenburg Concertos are in a somewhat different case. They were composed for Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg and a son of the Great Elector, whom Bach appears to have met on a journey with Prince Leopold. Christian Ludwig had a hobby of collecting concertos by various composers and he commissioned Bach to write him "some pieces." In an elaborate preface couched in extraordinary French and dated "Cöthen, March 24, 1721," the composer begged his noble patron to accept these products of his "slight talents" and to "overlook their imperfections." Whether the private orchestra of the Margrave played the works or not we cannot say. Neither do we know if Bach's gift was even acknowledged. After Christian Ludwig died, the catalogue of his richly stocked library had no mention of Bach's half dozen "trifles." The precious masterpieces turned up in a mass of scores offered for sale in job lots! [39]

It is practically certain, however, that the Brandenburg Concertos were performed by the princely Kapelle at Cöthen in Bach's presence, for the composer had been wise enough to make copies of his scores. They are not concertos in the modern sense of the term, but continuations and developments of those "concerti grossi" of masters like Torelli, Vivaldi, and Corelli. In various permutations and combinations they contrast groups of solo instruments (the "concertino") with the background of the "tutti." The "concerti grossi" of Handel furnish examples of the same principle of balance and diversity. The fact that none of the Brandenburg Concertos is in a minor key and that somber moods are rare, points to the probability that they were written for entertainment purposes. [40]

Their variety is astonishing, with no two quite alike. The first, in F major, is the only one which calls for horns; and for the performance of this concerto two horn players were specially engaged at Cöthen. The second, likewise in F, requires a trumpet—the solitary appearance in the entire set of this instrument. To choose between the Brandenburg Concertos, to determine their relative musical worth is impossible. Yet in some respects the sixth, in B flat, if perhaps the least frequently played, is the most unusual. No violins are used in its scoring. The employment of two violas, two viole da gamba, and cello gives the work a peculiar dark string color wholly its own.

Let us mention here the wondrous concerto for two violins, another sublime inspiration of Bach's Cöthen days. It is probable that it was played by the concertmaster, Josephus Spiess, and the excellent violinist, Johann Rose (who also played the oboe and taught fencing to the court pages!), with the composer conducting the orchestral accompaniment.

And Prince Leopold, himself, who not only enjoyed music but played it well, doubtless took part

in the sonatas for clavier and viola da gamba. He could not do without his musicians apparently and, when, in 1718, he went to take the “cure” at Carlsbad, he had a sextet from his Kapelle accompany him. Bach was one of the retinue. The following year the Kapellmeister made a pilgrimage to nearby Halle in an effort to meet Handel, who had come to the Continent to engage singers for his operatic ventures in London. But neither at this time nor on a subsequent occasion when he tried to make the acquaintance of his great contemporary was he successful. Handel had already returned to England, seemingly far less eager to meet Bach than Bach was to meet him. [41]

In May 1720, Prince Leopold again went to take the Carlsbad waters and once more Bach was in his train. The visit was somewhat longer this time and it ended grievously for the composer. When he set out he left his wife in the best of health and spirits. When he came back he found her dead and buried. With Maria Barbara gone there was, apparently, no one to look after Wilhelm Friedemann, Philipp Emanuel and Johann Gottfried Bernhard, the eldest not more than ten. The blow seems to have struck Bach the more heavily because, engaged in worldly music-making as he now was, he lacked the spiritual consolation of churchly activities and the communion with his inner self which he enjoyed in the organ loft.

An opportunity for a trip to Hamburg was provided by the sudden death of the organist at St. Jacob's Church of that city. Along with a number of other noted players Bach was invited to pass on the qualifications of new candidates for the post. This gave him a chance to renew old ties and stimulate new interests. Adam Reinken was still alive and in his presence as well as before a number of municipal authorities Bach improvised astounding variations on the chorale “By the Waters of Babylon,” one of Reinken's specialties, till the veteran conceded in amazement to his younger colleague: “I thought this art was dead, but I see it still lives in you.” [42]

