

Johann Sebastian Bach

Johann Sebastian Bach was one of the greatest composers in Western musical history. More than 1,000 of his compositions survive. Some examples are the Art of Fugue, Brandenburg Concerti, the Goldberg Variations for Harpsichord, the Mass in B-Minor, the motets, the Easter and Christmas oratorios, Toccata in F Major, French Suite No 5, Fugue in G Major, Fugue in G Minor ("The Great"), St. Matthew Passion, and Jesu Der Du Meine Seele. He came from a family of musicians. There were over 53 musicians in his family over a period of 300 years.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany on March 21, 1685. His father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, was a talented violinist, and taught his son the basic skills for string playing; another relation, the organist at Eisenach's most important church, instructed the young boy on the organ. In 1695 his parents died and he was only 10 years old. He went to go stay with his older brother, Johann Christoph, who was a professional organist at Ohrdruf. Johann Christoph was a professional organist, and continued his younger brother's education on that instrument, as well as on the harpsichord. After several years in this arrangement, Johann Sebastian won a scholarship to study in Luneberg, Northern Germany, and so left his brother's tutelage.

A master of several instruments while still in his teens, Johann Sebastian first found employment at the age of 18 as a "lackey and violinist" in a court orchestra in Weimar; soon after, he took the job of organist at a church in Arnstadt. Here, as in later posts, his perfectionist tendencies and high expectations of other musicians - for example, the church choir - rubbed his colleagues the wrong way, and he was embroiled in a number of hot disputes during his short tenure. In 1707, at the age of 22, Bach became fed up with the lousy musical standards of Arnstadt (and the working conditions) and moved on to another organist job, this time at the St. Blasius Church in Muhlhausen. The same year, he married his cousin Maria Barbara Bach.

Again caught up in a running conflict between factions of his church, Bach fled to Weimar after one year in Muhlhausen. In Weimar, he assumed the post of organist and concertmaster in the ducal chapel. He remained in Weimar for nine years, and there he composed his first wave of major works, including organ showpieces and cantatas.

By this stage in his life, Bach had developed a reputation as a brilliant, if somewhat inflexible, musical talent. His proficiency on the organ was unequalled in Europe - in fact, he toured regularly as a solo virtuoso - and his growing mastery of compositional forms, like the fugue and the canon, was already attracting interest from the musical establishment - which, in his day, was the Lutheran church. But, like many individuals of uncommon talent, he was never very good at playing the political game, and therefore suffered periodic setbacks in his career. He was passed over for a major position - which was Kapellmeister (Chorus Master) of Weimar - in 1716; partly in reaction to this snub, he left Weimar the following year to take a job as

court conductor in Anhalt-Cothen. There, he slowed his output of church cantatas, and instead concentrated on instrumental music - the Cothen period produced, among other masterpieces, the Brandenburg Concerti.

While at Cothen, Bach's wife, Maria Barbara, died. Bach remarried soon after - to Anna Magdalena - and forged ahead with his work. He also forged ahead in the child-rearing department, producing 13 children with his new wife - six of whom survived childhood - to add to the four children he had raised with Maria Barbara. Several of these children would become fine composers in their own right - particularly three sons: Wilhelm Friedmann, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Christian.

After conducting and composing for the court orchestra at Cothen for seven years, Bach was offered the highly prestigious post of cantor (music director) of St. Thomas' Church in Leipzig - after it had been turned down by two other composers. The job was a demanding one; he had to compose cantatas for the St. Thomas and St. Nicholas churches, conduct the choirs, oversee the musical activities of numerous municipal churches, and teach Latin in the St. Thomas choir school. Accordingly, he had to get along with the Leipzig church authorities, which proved rocky going. But he persisted, polishing the musical component of church services in Leipzig and continuing to write music of various kinds with a level of craft and emotional profundity that was his alone.

Bach remained at his post in Leipzig until his death in 1750. He was creatively active until the very end, even after cataract problems virtually blinded him in 1740. His last musical composition, a chorale prelude entitled "Before They Throne, My God, I Stand", was dictated to his son-in-law only days before his death.