

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

1685-1750

Some Documentary Aspects of His Life.

HOWARD BROWN*

ON July 28, 1750, there died in Leipzig one of the greatest musicians of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach. The minutes of the town council record no particular regret over the passing of this man who, since 1723, had been their Cantor at the Thomas-Schule. At the burial three days later, the minister of the Thomaskirche merely announced from the pulpit:

There has passed to his rest and now sleeps blessedly in God the right worthy and esteemed Herr Johann Bach, Composer to his Majesty the King of Poland and Prince-Elector of Saxony, Capellmeister to his Highness of Anhalt-Cothen and Cantor of the Thomas-Schule on the Thomaskirchhof. With the rites of Christian usage his body this day has been committed to the earth.

No one living at the time of his death recognized his supreme greatness, and, unfortunately, despite its uniformly excellent quality, his music was to undergo a period of oblivion. Although his treasure was opened in part to such musicians as Mozart and Beethoven, the latter gaining his first reputation in Vienna by his performance of the Well-tempered Clavier, the historical rediscovery may be taken as the year 1829. It was then that Mendelssohn's presentation of the St. Matthew Passion, one hundred years after its first performance, kindled serious interest in a revival of Bach's music. Whereas in 1870 all of Bach's published works could have been contained in one volume, to-day the Bach-Gesellschaft, representing the complete library of his works, numbers sixty-odd volumes, and there is scarcely a note in this tremendous output that we could lose without regret. To perform and listen to his music is always a mark of our deep respect for the composer, and it is fitting that widespread commemorative concerts this year mark the bicentenary of his death.

Generally speaking, the life of Johann Sebastian Bach, in its outward aspects, is well accounted for. His lineage has been traced back through five generations to one, Veit Bach, a

*Former Head of the Pianoforte Department Halifax Conservatory of Music; Head (Elect) of the Pianoforte Department, Mt. Allison University.

milller who also played the guitar and from whom stems a long line of town musicians whose steadily rising genius is consummated in the artistry of Johann Sebastian. His father Ambrosius lived at Eisenach in the Thuringian forests of Germany, where Sebastian was born. The death of both his parents about the time Bach was ten years of age made it necessary for Johann Christoph, an elder brother who was organist at Ohrdruf, to take in the young orphan that he might continue his education. At the age of fifteen, he began to fend for himself, and won a scholarship as a soprano singer at the convent at Luneburg, where he foreshadowed his future versatility by continuing as a violinist when his voice broke. At the age of seventeen, "our Bach", after having tried unsuccessfully to gain a post at Sangerhausen, obtained a minor post as a violinist in one of the court-bands at Weimar, and two years later, he was made town organist at Arnstadt with a large new organ and opportunity for study and writing. Here he could expand his greatness as a composer, trying his hand at toccatas and fugues. Here he wrote his one known attempt at sheer programme music, namely "The Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother", which describes the dangers his brother, Johann Jacob, might encounter should he leave for Sweden as oboist in King Charles XII's band.

The pressure of steady service at Arnstadt led Bach to seek inspiration by paying a visit to Lubeck to hear the great organist Buxtehude. The prowess displayed must have thoroughly captivated him, for he far outstayed his leave. The record at the Arnstadt Consistory, dated February 21, 1706, reads in part:

The Organist in the New Church, Bach, is interrogated as to where he has lately been for so long and from whom he obtained leave to go.

Ille: He has been to Lubeck in order to comprehend one thing and another about his art, but had asked leave beforehand from the Superintendent.

Dominus Superintendus: He has asked leave for only four weeks but had stayed four times as long.

Ille: hoped that the organ playing had been so taken care of by the one (Bach's cousin) he had engaged for the purpose that no complaint could be entered on that account.

Together with the above warnings, were charges that too many variations had been worked into the playing of the hymns. Furthermore, his relations with the choir were not too happy,

for not only did he lack ability to compromise on artistic matters with those in his care, but he lost heart to the point of letting things go when the administrative duties of the church and its choir stood in the way of his urge to compose. Then, when the Consistory asked him by what powers he had allowed the strange maiden to appear and make music in the choir (the "strange maiden" as nearly as we know being his cousin, Maria Barabra, whom he was soon to marry), Bach set about seeking a post elsewhere.