The Hamburg journey was but an interlude, however inspiring. There was no possibility of an organ position in that town. And another problem was now occupying him—the question of his children's education. Friedemann had received his first clavier lessons from his father shortly before Maria Barbara's death. The world has been the gainer through this instruction administered the youngster by such a formidable teacher. With his own hands Bach wrote out a *Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*. On the first page are set down the various clefs. More important for posterity is a transliteration of the ornaments, or “Manieren,” showing precisely how they are to be executed. Then follow exercises in fingering, hand positions, and much else. The little book is a valuable illustration of Bach's own methods of discipline and pedagogy. [43]

Nor are these the only things for which generations of pianists have to thank the Bach of the Cöthen period. It was for teaching purposes that he composed masterpieces like the Two- and the Three-Part Inventions. To furnish practical illustration of the advantages of the system of equal temperament he advocated for tuning, he composed, while still in Leopold's service, the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, that miraculous series of twenty-four preludes and fugues in all major and minor keys, which is the Bible of pianists to this day. The second book was written in Leipzig many years later.

It was not long before Bach realized that if his children were to be brought up in the traditions of rectitude he had himself inherited, they could not remain without a mother's care, the more so as his many occupations left him little leisure to oversee a company of lively youngsters. And so on December 3, 1721, Bach took to himself a second wife, Anna Magdalena Wilcken, the daughter of a court trumpeter of Weissenfels. A gentle, lovable soul, musical, devoted to her great husband and the mother of a fresh host of children, she was as ideal a helpmeet for Bach as her predecessor had been.

A week after his Kapellmeister's marriage, Prince Leopold took a wife in his turn. But the lady, the prince's cousin, quickly troubled the musical atmosphere of the Cöthen court. Her tastes were for masquerades, dances, fireworks, illuminations and other forms of tinsel show, not for concerts of orchestral and chamber music. Bach called her an “amusa”—a person of no culture. Her installation at Cöthen was the prelude to Bach's departure. As so often happened in his career, however, a more or less inopportune incident created a situation from which he might profit. [44]

LEIPZIG AND THE ST. JOHN PASSION

This particular incident was the death, half a year after Bach's second marriage, of Johann Kuhnau who, for more than twenty years, had held the Cantorship of St. Thomas's School in Leipzig. Whether or not the post seemed to Bach himself as desirable as a Kapellmeistership, the sudden vacancy attracted a flock of candidates, some of them men of distinction. Most preferable in the eyes of the Leipzig civic council was George Philipp Telemann who in Bach's day ranked higher in the esteem of many musicians than Bach himself. Another was Christoph Graupner of Darmstadt. We need not pursue in detail the complicated negotiations and the extensive intrigue the choice of Kuhnau's successor involved. Telemann was offered the job and things progressed so far that the authorities debated whether the address welcoming him should be in Latin or in German. But Telemann, who already held a lucrative position in Hamburg, determined to find out which town would offer him the better inducement. Hamburg increased his already considerable stipend, so in Hamburg he remained. Graupner, on the other hand, would have come gladly. But his Darmstadt masters declined to release him. [45]

Before the final decision was made, Bach made it his business to be on hand at Leipzig. When it

became clear to Graupner that he was out of the running he heartily recommended Bach. The latter was requested, in order to prove his fitness for the post he sought, to conduct in the Church of St. Thomas on Good Friday, 1723, a work of his own composition, appropriate to the day. That work was the *Passion according to St. John* which, though it may have been written hurriedly, is a creation of such transcendent grandeur that only the later *Passion according to St. Matthew* can be said to excel it in lyric splendor and sublimity.

As soon as Graupner's decision was known, Bach asked Prince Leopold for his official leave. The letter of dismissal was couched in most friendly and flattering terms. At Leipzig Bach executed a document binding himself to discharge all the duties of the Cantorship, undertaking to teach a variety of subjects and even to give private lessons in singing without extra pay. The only thing he balked at was taking charge of Latin classes. For this chore he agreed to provide a substitute at his own expense. Then he took leave of Prince Leopold, with whom he remained on terms of the closest friendship till the prince's death five years later. On May 5, 1723 he received from the burgomaster of Leipzig the ceremonious notification of his unanimous appointment. On May 30 he conducted at the Church of St. Nicholas (which he served alternately with the Church of St. Thomas) the cantata *The Hungry Shall Be Fed*. Therewith he inaugurated his office.

