



72

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

1685 - 1750

The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach was the first man to successfully combine the differing national styles of music which had existed in western Europe. By bringing together what was best in the Italian, French, and German musical traditions, he succeeded in enriching all of them. Not outstandingly famous during his own lifetime, Bach was half forgotten during the fifty years following his death. But his reputation has grown steadily during the last 150 years, and he is today generally acknowledged to be one of the two or three greatest composers of all time: in the opinion of some, the greatest of them all.

Bach was born in 1685, in the town of Eisenach, in Germany. It was his good fortune to be born into an environ-

ment where musical talent was admired and musical achievement encouraged. Indeed, the Bach family had been outstanding in the field of music for many years before Johann Sebastian was born. His father was a fine violinist, two of his great-uncles had been talented composers, and several of his cousins were highly respected musicians.

Bach's mother died when he was nine, and he was an orphan by the time he was ten. As a teenager, he received a scholarship to St. Michael's School in Lüneburg, partly because of his fine voice and partly on the basis of need. He graduated from St. Michael's in 1702, and the following year found a position as a violinist in a chamber orchestra. Over the next twenty years, he held a variety of positions. During his own lifetime, Bach was chiefly famous as a superb organ player, although he was a composer, teacher, and conductor as well. In 1723, when Bach was thirty-eight years old, he obtained the position of cantor of St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig. He held that position for the remaining twenty-seven years of his life. He died in 1750.

Although Bach was never without a good position and was always able to support his family, he was not nearly as famous during his own lifetime as Mozart and Beethoven (or even Franz Liszt or Frederic Chopin) became during their lifetimes. Not all of Bach's employers recognized his genius. In Leipzig, the council had wished to hire a "first rate musician"; it was only when they were unable to obtain the services of their first two choices that they reluctantly offered the position to Bach! (On the other hand, a few years earlier, when he had wished to leave his post as organist and concertmaster at the ducal court at Weimar for a new position, the duke was so reluctant to have him leave that he actually put Bach in prison. Bach spent over three weeks in jail before the duke finally relented.)

Bach married his second cousin when he was twenty-two years old. They had seven children together, but Bach's wife died when he was thirty-five years old. He remarried the following year, and his second wife not only helped raise the first seven children, but bore him an additional thirteen children. Only

nine of Bach's children survived him, but four of those became well-known musicians in their own right. A talented family indeed!

Bach was a prolific composer. His works include approximately 300 cantatas; the set of 48 fugues and preludes that compose *The Well-Tempered Clavier*; at least 140 other preludes; more than 100 other harpsichord compositions; 23 concertos; 4 overtures; 33 sonatas; 5 masses; 3 oratorios; and a large variety of other pieces. All in all, Bach composed more than 800 serious pieces of music during his lifetime!

Bach was a Lutheran, and deeply religious. He wished his music to serve the church, and the majority of his works are religious music. He did not attempt to invent new forms of music, but rather carried the existing forms to their highest peak.

During the half-century following his death, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach was largely ignored. (It is worth noting, though, that the greatest musicians of that era—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—*did* appreciate Bach's genius.) New musical styles were evolving, and the "old-fashioned" music of Bach went temporarily into eclipse. After 1800, however, there was a revival of interest in Bach's music, and since then his reputation and popularity have steadily climbed. Bach is more popular today, in this secular age, than he was during his own lifetime. It is indeed strange that a composer who was considered old-fashioned 200 years ago, both in style and in subject matter, should be widely admired today. What is the reason for his immense reputation?

In the first place, Bach is generally considered to be technically the best craftsman of all the major composers. He was acquainted with all the musical resources of his day, and could use each of them flawlessly. For example, no subsequent composer has ever rivaled Bach's artistic command of counterpoint (a technique in which two or more separate melodies are played at the same time). In addition, his works are admired for the logic and diversity of their orchestration, the cogency of their themes, and the expressiveness of their melodies.

To most serious students of music, the depth and complexity of structure of Bach's compositions give them a more lasting appeal than the more easily understood works of most other composers. Many people whose interest in music is more casual think of Bach as a rather difficult composer; however, it should be pointed out that his following is not confined to a small musical elite. His records probably sell better than those of any classical composer except Beethoven. (In the long run, of course, the works of Bach or Beethoven are listened to far more than the works of a "popular" composer who is all the rage for a while, but whose popularity proves transient.)

Where should Bach be ranked on this list? Plainly, he should be ranked below Beethoven: not only are Beethoven's works more popular, but he was also a daring innovator who did more to influence the course of musical history than Bach did. It likewise seems appropriate to rank Bach below Michelangelo, the leading figure in the visual arts, and far below Shakespeare, the greatest literary genius. But in view of the enduring popularity of Bach's music and the large influence it has had upon subsequent composers, it seems reasonable to rank him higher than any other artistic or literary figure.



A page from the score of the "Prelude and Fugue in B-Minor," written by J. S. Bach.