

The Bach Family



There has never been a dynasty like it! We have Johann Sebastian Bach to thank for much of the Genealogy as well. In the region of Thuringia, the name of Bach was synonymous with music, but they were also a 'family' experiencing the ups and downs of 17th & 18th century life, from happy marriages and joyful family music-making in this devoutly Lutheran community to coping with infant mortality and dysfunctional behaviour. The Bach Family encountered the lot.

In this page, we visit the lives of key members of this remarkable family, a family that was humble in its intent, served the community, were appropriately deferential to their various patrons or princes, and whose music lives on through our performances today. Joh. Seb. Bach's ancestors set the tone and musical direction, but this particular family member raised the bar higher in scale and invention. Sebastian taught his own sons too, plus many of the offspring of his relatives. His eldest sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel certainly held their Father in high regard, but also wanted to plough their own furrow - not easy even then. Others either held church or court positions and one travelled first to Italy and then to Georgian London in order to ply his trade - Johann Christian Bach, the youngest son.



The family's ancestry goes back to the late 16th/early 17th centuries to a certain Vitus (Veit) Bach (d.1619) who left his native Hungary and came to live in Wechmar, near Gotha in Thuringia. He was a baker by trade. This is his Mill (*see above*). Fast forward two centuries and we find the last of Joh. Seb Bach's children to survive, Regina Susannah, who died in 1809. Setting the date of her death in context, 1809 was the year of Mendelssohn's birth and eighty years after Matthäus-Passion was performed in 1720s Leipzig. It was a timespan that bore witness to significant change in musical taste, moving away from the Leipzig tradition of old Bach's day and more in line with his second son CPE Bach, the Age of Enlightenment, and beyond towards Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, who all three testified to their admiration for the Leipzig Cantor nonetheless.

Veit Bach had three sons, one of whom, Johannes, earned part of his living as a musician. The music tradition was being set. Bach's father, Johann Ambrosius, was Veit Bach's great grandson.



Johann Ambrosius Bach (1645-1695) *pictured left* was Bach's Father, born in Erfurt where he was employed as a violinist. In 1671 Ambrosius moved to Eisenach to work as a town musician. He married Maria Elisabetha Lämmerhirt and they had eight children, four of whom were sons who became musicians including the youngest, Johann Sebastian. With Ambrosius's death, Johann Sebastian and his brother Johann Jakob were orphaned.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was born in Eisenach where he also initially attended the same school as the theologian Martin Luther two centuries before. He was the youngest child of Ambrosius and Elisabeth Lämmerhirt. Both parents died when Joh. Seb. Bach was young. Aged 10, he and his brother Johann Jakob were subsequently taken into the home of their older brother Johann Christoph, who lived at Ohrdruf a few miles to the SE of Eisenach. JSB benefitted from musical teaching by Johann Christoph and at the local Ohrdruf school which he attended before successfully applying for a choral scholarship to the Michaelisschule in Lüneburg, entering that learned and performing establishment in 1700, aged 15.



Lüneburg's Michaeliskirche, with school attached

Bach travelled to his new school with Georg Erdmann, who became a lifelong friend and with whom he continually corresponded. Studying in Lüneburg, which was ruled by a francophile Ducal Court, brought the young and eager composer in contact with the composer and organist Georg Böhm (1661-1733), and with French fashion, taste, and style, plus the fashionable dances that leading French dancing masters introduced to the Court. It was an opportunity and an environment in which to develop and hone his musical skills.

The image below is of the 1985 sculpture of the Young Bach by Prof. Bernd Göbel and it stands in the main square at Arnstadt. It is in complete contrast to the bewigged, elder statesmen Bach with which we are more familiar – the 1746 and 1748 portraits – painted by Elias Haussmann.