[46]

BACH'S GREATER WORK

Bach settled in Leipzig at the age of thirty-eight. He remained there the rest of his life. True, he came and went, and he made journeys of one sort or another, but they were never far distant or protracted. In Leipzig he created his grandest, his most colossal, and also his profoundest and subtlest works. His duties were incredibly numerous and often heart-breakingly heavy. He was responsible, it has been said, "to all and to none." Again and again he had the rector of the St. Thomas School, the city council, the church Consistory, and yet others about his ears. He had to look after the musical services in four churches, two of them the most important in the town. Under exasperating conditions he had to teach turbulent and ruffianly pupils. He had to combat official ill will and intrigue. For the performances he was obliged to conduct he had vocal and instrumental forces that strike us as laughably inadequate and were in numberless cases grossly unskilled. The demands on his physical and spiritual strength must have been appalling. Yet Bach appears to have had the resources and the resistance of a giant. We know that over and again his temper, his obstinate nature and inborn pugnacity were tried to the uttermost. But in the face of all irritations he was earning enough, his home life was comfortable, he met and entertained artists, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his sons could enjoy the educational advantages of Leipzig, and he gradually gathered about him a company of greatly gifted young students and devoted disciples.

[47]

In the course of years he shifted some of his most unsympathetic duties to other shoulders. How he could otherwise have written the gigantic amount of music he did is an unanswerable question. For consider: he came to Leipzig the composer of about thirty church cantatas. When he died in 1750 he had produced there 265 more. Of this staggering total (295) 202 have come down to us. As if this were not enough (these cantatas, incidentally, were week-to-week obligations), his years at Leipzig account for many secular cantatas, six motets, five masses (including the titanic one in B minor), the Passions according to St. John and St. Matthew (not to mention lost ones), the *Christmas Oratorio*, the resplendent *Magnificat*, the *Easter* and *Ascension* oratorios, besides clavier works like the *Italian Concerto*, the *Goldberg Variations*, the second book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and an incredible mass of other things.

[48]

The rector of St. Thomas' School during Bach's first years in Leipzig was Johann Heinrich Ernesti, with whom Bach's relations were cordial enough, though the rector was a slipshod disciplinarian. Matters remained pleasant enough under Johann Gesner, but presently the latter left St. Thomas to assume a more profitable post at Göttingen. His successor, Johann August Ernesti, quickly proceeded to stroke Bach's fur the wrong way by declaring that altogether too much attention was given to the study of music. "So you want to be a pot-house fiddler," he used to say to youths he found practising the violin. It was only a question of time when the surly new rector and the combustible Bach would come into collision.

What has been called the "battle of the Prefects" was long drawn out and bitter. The details need not detain us. Trouble was intensified by the appointment to a responsible position of a person named Krause, whom Bach had angrily described as "ein liederlicher Hund" ("a dissolute dog"). Things went from bad to worse. Bach accused the rector of usurping his functions. He wrote long, circumstantial letters setting forth his case to "their Magnificences," the Burgomaster, the civic council, and other outstanding authorities. "Their Magnificences" replied with legalistic hair-splittings and things grew so violent that Bach in one case undertook to drive Krause from the choir loft. The lengthy series of undignified squabbles was finally brought to an end by Augustus the Strong, King of Poland, Saxony, "etc., etc., etc." (to use Bach's own designation). We are not certain that the composer obtained the satisfaction he demanded, but everyone seems to have tired of the interminable quarrel and was relieved to see it peter out.

[49]

Meanwhile, Bach had other worries and vexations. One of his sons, Gottfried Bernhard, proved as unstable as did Wilhelm Friedemann in a later day, but died before his financial misdeeds had ended in his open disgrace. Then the composer was made the target of attacks by a certain minor musician, one Scheibe, who criticized his works for what he called their "complexity and overelaboration." Bach immortalized the fellow by satirizing him in the secular cantata, "Phoebus and Pan," where Scheibe appears as the ignoramus Midas, adorned with a pair of ass's ears!

[50]



Bach performing at the organ of the Potsdam garrison-church. In the center is Frederick the Great, at whose request Bach played the organs in several of Potsdam's leading churches.

[51]



Bach accompanying his musically gifted second wife—for whom he wrote some of his most inspired arias—in an informal recital at their Leipzig home.

