

Johann Sebastian Bach was without question the greatest organist and composer of the Baroque Era. He was also widely recognised as one of the most productive geniuses in the history of music.

Johann was born and schooled in Eisenach, Thuringia, at the same Latin school that Luther had attended two centuries before. Johann Sebastian Bach was born 21 March 1685 and died 1750. Johann was part of a family that, in seven generations, produced 53 prominent musicians. He received his first musical instruction from his father Johann Ambrosius Bach. Orphaned at age 10, Johann went to live and study with his uncle Johann Christoph Bach, an organist in Ohrdruf. Johann was the eighth and youngest child of his parents.

By age 15, Bach was displaying tremendous talent and became a soprano in the choir of Lüneburg's Church of St. Michael. Three years later he became a violinist in the chamber orchestra of Prince Johann Ernst of Weimar. A few months later he was invited to become a church organist at Arnstadt. In October 1705, Bach was invited to study under the renowned German organist and composer Dietrich Buxtehude. Upon his return he was severely criticized for his new organ flourishes and harmonies that accompanied the congregational singing.

In 1707 he married Maria Barbara and went to Mülhausen to become organist in the church of St. Blasius. After 13 years of happy marriage, Maria died in 1720 and the next year he married Anna Magdalena Wilcken, an accomplished singer.

He finally settled down in Leipzig in 1723 where he remained for the rest of his life. Anna Magdalena bore him 13 children, in addition to the 7 he had had by Maria. In addition to running a busy household, Anna also helped copy music for Johann's performances. Four of Bach's surviving ten children became well known composers.

In Leipzig Johann Bach was music director and choir master of St. Thomas's church and a teacher at their school. This was not an easy time, and he was involved in constant conflict with the town council and the populace, who did not seem to appreciate his musical genius. The council paid him a very inadequate salary and, even when he died, they contrived to defraud his widow of her meager inheritance. (At his appointment one of the town councilors famously said: *As the best musicians are not available, I suppose we must take one of the second rate.*)

Bach wrote to a friend: *The authorities are odd and little interested in music, so that I must live amid almost continual vexation, envy and persecution.*

Yet, in this unpromising setting, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote some of his most enduring music. For a time he averaged a cantata a week. Today a composer who writes a cantata a year is highly regarded. Nearly three fourths of Bach's 1,000 compositions were written for use in worship. All of his music was closely bound to Biblical text. At the end of most of his music Bach wrote: *Soli Deo Gloria* (To God alone be the glory), or the initials SDG.

It was in Leipzig that Bach composed the *Passion of St. John* and the *Passion of St. Matthew* for use in worship services. The *Passion of St. Matthew* has frequently been called *The supreme cultural achievement of all western civilisation.* Even the skeptic Frederic Nietzsche admitted upon hearing it: *one who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as Gospel.*

When he was 48, Bach acquired a copy of Cavlov's 3-volume Luther translation of the German Bible, with parallel Luther commentary. This he studied most carefully. Next to 1 Chronicles 25 Bach wrote in his Bible *This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing music.* At 2 Chronicles 5:13 Bach wrote: *At a reverent performance of music, God is always at hand with His gracious presence.*

After his death, his music was generally neglected,

although a few musicians, such as Mozart and Beethoven, admired it. However, it was in 1829, when German composer Felix Mendelssohn arranged a performance of the *Passion of St. Matthew*, there was a massive resurgence of appreciation for Bach's compositions. Bach was not only one of the most creative and prolific musicians in all of history, but he was also acknowledged as an expert in organ design.

Today Johann Sebastian Bach is recognised as one of the greatest musical geniuses in all of history, a devout Christian theologian whose music has had such a deep impact that he has been described in many circles as *The Fifth Evangelist*.

Many music critics declare that Bach was the greatest musician that ever lived. J.S. Bach was an unsurpassed genius and is acknowledged as the Father of Modern Music. He left no musical form as he found it, says one critic. On the other hand, with every form he touched, he seemed to have said the last word. Bach's teaching notebooks and violin books have been the basis for music theory and practice ever since.

Bach was modest about his achievements, offering this classic understatement: *I was obliged to be industrious. Whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally well.*

Johann Sebastian Bach was a dedicated Protestant Christian, a Lutheran. Most of his library consisted of Protestant writings, including all of Luther's books. Bach taught his pupils that music is an act of worship and all musicians need to commit their talents to the Lord Jesus Christ. *The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul.*

As one critic said: *Bach is to music what Shakespeare is to literature. They are both the greatest. And they were both Protestant Christians.*