

# The life and legacy of johann sebastian bach



## The Life and Legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach

Many important figures have impacted and shaped the comprehensive history of western classical music. Even today, most laymen know of the names of the great classical composers like prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and can even identify some of the most iconic melodies such as the opening subject to Ludwig Van Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Surprisingly, these men of great talent all stem from the foundation set by one German composer: Johann Sebastian Bach. Now, the name J. S. Bach evokes the Baroque period of music and its influence can be seen throughout the works of later periods and other composers. With such a substantial impact, J. S. Bach in actuality had a very modest and local career and after Bach's death, his music was almost completely forgotten. It was through his legacy among musicians and protégés which sparked a rekindling of Bach's music and he now receives immense admiration and veneration for his technically challenging keyboard works, his potent liturgical works, and his vast amount of sheer repertoire.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1685, into a highly musical family. His father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, was the director of the town musicians and was skilled in the violin and harpsichord. J. S. Bach was the youngest of eight children all of whom were trained in harpsichord, violin, and basic music theory. Bach also had many uncles who were all professional musicians working as local organists, court chamber musicians, and composers. Thus, J. S. Bach was immersed in music from a young age and also was trained in music theory, composition, the harpsichord, clavichord, organ, and violin. In particular, his older brother Johann Christoph

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Bach, an organist at the St. Michael's Church in Ohrdruf and pupil of Johann Pachelbel, became a prominent musical figure in J. S. Bach's life and further engendered his passion for music. At the age of 14, Bach attended the prestigious St. Michael's School in Luneburg, Germany where he was exposed to a wide variety of cultural sounds such as the music of Northern and Southern Germany, Italy, and France. In 1703, J. S. Bach was appointed the position of court musician at the chapel of Duke Johann Ernst III in the city of Weimar but was unhappy with his work as he was often unsatisfied with the church choirs and the amount of composing he was responsible for. Thus, Bach and his family was required to travel and move in order to seek better job opportunities. However, unlike most musicians, who would travel all across Europe performing and making a living, Bach lived relatively local moving from town to town all within the confines of Germany.

Bach often had ideological differences with his employer and he would compose some of his greatest works all in different cities and churches as well require to teach students. For instance, in 1723, Bach was appointed the Cantor of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig where he served and composed till his death 27 years later. Bach was required to teach the students of the St. Thomas Church singing and keyboard. It was at this time that Bach wrote his Inventions and Sinfonias for keyboard, a collection of exercises that most pianists play even to this day in order to improve their technique, articulation, dexterity, precision, and speed. It was also as *Thomaskantor* that he wrote his Mass in B minor, considered to be one of the greatest choral works of all time.

Johann Sebastian Bach died on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1750 and although he was celebrated as an organist and harpsichordist, very few people beyond the city of Weimar knew of Bach's compositions. It was only the great composers and keyboardist to keep Bach's music alive in conservatories and libraries. Thus, the even the greatest of composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Frederic Chopin, and Felix Mendelssohn, all revered Bach's work as excellent keyboard music. This is because Bach's music was one of the most highly technical for the era, another being the music of Bach's contemporary, George Frederic Handel. During the Baroque period, keyboard instruments were often for accompaniment to harmonize and contrast with the string instruments of the orchestra. However, substantial advances for keyboard in result of Bach's compositions led to more solo prominence in music as well as facilitated the invention of the pianoforte, now one of the most learned music instruments.

Moreover, Bach has left not only a large amount of music manuscripts but also his legacy as a keyboardist, and composer of liturgical and secular music. Through his travels and his encounters with different cultures and colleagues within the Baroque Era, Bach was able to capitalize on both the aesthetic culture of the time and the variety of styles across countries. Also, as Bach had shifted positions and employers many times, he was required to create new music contextually depending on purpose and location. As Bach was a religiously devoted man, he wrote a numerous amount of chorales, pastoral songs, and congregational hymns for the choir and organ or harpsichord. As Bach began teaching and instructing, Bach began to write

more works for keyboard that included a variety of preludes and fugues, toccatas, fantasies, and theme and variation works.

Baroque music in general is classified by its heavily ornate technicality and grandiose sounds all within a systematically controlled framework. Thus, Bach's music is highly articulate and technical a reason why the great pianists Felix Mendelssohn and Franz Liszt both practiced with Bach works and built upon his keyboard foundation. Bach also further developed German music through his skill in counterpoint, harmonic, and motivic organization, and the adaptation of rhythms, forms and textures. However, after Bach's death, much of his music was deemed archaic and old-fashioned as new composers such as Franz Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven brought forth the new era of Classical music. Soon, most of the general public did not know of J. S. Bach's name in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many pivotal figures reincarnated Bach's name through the years. First, Johann Nikolaus Forkel's wrote the composer's biography in 1802. The pianist and composer, Felix Mendelssohn further popularized Bach's name by arranging and performing the St. Matthew Passion. The performance proved to be successful as Bach's name and reputation as a composer soon revived. By the 1850s, the *Bach-Gesellschaft*, or the Bach Society, was founded in order to further preserve Bach's works and promote his repertoire. New works by Bach are still being found to this day.

Bach's enormous library of music is simply a testament to his diligence and creativity. With such music, Bach was able to pave a way for future musicians and composers. Through his advancement in keyboard work, Bach provided the technique for great pianists. With his teachings and

instructions, many of his protégés moved on to become great Classical era composers. Even presently, Bach's works are performed by the finest of performers and has become truly a household name for both musicians and laymen alike.

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