In 1736 Augustus the Strong conferred upon Bach the title of Court Composer. The patent of Bach's dignity was committed to the Russian envoy in Dresden, Carl Freiherr von Keyserling. He was a sufferer from chronic insomnia and it is to this circumstance that we owe one of Bach's supreme works for the clavier—the so-called *Goldberg Variations*. To ease the torment of sleepless nights the Count had in his service a gifted clavecinist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a pupil of Bach's. While Bach was in the midst of his troubles with Ernesti, Keyserling commissioned him to write Goldberg "something soothing" to divert his wakefulness. Bach took a Sarabande melody he had copied into his wife's *Notenbuch* and used it as the basis of thirty variations. So delighted was Keyserling that he never wearied of listening to Goldberg play them and actually referred to them as "my Variations." The Count, paradoxically enough, now had every reason to remain awake and enjoy the never-ending ingenuity and luxuriant fancy of these variations and the lively *Quodlibet* toward the close, which recalls those boisterous medleys the Bach family of old used to improvise at its reunions. It is pleasant to record that Keyserling paid Bach liberally for "his" *Variations*.

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ST. MATTHEW PASSION AND B MINOR MASS

On Good Friday, 1729, came the turn of St. Thomas' Church to produce the music appropriate to the day. The result of this official duty was the *Passion according to St. Matthew*, for which Christian Friedrich Henrici, who wrote under the name of "Picander" and provided Bach with innumerable "librettos" for all purposes, compiled the text. The composer himself chose and distributed the chorales which punctuate the score. Bach was still at work on it when his former patron, Prince Leopold of Cöthen, died. Rather than prepare a special memorial piece he asked Picander to adapt appropriate words to parts of the music in the *St. Matthew* and he performed them in Cöthen at his friend's obsequies.

It is hard for us to believe that the *St. Matthew Passion* did not receive on that far-off April 15,

1729, the tribute of wondering amazement which in the fullness of our hearts we bring it today. Yet we are told that the Leipzig worshipers considered its overwhelming dramatic pages "theatrical." "God help us," exclaimed a scandalized old dame, "'tis surely an opera-comedy!" We know that, judged by our standards, the first performance of the work must have been inefficient. Whether it was much better done at its repetition in 1736 may be doubted. Be this as it may, the *St. Matthew Passion* passed into oblivion for nearly a hundred years. The glory of its rediscovery and its reawakening an exact century after its birth belongs to Felix Mendelssohn who, with its resuscitation at the Singakademie in Berlin, performed a service that would have shed immortal luster upon his name had he never done anything else.

[54]

The *St. Matthew Passion*, which is Bach at his most tender, intimate, lacerating and compassionate, stands, like the *B minor Mass*, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Wagner's *Tristan*, as one of the epochal feats of music, a lonely and incomparable achievement of the human spirit. Bach is believed to have written a Passion according to St. Mark, but not a trace of it survives. Another, according to St Luke, is extant but most certainly spurious. It is hard to believe he could ever have surpassed the lyric glory of the *St. Matthew*. For generations after its re-emergence musicians paid it everything from lip-service to ecstatic tribute. A complete, full-length performance of it was, however, a rarity and not even Mendelssohn had the courage to attempt it. In our own time we have finally come to the ways of wisdom, recognizing that the *St. Matthew Passion* can produce its proper effect only when heard in its entirety, with never a bar or a phrase omitted. Those who have heard it thus are unlikely ever again to listen willingly to a cut version.

[55]

If anything can be said to rival the grandeur of the *St. Matthew Passion* it is the *Mass in B minor*, the triumphal hymn of the church militant. This utterance of subduing and inscrutable majesty, which transcends the world to bestride the universe, was completed in 1733 and offered to Augustus the Strong as "an insignificant example of my skill in Musique"! Augustus the Strong, being occupied at the moment with problems of state, did not deign to notice Bach's "insignificant" gesture. The composer never heard a performance of this gigantic creation, which soars to heights beyond human gaze and, in its proportions and technical details, is too vast to serve ordinary liturgical purposes. Yet here, as so often elsewhere, Bach followed the example of his age and employed several numbers from this Mass—with greater or lesser alteration—elsewhere. Even the triumphant *Osanna*, which expert criticism has pronounced a polonaise (apparently a subtle compliment paid to Augustus as King of Poland), and the ineffably touching *Agnus Dei* may be encountered again in several of Bach's cantatas.

