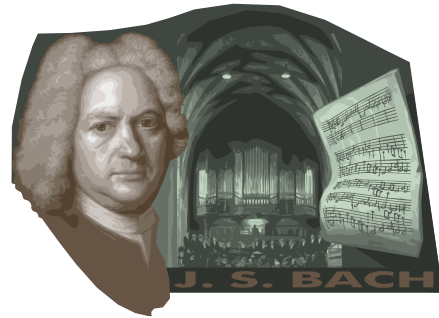


JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

The ancestry of J. S. Bach (1685 - 1750) can be traced, through genealogical data he recorded, to Veit Bach (d. 1577), baker and cittern player in Thuringia. Most of Veit's descendants possessed some degree of musical talent, which they used in positions under municipal government and/or church patronage. The Bachs were proud of their musical heritage. Children received musical training from parents or other relatives; when a son was born, it was presumed that his vocation would be music.



Most of the Bachs were instrumentalists, usually keyboard players, and some made instruments; a few wrote music. J. S. Bach copied 20 of their compositions into the Alt-Bachisches Archiv (Bach Ancestral Records) that he maintained. An abundance of musical talent was inherited by J. S. Bach, who was famous in his own day as virtuoso organist and consultant on organ building.

In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, several Bachs held important positions in Thuringia. Johann Ambrosius (1645 - 95) was court trumpeter and town music director at Eisenach; his twin brother, Johann Christoph (1645 - 93), was a court violinist and town musician at Erfurt. Their cousin Johann Christoph (1642 - 1703), musically the most important member of the family before Johann Sebastian, was organist and harpsichordist in the Eisenach court chapel; his brother Johann Michael (1648 - 94), town clerk and town organist at Gehren, was an instrument maker and composed excellent chorale motets.

Johann Sebastian Bach, born at Eisenach on 21 March 1685, was the youngest of the eight children of Johann Ambrosius Bach and Maria E. Lammerhirt (1644 - 94). Sebastian attended the local Latin School where he received a general humanistic-theological education that included singing; his father taught him to play violin. His mother died in 1694, and his father soon remarried. After Ambrosius died (early in 1695), Sebastian's stepmother was financially unable to maintain the household, so Sebastian and his brother Jacob went to live with their older brother, Johann Christoph (1671 - 1721), organist at Ohrdruf. At the Ohrdruf Lyceum, Sebastian received a broad, enlightened education that included religion and singing; Christoph gave him keyboard lessons and probably trained him to assist with organ repairs.

It was customary for the prince to take several musicians with him when he traveled, and on several occasions Bach accompanied him to the Carlsbad spa. Upon returning from such a trip in July 1720, Bach learned that Maria Barbara had died and that her funeral had already been held. During Bach's temporary depression after his wife's death, he considered taking a church organist position, and he auditioned by playing for more than two hours on the organ at Catharinenkirche, Hamburg, before city officials and 97-year-old Reincken, who praised him highly for his ability to extemporize on a given theme. Yet, when offered the organist post at Jakobikirche, Hamburg, Bach declined. In 1721 he became acquainted with court-singer Anna Magdalena Wilcke (1701 - 60), and they married on 3 December 1721.

INFLUENCES

Many factors influenced Bach's career: (1) a working knowledge of both Renaissance and Baroque contrapuntal techniques; (2) an awareness of the techniques, styles, and forms used by his contemporaries at home and abroad - composers older and younger, as well as those of his own generation - and assimilation of the best of their stylistic characteristics into his own work; (3) a thorough understanding of voices and instruments and of vocal and instrumental virtuosity; (4) craftsmanship, perseverance, and planning, coupled with family pride, talent, and personal genius; (5) the eighteenth-century patronage system, by means of which an employer dictated, controlled, and stimulated an individual's artistic production; and (6) a religious conviction that the primary purpose of his life and his work was to glorify God. Bach was well-educated in theology and interpreted the Biblical and liturgical texts he set to music from a theologian's viewpoint; this is evident from his marginal notes in his Bible and his copy of Abraham Calov's three-volume commentary on the Lutheran Bible. Bach's religious conviction is expressed overtly in J. J. (Jesu, juva, Jesus, help) and S. D. G. (Soli Deo gloria, To God alone be glory) that appear at the beginning and end of his cantatas or the letters I. N. J. (In nomine Jesu, in Jesus's name) above the first piece of music in Wilhelm Friedemann's Clavier-Buchlein.