

Bach Remembered By His Son

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–88), the most famous of J. S. Bach's composer sons, contributed much valuable information to the first full-length biography of his father, written by J. N. Forkel. The following details are from a letter to Forkel dated 1774.

He understood the whole building of organs in the highest degree. Organists were terrified when he sat down to play on their organs and drew the stops in his own manner, for they thought that the effect could not be good as he was planning it; but then they heard an effect that astounded them. (These sciences perished with him.) The first thing he would do in trying an organ was this: he would say, in fun, "Above all I must know whether the organ has good lungs," and, to find out, he would draw out every speaking stop, and play in the fullest and richest possible

texture. At this the organ builders would often grow quite pale with fright. The exact tuning of his harpsichords as well as of the whole orchestra had his greatest attention. No one could tune and quill his harpsichords to please him. He did everything himself. The placing of an orchestra he understood perfectly. He made good use of any space. He grasped the sound properties of any place at first glance. A remarkable illustration of that fact is the following: He came to Berlin to visit me; I showed him the new opera house. He perceived at once its virtues and defects (that is, as regards the sound of music in it). I showed him the great dining hall. He looked at the ceiling, and without further investigation made the statement that the architect had here accomplished a remarkable feat, without intending to do so, and without anyone's knowing about it: namely, that if someone went to one corner of the oblong-shaped hall and whispered a few words very softly upwards against the wall, a person standing in the corner diagonally opposite, with his face to the wall, would hear quite distinctly what was said, while between them, and in the other parts of the room, no one would hear a sound. A feat of architecture hitherto very rare and much admired! This effect was brought about by the arches in the vaulted ceiling, which he saw at once. He heard the slightest wrong note even in the largest combinations. As the greatest expert and judge of harmony, he liked best to play the viola, with appropriate loudness and softness.

In his youth, and until the approach of old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly, and thus kept the orchestra in better order than he could have done with the harpsichord [a reference to the two methods of directing ensembles before the advent of conductors]. When he listened to a rich and many-voiced fugue, he could soon say, after the first entries of the subjects, what contrapuntal devices it would be possible to apply, and which of them the composer by rights ought to apply, and on such occasions, when I was standing next to him, and he had voiced his surmises to me, he would joyfully nudge me when his expectations were fulfilled. He had a good penetrating voice of wide range and a good manner of singing. In counterpoints and fugues no one was as happy as he in all kinds of taste and figuration, and variety of ideas in general.

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Bach's Obituary

The most extensive account of Bach's life and work to be published during the eighteenth century was the obituary prepared by C. P. E. Bach with the help of J. F. Agricola, one of his father's pupils, and published in 1754 in the *Musikalische Bibliothek*, a periodical put out by another former Bach pupil, Lorenz Mizler. In addition to what is given below, the obituary contained genealogical data, lists of works both published (mainly keyboard music) and unpublished (the vast bulk of Bach's output), and many more anecdotes, some of them rather heavy-handed in their partisanship: Bach had been a church musician in the traditional Lutheran mold, whose relatively placid career had never taken him far from home. As a result, he had never won the fame that Handel, Scarlatti, and perhaps a dozen lesser composers had enjoyed. His son and pupil evidently felt this needed explaining.

OBITUARY

of

The World-Famous Organist, Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach,
Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer,
and Music Director in Leipzig

Johann Sebastian Bach belongs to a family that seems to have received a love and aptitude for music as a gift of Nature to all its members in common. So much is certain, that Veit Bach, the founder of the family, and all his descendants, even to the present seventh generation, have been devoted to music, and all save perhaps a very few have made it their profession. It would be a matter for astonishment that such excellent men should be so little known outside their native land if one did not remember that these honest Thuringians were so well satisfied with their native land and with their station in life that they did not even dare to wander far to seek their fortune. They gladly preferred the approval of the rulers in whose domains they were born, and the approval of a throng of their faithful countrymen, who were close at hand, to the uncertain manifestations of praise that they might gather, at great pains and expense, from a few (perhaps even envious) foreigners.

Johann Sebastian was not yet ten years old when he found himself bereft of his parents by death. He betook himself to Ohrdruff, where his eldest brother Johann Christoph was organist, and under this brother's guidance he laid the foundations for his playing of the clavier. Afterwards Johann Sebastian betook himself to the Michaels-Gymnasium in Lüneburg. From there he journeyed now and again to Hamburg, to hear the then famous organist of the Church of St. Catharina, Johann

Adam Reinken [1623–1722]. And here, too, he had the opportunity to go and listen to a then famous band kept by the Duke of Celle, and consisting for the most part of Frenchmen; thus he acquired a thorough grounding in the French taste, which, in those regions, was at the time something quite new.

In the year 1703 he came to Weimar, and there became a musician of the Court. The next year he received the post of organist in the New Church in Arnstadt. Here he really showed the first fruits of his application to the art of organ playing, and to composition, which he had learned chiefly by the observation of the works of the most famous and proficient composers of his day and by the fruits of his own reflection upon them. In the art of the organ he took the works of [Nikolaus] Bruhns [1665–97], Reinken, [Dietrich] Buxtehude [c. 1637–1707], and several good French organists as models. While he was in Arnstadt he was once moved by the particularly strong desire to hear as many good organists as he could, so he undertook a journey, on foot, to Lübeck, in order to listen to Buxtehude, the famous organist of the Church of St. Mary. There he tarried, not without profit, for almost a quarter of a year, and then returned to Arnstadt.

In the year 1707 he was called as organist to the Church of St. Blasius in Mühlhausen. But this town was not to have the pleasure of holding him long. For in the following year, 1708, he undertook a journey to Weimar, had the opportunity to be heard by the reigning Duke, and was offered the post of Chamber and Court Organist in Weimar, of which post he immediately took possession. The pleasure His Grace took in his playing fired him with the desire to try every possible artistry in his treatment of the organ. Here, too, he wrote most of his organ works.