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VISIT TO FREDERICK THE GREAT AND LATER WORKS

Early in 1741 Bach's son Philipp Emanuel had become clavecinist to the new sovereign of Prussia, Frederick the Great. Moved, it appears, by a paternal wish to see the young man comfortably settled, the father made a trip to Berlin in the summer of that year. Details of the journey are few and it was cut short by news that Anna Magdalena, in Leipzig, was seriously ill.

Bach's famous visit to Berlin and Potsdam did not take place, however, till fully six years later. One of its chief objects was to make the acquaintance of his daughter-in-law, whom Philipp Emanuel had married in 1744, and of his first grandchild. But the visit had more spectacular consequences. Frederick the Great had learned about Bach from his court pianist. Whether or not the great Cantor went to the palace of Sans-Souci in Potsdam at the king's special command, he arrived there at a psychological moment on May 7, 1747, just as Frederick was about to begin one of his regular evening concerts at which, surrounded by his picked musicians, he loved to exhibit his own considerable virtuosity on the flute. "Gentlemen, old Bach is here!" the monarch exclaimed and, calling off the concert, received his guest with cordiality. He immediately had Bach examine the new Silbermann claviers with hammer action newly installed in the palace and invited him to show his skill. After putting each of the instruments to a test, Bach amazed Frederick and his court by improvising a superb six-part fugue on a subject submitted him by the king himself. The next evening he transported his hosts once more with a recital on the organ of the Church of the Holy Ghost in Potsdam and a little later, in Berlin, examined the new opera house, detecting acoustical effects which the architect himself seems not to have suspected.

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Back in Leipzig Bach resolved to break a rule against dedicating scores to noble patrons he had made after the shabby treatment accorded him in the case of the Brandenburg Concertos and the *B minor Mass*. But he would have been less than human if he had not thought that a gracious gesture on his part might perchance further his son's interests at court; and besides, he was genuinely pleased with the fine theme Frederick had given him to develop. So, alleging that his Potsdam improvisation had failed to do the royal theme justice, he dispatched to the monarch with a suitable dedication a series of elaborate contrapuntal developments of the theme, diplomatically incorporating in the set a sonata for flute, violin and clavier. This princely gift is the work known as the *Musical Offering*, whose beauty and ingenuity have come to be properly valued only in recent years.

[58]

Theoretical problems of music now interested Bach more and more and in 1747 he was elected to the so-called Society for the Promotion of Musical Science, founded by Lorenz Christoph Mizler. Men as illustrious as Telemann, Handel and Graun were already members and after a brief period of hesitation Bach joined it, too, presenting the Society in return for his diploma with a formidable sample of his technical skill in the shape of a lordly set of canonic variations for organ on the Christmas hymn *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*.

In 1749 he was occupied with a work in some ways his profoundest and most enigmatic, which

virtually till our own time has been misconstrued even by serious musicians as a dry and abstract experiment in polyphony of no independent musical value. It is that stupendous succession of fugues and canons (or "counterpoints," as the composer himself called them) under the collective title *The Art of Fugue*. On a subject not unlike the theme given him by Frederick the Great, Bach has heaped one polyphonic marvel upon another in a manner to exploit to the limits of technique and imagination every possible device of fugal and canonic development. He was not spared to complete it but dropped his pen at a passage in the final counterpoint when the notes "B-A-C-H" (in German B flat, A, C, B natural) were woven into the contrapuntal texture. What adds to the further riddle of the work is the fact that the composer did not indicate for what instrument or group of instruments he intended it. In our day it has been scored by turns for a full orchestra, a chamber orchestra, a string quartet, two pianos, and the organ. It is difficult to believe that Bach did not intend this colossal conception to be performed and that he projected it merely as a theoretical problem or an exercise in what is called "eye music." It stands in relation to Bach's other works something as the mystical last quartets of Beethoven do to his more popular creations. It was published posthumously and reissued by Philipp Emanuel Bach in 1752. Yet four years later not more than thirty copies had been sold and Philipp Emanuel, in disgust, sold the plates for old metal. [59]