A vacancy occurred at St. Blasius' Church, Mulhausen, and Bach's test performance on the organ made him the unanimous choice of the council. A disastrous fire in the town of Mulhausen delayed his appointment, the transactions being recorded in the proceedings of the parish meetings, June 14th, 1707. They state that "Mr. Bach requires":

85 gulden, which he received at Arnstadt and the following emoluments in kind:

54 bushels of grain.

2 cords of wood, 1 beech and 1 other (oak or aspen)

6 times threescore fagots delivered to the door.

The council consented to his terms, and facilitated the move by sending a cart to transport his goods from Arnstadt to Mulhausen in September, 1707. A month later, at rather less than twenty-three years of age, Bach returned to Arnstadt to marry the little cousin who had spread consternation among the townspeople by appearing in the choir. He returned with his bride to the town of his new appointment, so soon to frustrate his desire for further musical achievement. The picture was disturbed by the strife between Orthodox Lutheranism and Pietism, a sect that feared artistry in religion. Admitting frankly that he saw no improvement in musical conditions, Bach sent in his resignation to the council after a year, and leaving yet another cousin in his place, made a bold move with better pay in sight. Weimar was to receive him for a second time, not again as a mere violinist but as court organist and chamber musician to "His Royal and Serene Highness of Saxe-Weimar", Duke Wilhelm Ernst, one of the most distinguished and cultivated princes of his time. His orchestra of some twenty members officiated at birthdays, weddings and funerals, and in this artistically agreeable situation, Bach must have longed only for the title of "Kapellmeister" to be completely happy. When

Drese, the holder of that title, died and his son was made successor, Bach, feeling the slight most keenly, had as his only aim to leave Weimar as quickly as possible. He demanded immediate acceptance of his resignation, having been offered a Kapellmeistership by the Prince of Anhalt-Cothen, and now was impatient to assume the title. The Weimar Duke decided rather meanly, to discipline his temperamental musician, putting him under arrest for a month. His release came only with the Duke's realization that an organist in prison is of little use, and it was followed close by his departure for Cothen on December 2, 1717.

The six years spent in Cothen were regarded by him as musically the most pleasant, largely due to the amiable qualities of his prince, who was skilled in both voice and violincello. Twice Bach and a group from the Cothen orchestra accompanied the prince to Carlsbad and it was on his return from the second visit in 1720 that Bach met with the news that his poor wife had died during his absence, though apparently in good health when he left. Four children were living of the seven she bore him, and though not so musical as his second wife-to-be, she had been most sympathetic with her husband's work. A year and a half later Bach married the twenty-one year old Anna Magdalena Wilcken of Weissenfels. Hers was a good, well-trained voice, and in order to round out her musicianship, he wrote a series of little pieces to teach her to play the harpsicord, known as the "Anna Magdalena Clavier Pieces", and a delight for their simplicity. Not a few surviving manuscripts are copied in her hand, and it is a pity that such a devoted companion had to die in poverty ten years after her husband's death.

In 1722, Kuhnau's death made vacant the post of Cantor at Leipzig. Here was a big city of thirty thousand inhabitants, and opportunity for the education of his elder sons, but the title of Cantor was less than his present one. He weighed the two positions against each other, the comfortable life at Cothen as opposed to the duties at Leipzig, where, though not required to play the organ, he would have to instruct the choir boys of the Thomas-Schule in their work for four churches, St. Thomas's, St. Nicholas's, St. Peter's and The New Church. In a letter to a friend, George Erdmann, at Danzig, dated October 28, 1730, Bach writes:

At first it was not altogether agreeable to me to change the post of Kapellmeister for that of Cantor. Consequently, I delayed my decision for a quarter of a year; nevertheless this post was so favorably described to me that finally, especially as my

sons appeared to be inclined to study, I ventured upon it in the name of the Most High and went to Leipzig, passed my trial, and at once set about my removal.