The year 1717 gave our already famous Bach a new opportunity to achieve still further honor; the reigning Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, a great connoisseur and amateur of music, called him to be his Capellmeister. He entered forthwith upon the duties of this post, which he filled for almost six years, to the greatest pleasure of his gracious Prince. During this time, about the year 1722, he made a journey to Hamburg and was heard for more than two hours on the fine organ of the St. Catharina Church before the Magistrate and many other distinguished persons of the town, to their general astonishment. The aged organist Reinken, who at that time was nearly a hundred years old [this is literally true], listened to him with particular pleasure. Bach, at the request of those present, performed extempore the chorale *By the Waters of Babylon* at great length (for almost half an hour) and in different ways, just as the better organists of Hamburg in the past had been used to do at the Saturday Vespers. Particularly on this, Reinken made Bach the following compliment: "I thought that this art was dead, but I see that in you it still lives."

The Town of Leipzig chose our Bach in the year 1723 as its Music Di-

rector and Cantor at the Thomas-Schule. Not long thereafter, the Duke of Weissenfels appointed him to be his Capellmeister; and in the year 1736 he was named Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Compos̄er, that is, after he had let himself be heard variously at Dresden, playing the organ publicly and with great success before the Court and the connoisseurs of music of that city.

In the year 1747, he made a journey to Berlin and on this occasion had the opportunity of being heard at Potsdam by His Majesty the King of Prussia [Frederick the Great—see below, p. 304]. His Majesty himself played him a theme for a fugue, which he at once developed, to the particular pleasure of the Monarch, on the pianoforte. Hereupon His Majesty demanded to hear a fugue with six voices, which command he also fulfilled, to the astonishment of the King and the musicians there present, using a theme of his own. After his return to Leipzig, he set down on paper a three-voiced and a six-voiced so-called *ricercar* together with several other intricate little pieces, all on the very theme that had been given him by His Majesty, and this [the *Musical Offering*] he dedicated, engraved on copper, to the King.

His naturally somewhat weak eyesight, further weakened by his unheard-of zeal in studying, which made him, particularly in his youth, sit at work the whole night through, led, in his last years, to an eye disease. He wished to rid himself of this by an operation, partly out of a desire to be of further service to God and his neighbor with his other spiritual and bodily powers, which were still very vigorous, and partly on the advice of some of his friends, who placed great confidence in an oculist who had recently arrived in Leipzig. But the operation, although it had to be repeated, turned out very badly. Not only could he no longer use his eyes, but his whole system, which was otherwise thoroughly healthy, was completely overthrown by the operation and by the addition of harmful medicaments and other things, so that, thereafter, he was almost continuously ill for full half a year. Ten days before his death his eyes suddenly seemed better, so that one morning he could see quite well again and could also again endure the light. But a few hours later he suffered a stroke; and this was followed by a raging fever, as a victim of which, despite every possible care given him by two of the most skillful physicians of Leipzig, on the 28th of July, 1750, a little after a quarter to nine in the evening, in the sixty-sixth year of his life, he quietly and peacefully, by the merit of his Redeemer, departed this life. This is the brief description of the life of a man who contributed quite exceptionally to the honor of music, of his fatherland, and of his family.

If ever a composer showed polyphony in its greatest strength, it was certainly our late lamented Bach. If ever a musician employed the most hidden secrets of harmony with the most skilled artistry, it was certainly our Bach. No one ever showed so many ingenious and unusual ideas as he in elaborate pieces such as ordinarily seem dry exercises in crafts-

manship. His melodies were strange, but always varied, rich in invention, and resembling those of no other composer. His serious temperament drew him by preference to music that was serious, elaborate, and profound; but he could also, when the occasion demanded, adjust himself, especially in playing, to a light and more humorous way of thought. His constant practice in the working out of polyphonic pieces had given his eye such facility that even in the largest scores he could take in all the simultaneously sounding parts at a glance. His hearing was so fine that he was able to detect the slightest error even in the largest ensembles. It is but a pity that it was only seldom he had the good fortune of finding a body of such performers as could have spared him unpleasant discoveries of this nature. In conducting he was very accurate, and of the tempo, which he generally took very lively, he was uncommonly sure.

So long as we can be offered in contradiction no more than the mere suggestion of the possible existence of better organists and clavier players, so long we cannot be blamed if we are bold enough to declare that our Bach was the greatest organist and clavier player that we have ever had. It may be that many a famous man has accomplished much in polyphony upon this instrument; is he therefore just as skillful, in both hands and feet—just as skillful as Bach was? This doubt will not be considered unfounded by anyone who ever had the pleasure of hearing both him and others and is not carried away by prejudice. And anyone who looks at Bach's organ and clavier pieces, which, as is generally known, he himself performed with the greatest perfection, will also not find much to object to in the sentence above. How strange, how new, how expressive, how beautiful were his ideas in improvising! How perfectly he realized them! All his fingers were equally skillful; all were equally capable of the most perfect accuracy in performance. He had devised for himself so convenient a system of fingering that it was not hard for him to conquer the greatest difficulties with the most flowing facility. Before him, the most famous clavier players in Germany and other lands had used the thumb but little. All the better did he know how to use it. With his two feet, he could play things on the pedals which many not unskillful clavier players would find it bitter enough to have to play with five fingers. He not only understood the art of playing the organ, of combining the various stops of that instrument in the most skillful manner, and of displaying each stop according to its character in the greatest perfection, but he also knew the construction of organs from one end to the other. Of his moral character, those may speak who enjoyed association and friendship with him and were witnesses to his uprightness towards God and his neighbor.

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