DEATH

Bach's eyesight had long been failing. The strain to which he had mercilessly subjected it all his life, copying music as well as engraving elaborate compositions of his own, was now telling on it. By the end of 1749 his vision was in such a state that an English eye specialist, John Taylor, who later treated Handel but at this time chanced to be touring the continent, was summoned and operated on Bach about the beginning of 1750. It was of little avail. Prolonged confinement in a dark room, medicines and dressings told on the master's ordinarily robust constitution. When his condition permitted and his sight temporarily improved he recklessly returned to his creative labors and also prepared for the engravers a set of eighteen choral-preludes for organ. But the end was at hand. Calling to his side his son-in-law, Johann Christoph Altnikol, Bach dictated to him the variation on the chorale *When We Are in Our Deepest Need*, prophetically bidding him alter the title to *With This Before Thy Throne I Come*. On July 18 he suffered an apoplectic stroke and lay for ten days in a desperate state. At nine in the evening on July 28, 1750, he passed from a world that could barely discern the shadow of his greatness. [60]

It is excessive, perhaps, to maintain that for over three quarters of a century after his death Bach went into total eclipse. But he was disregarded if not forgotten. A handful of musicians, indeed, remembered him, among them some of his talented pupils. From time to time a few scattered works of his gained a limited circulation and came into worthy hands. Thus, in the seventeenth-eighties several became known in Vienna, and at the Baron Van Swieten's Mozart had occasion to acquaint himself with a few specimens, which powerfully stimulated his genius. Afterwards, in Leipzig, being shown the parts of one of the motets he exclaimed after closely studying them: "Here, at last, is something from which one can learn!" Beethoven, too, knew the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and even went so far as to ask someone to procure him the *Crucifixus* from the *B minor Mass*. His exclamation is well known: "Not Bach (brook) but Ocean should be his name!" [61]

Yet, in the latter part of the eighteenth century it was chiefly Philipp Emanuel, not his father, to whom one referred when the mighty name was invoked. For the sons of Bach, not the mighty parent, embodied "the spirit of the time." Even prior to his death Johann Sebastian had passed for outmoded and rather hopelessly "old hat." Philipp Emanuel went so far as to call his father "a big wig stuffed with learning"; and such was the opinion shared by many of the young bloods in Leipzig and elsewhere. In a way this was not surprising. Bach represented a type of music whose complex profundities were giving place to homophony, entertainment and the graceful superficialities of the so-called "gallant style." The new age was concerned with the problems of the sonata and the opera. Even if Bach's scores—most of them unpublished—had been accessible, it is questionable whether the epoch we call "classical" would have been able to see him in a just perspective. [62]

In due course the wheel was to turn full-circle and surely none would have been more amazed than Philipp Emanuel, Wilhelm Friedemann, and Johann Christian could they have known that one day their own works would be looked upon as museum pieces, while the creations of the "learned old perruque" had become the fountain of musical youth, the perpetual source of strength and of illimitable, self-renewing wonder. With Mendelssohn's revival of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 there began that resurrection which went on increasingly through the nineteenth century, headed by the redemptive labors of the *Bach-Gesellschaft*, and which continues to gain momentum right through our own day. Boundless as the universe, timeless as eternity, modern as tomorrow, Bach remains from decade to decade what Richard Wagner once called him—"the most stupendous miracle in all music."

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MAHLER—Symphony No. 4 in G major (with Desi Halban, soprano)—LP
MAHLER—Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor
MENDELSSOHN—Concerto in E minor (with Nathan Milstein, violin)—LP
MENDELSSOHN—Scherzo (from Midsummer Night's Dream)
MOZART—Cosi fan Tutti—Overture
MOZART—Symphony No. 41 in C major ("Jupiter"), K. 551—LP
SCHUBERT—Symphony No. 7 in C major—LP
SCHUMANN, R.—Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major ("Rhenish")—LP
SMETANA—The Moldau ("Vltava")—LP
STRAUSS, J.—Emperor Waltz