Bach had to sign an agreement to lead a respectable and sober life, to be faithful and diligent in the performance of his duties, to have a proper respect for the council: not to make the church music too long or too operatic; to instruct the boys in instrumental as well as vocal music; to treat them with humanity; not to send incapable singers to the New Church; not to make any journeys without the permission of the burgomaster; and not to accept any office in the university without leave from the council. When the negotiations had opened, he had glibly consented, in order to appear entirely favorable to the council, to teach Latin to the choir boys, but this task proved too much. He was glad to delegate a colleague at a payment of fifty thalers per annum to relieve him of the work.

In his new Leipzig post, Bach was careful not to be known merely as Cantor. He attached great significance to the fact that he held the rank of Musical Director to the Duke of Anhalt-Cothen, and, in addition, bore the same in an honorary way at the Court of Weissenfels. For all his pride in these titles, the Leipzig town council persisted in referring to him only as Cantor, doubtless a point of annoyance for him. His work was complicated by the number of allegiances that he owed, and not only were the town council demanding, but also the church and university authorities. The question as to who should be music master in the university chapel soon raised itself. For two years Bach had tolerated its organist, Gorner, who was not only incompetent, but took fees that rightfully belonged to the Cantor. A letter to the Elector of Saxony explains that he (Bach) conducted the music, but was paid only half the salary, and the dispute dragged on with much exchange of correspondence, but concluded without any clear definition of Bach's position. In this period of his great choral output, it was only natural that he should want none but the best scholars as performers, and, to help improve the situation he asked the council to provide nine scholarships. When new scholars were to be elected, and Bach's choice was not entirely in accord with the council's, trouble ensued. The importance of providing better material for music the calibre of the St. Matthew Passion was ignored by the town fathers. In an account submitted to the Council titled: "Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-appointed

Church-music; with Certain Modest Reflections on the Decline of the same," Bach says, "Modesty forbids me to speak at all truthfully of their qualities and musical knowledge."

Bach was on both good and bad terms with the rectors of the school. He was happiest under Gesner, who seems to have held his Cantor in high regard, for he appends a note to his edition of the "Institutio Oratoria" of Quintilian, part of which follows in translation:

All this, my dear Fabius, you would consider very trivial could you but rise from the dead and hear Bach: how he, with both hands, and using all his fingers, whether on a keyboard which seems to consist of many lyres in one, or on the instrument of instruments, of which the innumerable pipes are made to sound by means of bellows; here with his hands, and there with the utmost celerity with his feet elicits many of the most various yet harmonious sounds: I say, could you only see him presiding over thirty or forty players all at once, recalling this one by a nod, another by a stamp of the foot, another by a warning finger, keeping tune with time . . . Great admirer as I am of antiquity in other respects, yet I am of the opinion that my one Bach unites in himself many Orpheuses and twenty Orions.

With Gesner's successor, Ernesti, Bach disputed at length, and doubtless there was fault on both sides. His new superior appears to have lacked an appreciation of music and tried to dissuade the boys in his charge from its study with the taunt, "What! You want to be a beer-fiddler!". In the *Acta* of the town is a complaint by Bach dated August 12, 1736, stating that Ernesti had exceeded his powers by promoting the prefect of the second choir. Because the student chosen was, according to the Cantor, of no use in the performance of music, Bach made a second choice, maintaining that voice, character and ability to conduct must all be found in the first prefect. The situation developed to a point of charge and counter-charge, with the King whom Bach was not hesitant to approach in the issue, finally giving decision in his favor. In all fairness, it must be admitted that the Cantor does not always appear in sympathetic light. As Schweitzer, writing on Bach, observes:

His irritability and his stubborn belief that he was always in the right can neither be excused nor glazed over. Least of all can we find excuse for the fact that at first he would be too easy-going, would always remember too late what he called his rights, and then, in a blind rage, would make a great affair out of what was merely a trifle. Such was Bach in his relations with people whom he suspected of a desire to enroach upon his freedom!

The documentary aspects of Bach's life do not entirely ignore the picture of the family man. Altogether his first and second wives had borne him twenty children, but the high infant death rate left only nine to survive. That he was quite pleased with them is demonstrated in his comment:

They are all born musicians; and I can assure you that I can already hold a concert, both vocal and instrumental, in my own family. My wife sings a clear soprano and my eldest daughter joins in not badly.

