

Johann Sebastian Bach -- "The Fifth Evangelist"



Johann Sebastian Bach, who lived from 1685 to 1750, was part of an impressively musical family that in seven generations produced 53 prominent musicians; indeed, over 300 hundred years' worth of Bachs worked as professional musicians.

Johann Sebastian received his first musical instruction from his father, Johann Ambrosius, who worked as a town musician in Eisenach, Germany.

At 7, Bach went to school where he received religious instruction, as well as studying Latin and other subjects. The Lutheran faith which characterized both his home life and his schooling was a great influence on his musical works.

By the time he was 10, both of Bach's parents had died and he went to live and study with his elder brother, Johann Christoph, who was an organist in Ohrdruf.

When he was 18, Bach began the first of his professional appointments, working as a court musician for a duke. Over the course of his lifetime, he worked in several noble or royal courts, eventually for Prince Leopold. The last several decades of his working life were spent as the director of music for the St. Thomas Church and School in Leipzig.

But professional life in both court and church settings included multiple causes for frustration and dissatisfaction and was always more difficult for Bach than family life. The British Library website biography of Bach notes that "With employers, who rarely appreciated his talents, he was chippy and argumentative; at a family gathering with a few drinks and a pipe of tobacco, however, he was robustly good-humored, especially when the Bach clan took turns to improvise rude country songs."

Bach married twice and fathered 20 children, only 8 of whom survived infancy. His surviving children followed in his musical footsteps, and three of his sons became composers of note in their own right.

When he was 48, Bach acquired a copy of Luther's three-volume translation of the Bible, which he poured over as if it were a long-lost treasure. He underlined passages, corrected errors in the text and commentary, inserted missing words, and made notes in the margins. Near 1 Chronicles 25, a listing of Davidic musicians, he wrote, "This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing music." At 2 Chronicles 5:13, which speaks of temple musicians praising God, Bach notes, "At a reverent performance of music, God is always at hand with his gracious presence."

As one scholar put it, Bach, the musician, was indeed "a Christian who lived with the Bible." Besides being the baroque era's greatest organist and composer, and one of the most productive geniuses in the history of Western music, Bach was a theologian who just happened to work with a keyboard. In fact, he has been described as "the Fifth Evangelist".

Bach wrote 1,000 musical compositions, nearly three-fourths of which were written for use in worship. Even Bach's ostensibly secular work reflected his deep commitment to his faith, and it was his practice to mark his sheet music with the initials "I.N.J." to indicate the work had been done "in the name of Jesus".

During his lifetime, Bach was better known as an organist than as a composer; few of his works were published while he was alive. One hundred years after his death, when Felix Mendelssohn conducted a performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion, people began to realize what a treasure Bach had left to the world. From that time forward his music has been widely heard and appreciated.

If you are a Bach fan, you might have noticed that Beverly's Prelude was one of his compositions -- Prelude in G Major. The Offertory and Postlude will also be his work, and the choir anthem that we're about to hear is another of Bach's compositions.

Last week and today, with our Faith Stories about Isaac Watts and Johann Sebastian Bach, we have looked at lives in which music provided the means to express faith in Christ. Over the coming weeks, we'll take brief glances at men and women in a broad range of contexts who have used a great variety of gifts and tools and actions to live out their commitment to Christ's gospel message of justice, peace, and love. Next week's subject will be Harriet Tubman.

Works consulted:

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