After a short term as a 'lackey' (music secretary) and chamber musician at the Weimar Court in 1703, four years later it was then on to Arnstadt as organist, during which time, still eager to learn, the young Bach travelled 200 miles on foot and by cart over to Lübeck in 1705 to study with Buxtehude and attend the Abendmusiken (Evening Concerts). It was a life-changing experience for Bach, who was so transfixed by events that he stayed longer than the two months permitted. When he returned to Arnstadt in 1706, he was roundly admonished for overstaying his time away. This

lapse tells us a great deal about Bach's character, his eagerness and youthful exuberance, curious nature, and determination to improve his Art, a lifelong commitment. The Buxtehude effect on Bach's compositions is perhaps best manifested in his Cantata "*Gottes Zeit is die Allerbeste Zeit* (God's time is the best time) BWV 106 (Actus Tragicus) in structure, economy of instrumentation, adherence to the text. After Arnstadt it was on briefly to the St Blasiers Church at Mühlhausen, Organist and then Kapellmeister at Weimar (1708-1717) where from 1714 he was required to provide a cantata a month for the services at the Himmelsburg. As Kapellmeister, life at the Court at Cöthen (1717-1723) must have been very agreeable at first as Bach had a musical patron in Prince Leopold, that is until the latter married a Princess not possessed of such an interest. So there came a time when it was necessary to consider moving on, especially to a position that would also open doors to good education for his sons. His early appointments were of shorter duration as he built his career, but each showed the composer's development as a musician, as a man with a growing and talented family, and as someone fit to occupy prominent musical positions.



Thomaskirche today

This culminated in 1723 when he was appointed Cantor to the Thomasschule at Leipzig, a position he held for 27 years until his death in 1750. Here among other genres (passions, oratorios, masses, chamber music, suites et al), the cornerstone of his compositions, the church cantatas, were given full creative expression in five cycles composed from 1723 and 1728-29. The Leipzig cycles of cantatas, some revised from his earlier years, were each provided for a specific Sunday in the church year, starting on the First Sunday after Trinity and ending on Trinity Sunday. All this was in addition to tending his family members and providing appropriate education for them in what was a seemingly happy bustling household that

coped equally with infant mortality and dysfunctional behaviour.



Maria Barbara Bach (1684-1720) was Johann Sebastian's first wife. She was his second cousin and the youngest daughter of Johann Michael Bach (1648-1694) who was first cousin of Ambrosius and brother of Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703). The marriage took place on 17 October 1707 at Dörnheim, near Mühlhausen. Moving to Weimar in 1708 and then to Cöthen in 1717, they had six children, including sons Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Gottfried Bernhard who later became composers and performers in their own

right. Tragedy struck this otherwise happy household in 1720 when Maria Barbara died suddenly, cause unknown, while her husband was away in Carlsbad with Prince Leopold, his Cöthen patron. Sebastian returned not only to discover that his wife had died, but that she had been buried too. No email or mobiles in those days!



Anna Magdalena Bach née Wülcken (1701-1760), daughter of a court trumpeter at Weissenfels became Joh. Seb.'s second wife on 3 December 1721 while Bach was serving at the Court at Cöthen. The image of her above is unauthentic as such, but a convenient one, nonetheless. She was a gifted singer, musician and reliable copyist for her husband, as well as the mother of no less than thirteen children and stepmother to Bach's children by his first wife.

Anna Magdalena and Joh. Sebastian also welcomed students and passing musicians to their household, first at Cöthen.... and later to the lodgings at Leipzig

(Bach's Family Lodgings in 18th century Leipzig, c.1723 far building centre, Thomaskirche right).



The number of comings and goings to the Bach home is evidence of the gregarious nature of this new Bach family. Joh. Seb. provided two *Clavierbüchlein* for his wife; one in 1722 and another in 1725. These volumes contain, among others, a selection of keyboard pieces and some vocal works for Anna Magdalena to enjoy and keep her own musical skills honed. Church rules determined that women could not participate in the weekly services, the treble parts sung by boy members of the Thomaner.