His sons continued in the musical tradition. Wilhelm Friedmann' the eldest, was a fine keyboard player with considerable talent for composition. Carl Phillip Emmanuel was associated for a number of years with the Court of Frederick the Great, the king who also played the flute. Johann Christoph Friedrich, Anna Magdalena's eldest son, became Kapellmeister at Buck-burg, and Johann Christian, her youngest, went to England, becoming known as "the London Bach."

None could question Bach's hospitality. His son Emmanuel wrote in his biography:

No master of music would willingly pass through his town [Leipzig] without making his father's acquaintance and obtaining permission to play for him. My father's greatness in composition and organ and clavier-playing which was quite remarkable was too well known for any great musician of importance to neglect making that great man's acquaintance when it was in any way possible.

Bach even took artiled pupils to live with the family, something to be wondered at considering his many children. Amongst his most famous pupils were Schubart, Vogler and Krebs, the last of whom caused the Cantor to remark facetiously, "In a brook [Bach] there was only one crab [Krebs] caught." The general clannish feeling amongst the Bachs caused the younger men of the set to locate in Leipzig for both musical and general study. Included were Johann Ernst, son of Bernhard Bach of Eisenach, and Johann Elias, who came to matriculate in theology and acted as secretary to his famous relative.

Not least among the Cantor's duties were his examinations and reports on organs. In this regard, his opinion was widely sought after, and it is recorded that when he sat down to test the instruments, he first liked to pull out all stops to see whether or not the organ had good lungs. Forkel, his earliest biographer further says:

Many organ builders and organists were frightened when they saw him draw the stops. They believed such a combination of stops would never sound well, but were afterwards surprised when they perceived the organ sounded best just so, and had now something peculiar and uncommon which could never be produced by their mode of registration.

Famed for his perfected tuning in equal temperament and for his improvement of instruments generally, he himself kept in repair his most beloved instrument, the clavichord, and tuned and added new quills to the harpsicords at his disposal. He was indeed a practical musician.

Perhaps he was too practical a musician in the eyes of his critics, for he had to endure repeated slights that annoyed him greatly. Unlike Handel, his famed contemporary whom he unsuccessfully tried several times to meet, Bach had no formal training in the liberal arts. Scheibe, author of the journal, "Der Critische Musicus", twits him in an anonymous letter, giving praise to Bach the player but deprecating the composer. To quote the gibe:

This great man is not well up in the sciences that are particularly required of a learned musician. How can one be quite without blemish in his musical work who has not, by knowledge of the world, qualified himself to investigate the forces of nature and reason?

The attack was answered by Birnbaum, a friend of Bach and a professor of rhetoric at Leipzig. This was taken by Scheibe as a confession of disability, and perhaps Bach would have been wiser to answer the letter himself. Certainly much of the reproach is not unfounded. In Mizler's *Necrology*, 1754, is found the following statement, "Our Bach did not engage at all in deep theoretical considerations of music, but was all the stronger in the practice of it." Nor could it be denied that he was a self-taught musician who, by continual experiment, had arrived at amazing mastery of clavier-playing, organ playing, harmony and composition. However, no uncultivated man would possess, or could have used, the extensive library in his estate at the time of his death. Evidence of his religious knowledge comes from the catalogue of theological books that undoubtedly were used for pious reading and discussion. The forces of Bach's emotional life were founded in religion, and the music of the Lutheran church was his one great source of endeavour. He was one of the last composers to pursue his ideal of music-making solely

for the Glory of God in the midst of the worldliness around him, and not a few of his manuscripts bear the pious inscription "In Jesus Name" at the head. His long final Leipzig period, when the greatest of his canatas, motets, Passions and Masses were produced, results in music tinged with a wonderful religious mysticism. Musicians revere his *Mass in B minor* for the supreme joy and aesthetic satisfaction which its performance imparts.