Under the Direction of Leopold Stokowski

- COPLAND—Billy the Kid (2 parts)
GRIFFES—"The White Peacock," Op. 7, No. 1—LP 7"
IPPOLITOW—"In the Village" from Caucasian Sketches (W. Lincer and M. Nazzi, soloists)
KHACHATURIAN—"Masquerade Suite"—LP
MESSIAN—"L'Ascension"—LP
SIBELIUS—"Maiden with the Roses"—LP
TSCHAIKOWSKY—Francesca da Rimini, Op. 32—LP
TSCHAIKOWSKY—Overture Fantasy—Romeo and Juliet—LP
VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS—Greensleeves
VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS—Symphony No. 6 in E minor—LP
WAGNER—Die Walküre—Wotan Farewell and Magic Fire Music (Act III—Scene 3)
WAGNER—Siegfried's Rhine Journey and Siegfried's Funeral March—"Die Götterdämmerung"—LP

Under the Direction of Efrem Kurtz

- CHOPIN—Les Sylphides—LP
GLINKA—Mazurka—"Life of the Czar"—LP 7"
GRIEG—Concerto in A minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 16 (with Oscar Levant, piano)—LP
HEROLD—Zampa—Overture
KABALEVSKY—"The Comedians," Op. 26—LP
KHACHATURIAN—Gayane—Ballet Suite No. 1—LP

KHACHATURIAN—Gayne—Ballet Suite No. 2—LP
LECOQ—Mme. Angot Suite—LP
PROKOFIEFF—March, Op. 99—LP
RIMSKY-KORSAKOV—The Flight of the Bumble Bee—LP 7"
SHOSTAKOVICH—Polka No. 3, "The Age of Gold"—LP 7"
SHOSTAKOVICH—Symphony No. 9—LP
SHOSTAKOVICH—Valse from "Les Monts D'Or"—LP
VILLA-LOBOS—Uirapuru—LP
WIENIAWSKI—Concerto No. 2 in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 22 (with Isaac Stern, violin)—LP

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MILHAUD—Suite Française—LP
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BIZET—Symphony in C major—LP
BRAHMS—Symphony No. 1 in C minor—LP
BRAHMS—Symphony No. 2 in D major—LP
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RACHMANINOFF—Symphony No. 2 in E minor
SAINT-SAENS—Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 4 in C minor (with Robert Casadesu)—LP
SIBELIUS—Symphony No. 4 in A minor
TSCHAIKOWSKY—Nutcracker Suite—LP
TSCHAIKOWSKY—Suite "Mozartiana"—LP
TSCHAIKOWSKY—Symphony No. 6 in B minor ("Pathétique")—LP
WAGNER—Lohengrin—Bridal Chamber Scene (Act III—Scene 2)—(with Helen Traubel, soprano, and Kurt Baum, tenor)—LP
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WAGNER—Siegfried Idyll—LP
WAGNER—Tristan und Isolde—Excerpts (with Helen Traubel, soprano)
WAGNER—Die Walküre—Act III (Complete) (with Helen Traubel, soprano and Herbert Janssen, baritone)—LP
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BRAHMS—Academic Festival Overture—LP
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DEBUSSY—Petite Suite: Ballet
MOZART—Concerto in B-flat major (with Robert Casadesus, piano)
MOZART—Symphony No. 25 in G minor, K. 183
RAVEL—La Valse
RIMSKY-KORSAKOV—Capriccio Espagnol
SIBELIUS—Symphony No. 1, in E minor
SIBELIUS—Symphony No. 2, in D major
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HAYDN—Symphony No. 4 in D major (The Clock)
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MOZART—Symphony in D major (K. 385)
ROSSINI—Barber of Seville—Overture
ROSSINI—Semiramide—Overture
ROSSINI—Italians in Algiers—Overture
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J. S. BACH—Arr. Mahler—Air for G String (from Suite for Orchestra)

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HANDEL—Alcina Suite

MENDELSSOHN—War March of the Priests (from Athalia)

MEYERBEER—Prophète—Coronation March

SAINT-SAËNS—Rouet d'Omphale (Omphale's Spinning Wheel)

SHELLING—Victory Ball

WAGNER—Flying Dutchman—Overture

WAGNER—Siegfried—Forest Murmurs (Waldweben)

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- Illustrations shifted to the nearest paragraph break.
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Following remarks have been marked in the text as well:

- Page 49, "socalled" changed to "so-called"
- Page 55, "Cosi fan Tutti" kept, but should be "Cosi fan Tutte"
- Page 56-58, "SAINT-SAËNS" kept, but should be "SAINT-SAËNS" (3 times)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH ***

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