However, for events outside the church and in the intellectual circles at Leipzig in which the Bachs moved, Anna Magdalena had opportunities to show off her clear soprano voice. It is believed that such an occasion could have been a wedding between 1738 and 1745 when the secular cantata "O holder Tag erwünschte Zeit" (Oh lovely day, oh hoped-for time) BWV 210 was performed. If so, the tessitura and degree of vocal technical skill required of the singer throughout tells us that Anna Magdalena was a high soprano, with a very good technique which Bach exploited in this challenging cantata. After Joh. Seb. died in 1750 and her inheritance of a third of his Estate, Anna Magdalena's life took a considerable down-turn and her remaining years were financed by charity, the sale of some Bach manuscripts and a fraction of his yearly income. She died in poverty in 1760 aged 59.



Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710-1784) was Bach's eldest son, born to Maria Barbara at Weimar. A pupil of Bach's, WF was also enrolled at the Thomasschule. He was a brilliant keyboard performer, so to assist his studies and provide for his family member(s) in the true Lutheran tradition, Bach provided for the gifted nine-year-old the *Clavierübung für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (Keyboard Practice) in 1720. It is also believed that Bach's set of Organ Trio Sonatas BWV 625-630 was written with WF in mind, evidence of the impressive keyboard facility the young man possessed and was developing. Friedemann Bach studied law first at the University of Leipzig and later at the University of Halle. Having completed them, Friedemann then accepted the post of organist at the Sophienkirche in Dresden in 1733 aged

23. This was the same year as his Father presented the *Kyrie and Gloria, the Missa* BWV 232 to the Elector of Saxony in the hope that a Court Title might come his way. It was then on to the Marienkirche at Halle in 1746, and eventually to Berlin in 1774. While he was regarded as a brilliant keyboard player, Friedemann's character was of a more problematic nature that must have prevented him from achieving greater success. He did provide a modest folio of compositions and perhaps his best-known contribution is the striking addition of trumpet parts in his Father's cantata "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" BWV 80 composed for the Reformation Festival (31 October). However, his eventual demise was a tale of drink and debt, financed supposedly by the selling off the manuscripts he inherited from his late Father. Wilhelm Friedemann Bach died in July 1784.



Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788). Bach's second surviving son was also born at Weimar to Maria Barbara. He too was taught exclusively by his Father, although the composer Georg Philipp Telemann was his godfather and could have contributed to his godson's education. CPE Bach is currently enjoying a significant revival in interest in his music, but up until recently and the 300th Birthday year (2014) in particular, while acknowledging his ability as a musician and composer, he was generally regarded as a sort of bridge between the Baroque and Classical periods, and the co-author of his father's Obituary, not as a composer with his own

influential style and priorities.

Performers today have addressed this misplaced impression, inspiring a special CPE Bach Edition produced for the 300th anniversary of his birth in 2014. The modern-day revival in musical interest and appreciation of the place Emanuel Bach occupies in musical history is such that performers now readily turn to his keyboard sonatas, concertos, and symphonies for example to enjoy the "*empfindsamer*" (expressiveness) that is one of the music's characteristics and hallmarks. His two-volume treatise (1753-1762) "*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu*

spielen" (The true Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments) was a staple among musicians well into the 19th century and remains a useful reference point for music students and historians since.

In addition to being tutored at home with his Father, Emanuel Bach was also a member of the

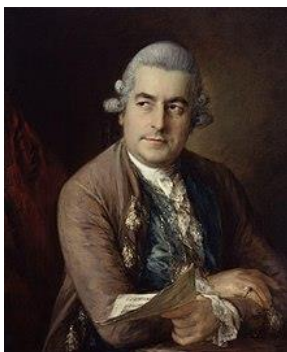


Thomaner before pursuing further study in Jurisprudence at the Universities of Leipzig (1731) and Frankfurt an der Oder (1734). Four years later he travelled to Berlin and in 1740 became court harpsichordist to the military and flute playing Frederick the Great of Prussia, with the possibility of entering the glittering circle that surrounded the King. In his thirties, the 1740s were marked by an intense period of composing sets of keyboard sonatas including the '*Prussian*' and '*Württemberg*' sets and concertos. With his Father's death in 1750, it would not have been