Such a monumental work flowed from the pen of one who had assimilated all the great musical achievements to which his age had fallen heir. He was familiar with Palestrina and Vivaldi, to mention Italian sources, having made copies and transcriptions of the latter's concertos. During the visit of his youth to the court at Celle, where taste was modelled after Versailles, he developed a liking for the pointed rhythms of French dance music, and, of course, he was thoroughly conversant with the music of German-speaking countries. He was indebted to Froberger and Fux, the latter famed for his system of teaching counterpoint; to Schutz who had written Passion music according to the four Evangelists; to Pachelbel, the composer who had taught Bach's elder brother with whom Bach had lived when orphaned, and to Kuhnau, whose position Bach filled at Leipzig. He could assimilate from his many sources any pattern or style, and keep apart the various elements. His great ability in this regard may be seen in the second part of the *Clavier-Uebung*, which contains two compositions for harpsichord, namely, the Italian Concerto and the French Overture. One has only to refer to his Chorale Preludes for an idea of his thoroughgoing development of peculiar technique or character with which he was able to inform each, and in the realm of contrapuntal intricacy, he made of the fugue, which hitherto had been known only as a type, a live and eloquent form of expression. The Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues for the Well-tempered Clavier bear ready witness of his skill in this regard.

One of the foremost aims of music at the time was the expression of what the Germans call the "Affetti", such as love, jealousy, hatred, joy and sorrow. While it is possible to read into Bach's music an elaborate system of moods with which are associated ready-made patterns, such an intellectual routine seems beneath the great musician. Suffice it to say that he was careful to treat his texts with the most appropriate music, carefully suiting mood and meaning. Certainly (in his vocal music) he did use descriptive patterns, as Schweitzer has been at pains

to point out in his writing on Bach. Such actions as running, resting, flying, falling are translated with remarkable ingenuity, and to mention one instance of pictorial effect, the scale runs to describe the rending of the veil of the temple in the Passion, are famous. In such tone-painting, the architectural system is not supplanted by the pictorial: architectural and pictorial go side by side. His instrumental music relies on musically constructive features with scarcely any titles or poetic programmes, and, as a composer of absolute music, his fondness for writing in sixes and multiples thereof is clearly illustrated by his six French Suites, six English Suites, six partitas, six concertos, six sonatas or suites for violin alone, six suites for 'cello alone, six sonatas for clavier and viola, six sonatas for clavier and flute, six sonatas and eighteen preludes for organ, eighteen chorales and the six Brandenburg Concertos.

Although Bach, before his death, had ceased to be the heart of musical vitality in Leipzig, according to a contemporary, Telemann, his prowess on the clavier and organ won him the title of "The Great". Any reputation he had outside his immediate sphere was based on organ concerts in Dresden and Cassel, and on his trip to the court of Frederick the Great in 1747. At such times, his power to improvise alone would have been enough to establish him at the top. But the Bach we know to-day was not the one known to his contemporaries, who admired him as a writer of fugues and as a composer of canatas and Passions, without loving or trying to understand him. He was called "the old wig" even by his sons, whose immediate reputation as musicians many times outshone their father's. Bach felt stylistically and spiritually at ease in the older forms he chose to use for creative effort, and was consciously out of step with the modern trends of his day, which pointed to the smooth vocal style of Italian opera.

Dr. Burney, music historian of the time, writes as follows:

If Sebastian Bach . . . had been employed for the stage and the public of great capitals such as Naples, Paris, or London, and for performances of the first class, [he] would doubtless have simplified [his] style more to the level of [his] judges . . . and would have sacrificed all unmeaning art and contrivance.

Perhaps so. On the other hand, Ernest Newman, famed music critic of the present day, says:

It was his good fortune, we now see, that he remained throughout his life the great provincial of music, working always in small

towns and developing his purely German genius along the lines native to himself and appropriate to his historical perspective.

The wonder is that he could apparently be so unconscious of the greatness of his own work. Though he assiduously copied his own music to the detriment of his eyesight, one can hardly interpret his industry as a desire to propagate his writing beyond his immediate sphere. Often his manuscripts have been preserved for us by pure chance, and it is not his fault that we know and possess as much record of his prodigious flow of composition as we do. Yet somehow one feels Bach received just such recognition during his lifetime as he wished and expected. Zelter, to whom Goethe was indebted for his introduction to Bach, once wrote:

Even when every criticism made against him is allowed, this Leipzig Cantor is one of God's own phenomena—clear, yet never to be cleared up.