unreasonable of CPE to have expected to succeed Johann Sebastian Bach as Cantor, but it was not to be although he was a candidate. Instead, Emanuel presided over the publishing of his Father's '*Art of Fugue*' BWV 1080 and was one of the authors of the Bach Obituary (1751) which was eventually published in 1754. In his mid-fifties, CPE Bach entered perhaps the most important part of his working life by succeeding his godfather, Georg Philipp Telemann, as Director of Music at Hamburg. This post required Emanuel Bach to preside over the music for no less than five churches, including the Michaeliskirche (*above*) in this musical city, and also to direct public concerts, one of which later included the *Credo* from his Father's Mass in B minor. His composing was prolific, including over twenty Passions. The motet "*Heilig ist Gott*" (1776) is perhaps his best known choral work and scored for musical forces on a grand scale; eight minutes of creative genius for alto solo, double choir and double orchestra each containing three trumpets, one choir being 'in the Heavens' and the other on Earth.

After his death on 14 December 1788, CPE Bach's manuscripts were given to the Singakademie Library in Berlin, with additions in the 19th century from various donors, rendering the Library the single most important source of Bach manuscripts, including the Alt-Bachisches Archiv (Music by Bach Family members). However, in 1945, the library material was removed by the USSR and stored for safe keeping, to be rediscovered years later in the State Library of the Ukraine at Kiev in 1999. The Library was eventually returned to Berlin in 2001.

A Bach in Georgian London



Johann Christian Bach painted by Thomas Gainsborough and hung in the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782) is Bach's youngest son. He was born at Leipzig to Anna Magdalena and only 15 years of age when his famous Father died in 1750. So while he would have received some music education from Father Bach, the earliest influential music education was provided by CPE Bach who took his half-brother into his Berlin home after their Father's death. Johann Christian was left some of Bach's manuscripts plus three clavichords, one with a pedalboard for organ practice - a broad hint perhaps!

At Berlin in his late teens, J C Bach would have sampled some of the city's glitz due to his close proximity to the court orchestra in which his step-brother featured as court harpsichordist. There, perhaps influenced by his half-brother, he composed some keyboard sonatas and concertos, but in 1755 left the city to widen his horizons. Christian Bach eventually travelled to Bologna in Italy where he became friends with a priest and composer Giovanni Battista Martini. How they met and who introduced them is not known. The priest was of such influence that he not only changed Joh. Christian's composing style but also encouraged and facilitated his conversion to Catholicism. This led to a burst of sacred compositions, especially those to be performed as part of the Liturgy. It was here too in Italy that Christian Bach composed *opera seria* incorporating the *da capo* aria, a genre that eventually helped him towards a highly significant move to London in 1762 for three of his operas to be performed at the famous Kings Theatre. These established his reputation and led to his becoming the most influential composer in the mid-18th century. Thereafter, London also became his home where he worked and moved in the highest circles until his death twenty years later. This was the immediate post-Handel era in fashionable Georgian London, where opera performances proliferated and where concert life began to flourish. Christian Bach quickly moved to be at the heart of it, becoming music master to Queen Caroline in 1764, the same year as he met and formed a friendship with the young Mozart while the nine-year old prodigy was visiting London with his father and sister. In the 1770s Christian Bach was also the co-founder of the Bach-Abel concerts with his Leipzig friend and gamba player Carl Friedrich Abel. These concerts, known as the Bach-Abel Concerts, were initially presented in private homes, but with the advent of the Hanover Square Rooms in fashionable Mayfair, the burgeoning series found a home in what became London's premier concert hall.



Hanover Square Rooms: The Rooms on the corner of Hanover Street, London W1 where the likes of Haydn and Berlioz also conducted.

These public subscription concerts were the forerunners of the concerts we enjoy today, a place to be seen by the great and the good who lived in Mayfair Squares for example, but which were also accessible to ordinary folk.

Performances of his operas in Paris and Mannheim followed, but almost inevitably, having continued to occupy social prominence Christian Bach's musical star waned as fashions changed and he fell into financial difficulty. He died on 1 January 1782. Christian Bach's life in London co-incided with that of composer and organist William Boyce (1711-1779) and Thomas Arne who wrote "Rule Britannia".



Johann Christian Bach is buried in St Pancras Churchyard

Christian Bach does not seem to have promoted his Father's compositions here, but his music bore the hallmarks of the Bach family composing reputation for good craftsmanship. J C Bach's music is enjoying a renaissance, especially his church works and chamber music.

Other Family Members *a selection*



Johann Christoph Friedrich (1732-1795) was Bach's son, born at Leipzig and educated by his father, and his secretary and second cousin Johann Elias Bach from Schweinfurt. Having studied Law at Leipzig University, he became chamber musician and then Konzertmeister at the Court at Bückeburg, where he remained until his death. He married Lucia Elisabeth Münchhausen and they had nine children. A close friendship with Pastor Johann Gottfried Herder engendered a corpus of librettos which JCF set in cantatas and oratorios to add to his collection of symphonies and chamber

music

Johann Gottfried Bernhard Bach (1715-1739) was born at Weimar, is Bach's third surviving son and one that caused the family considerable concern. He attended the Thomasschule at Leipzig. Appointed organist at Mühlhausen and later at Sangerhausen, Gottfried Bach is said to have lived a 'disordered' life, reaching a point where he was mired in debt, something that was of concern to his financially cautious Father. Having been accepted at the University of Jena to study Law in 1739, Gottfried Bach died a few months later aged just 24. It has been said that Gottfried Bach was regarded as the most talented by his brother Carl Philipp Emanuel, but that it never truly blossomed. (Perhaps that was kind brotherly speak to cover up his brother's mental state.)



Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703) was also the first cousin of Ambrosius Bach. He was honoured and respected in his family, 'a profound composer' (attrib: JSB). This Johann Christoph Bach was an organist who spent most of his life as the town musician (organist, court organist and harpsichordist) at Eisenach. There are examples of his compositions (motets) in the Alt-Bachisches Archiv. He was succeeded at Eisenach by Johann Bernhard Bach, second cousin.

Johann Elias Bach (1705-1755), a second cousin, was born in Schweinfurt, a composer who also studied at the Universities of Jena and Leipzig and worked as Bach's secretary for five years, a position that included the tutoring of his employer's children. His letters are an important source of information about the Bach family life at Leipzig.

Johann Christoph Bach (1671-1721) was Bach's elder brother and born at Erfurt. Not to be confused with the Joh. Christoph Bach (above), Bach's brother studied with Pachelbel in the city of his birth, later accepting an appointment as organist at the Thomaskirche there. In 1690 he became organist at the Michaeliskirche in Ohrdruf and following his father's (Ambrosius) death provided a home for brothers Johann Jacob (1682-1722) and Johann Sebastian Bach, contributing to Sebastian Bach's early musical education with his first keyboard lessons.

Johann Bernhard Bach (1700-1743) was born at Ohrdruf and is Bach's nephew. Like many Bach family relatives, he studied with his Uncle and also worked as a copyist. Another **Johann Bernhard Bach** (1676-1749), second cousin, succeeded Johann Christoph Bach as organist at Eisenach's Georgenkirche.

A useful reference book about Bach's life and genealogy is "*The New Bach Reader: A life of Johann Sebastian Bach in letters and documents*" Edited by Hans T David and Arthur Mendel, Revised and expanded by Christoph Wolff (published by W.W. Norton & Co)

©Margaret Steinitz 2020