

Home Schooling: The Bachs

If students at the Venetian and Neapolitan conservatories, the *ospedali*, were given music education as compensation for the lack of family and questionable origins, for the Bachs, the science of music was a family legacy and right. The young Johann Sebastian could look towards so many cities in his native Thuringia to find brothers, cousins and uncles who could serve as mentors during his bright apprenticeship. Thus his teenage decision to travel north to study in a school far away and work with North German musicians was unique and daring. After all, for almost 200 years fathers taught sons, nephews travelled to live in the homes of uncles and, at the deaths of parents, older brothers who took on the guardianship of kid brothers, directing their general and musical educations.

There were 51 men in the Bach genealogy who distinguished themselves as musicians. They formed a close-knit corporation of professionals that supplied their villages and cities, principalities, and churches with first rate composition and stellar performance. What was Johann Sebastian looking for that he could not find in the works of his uncle Johann Christoph, in his brother's library of works by Froberger or in the circle of Pachelbel, who was so closely allied to the Bach family?

The love of our little Johann Sebastian for music was uncommonly great even at this tender age. In a short time he had fully mastered all the pieces his brother had voluntarily given him to learn. But his brother possessed a book of clavier pieces by the most famous masters of the day and this, despite all his pleading and who knows for what reason, was denied him . . . The book was kept in a cabinet whose doors consisted only of grillwork. Now, with his little hands he could reach through the grillwork and roll the book up: accordingly, he would fetch the book out at night . . . and since he was not even possessed of a light, copy it by moonlight . . . His brother, to his great dismay, found out about it, and without mercy took away from him the copy he had made with such pains. Obituary biography

This "moonlight manuscript" is one of the mythical anecdotes in the life of Johann Sebastian Bach illustrating his ravenous appetite for learning, his industry, and his capacity for appreciating all styles. The impression that he lived a Cinderella existence at the mercy of a ruthless and stingy brother is not accurate.

Christoph was neither stingy nor jealous in holding back this particular volume of keyboard music from his young brother. No doubt, he had a plan of study in mind for the progress of his genius charge. Similarly, as a teacher, Johann Sebastian would carefully monitor the education of his sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Phillip Emanuel with the focused composition of small preludes, 2 and 3 part *Inventions*, suites and the *Well Tempered Clavier*. This careful planning had roots in Christoph's approach.

There was formal schooling for the members of the Bach family outside of the home. They went to local Lutheran academies that taught general studies including, of

course, music. Johann Sebastian learned mathematics, philosophy, classical studies, rhetoric and theology. But, after several years under his brother's care, Johann Sebastian traveled north to Luneburg where he enrolled as a scholarship student at the St. Michael's Gymnasium. Here he would perform, organize, and sing. However, true music learning became independent study. In Luneburg, Johann Sebastian endeared himself to Reinken, Böhm and Buxtehude, the three greatest masters of the North German style of music. He heard them improvise, he listened to cantata performances and he copied and arranged their instrumental music. (Reinken, as an ancient man, recognized Johann Sebastian as the sole musician who would keep the art of the north German School of chorale elaboration alive, as its torchbearer.) In the North, Bach also listened to the performances of refugee French Protestant musicians playing dance music in the high styles of Versailles, where simplicity and finesse reigned.

Johann Sebastian was self-motivated, his mind an open window to quality and the discovery of options available in any contemporary style. His ability to incorporate, revise and fuse is unique in music history.

For instance, some few years later as a working musician at the court of Weimar, Bach got to know the contemporary Italian concerto form, most specifically, Antonio Vivaldi's music. By copying out parts for performance and by crafting harpsichord and organ transcriptions of these orchestral pieces, Bach not only came to understand the power of this direct, energetic and vibrant style, but he incorporated the complexity and counterpoint of his German organist tradition, making changes and corrections to the Italian music, while entirely reconsidering the way he composed his own music.

We are fortunate to have copies that Bach made throughout his life of works by Vivaldi, but also of the French organ works of deGrigny and other composers. In observing his subtle re-workings of the music of others, we can begin to understand Bach's brilliance.

Johann Sebastian began teaching seriously as he became aware that his own children were gifted. In writing out the notebook for Wilhelm Friedemann, always his favorite child, he charted a method for the awakening of performance and composition skills. We may be astonished by the apparent quick process by which Johann Sebastian takes Friedemann, in very few pages, from simple freestyle preludes to richly conceived fugues. Bach nourishes his son's education with godlike food. Soon, Bach also took on the role of mentor to cousins, nephews and young musicians who were rightly guided to the composers' studio. We have testimonials from Johann Sebastian for many of his students. As they applied for positions, playing organ or as court musicians, Bach generously recommends his students for these posts. More enlightening are the testimonials and descriptions of Johann Sebastian as a teacher by his students:

He is an excellent and sterling man, both in composition and in instruction on the keyboard and other instruments. It is assuredly six hours per day of guidance that I

am receiving . . . The rest of the time I use by myself for practice and copying work, since he shares with me all the music I ask for. I am also at liberty to look through all of his pieces . . . Phillip David Kraüter (1712)

He promised to give him the instruction he desired and asked at once whether he had industriously played fugues. At the first lesson he set his Inventions before him. When he had studied these through to Bach's satisfaction there followed a series of suites, then the Well-Tempered Clavier. This latter work Bach played altogether three times through for him with his unmatched art and my father counted these as his happiest hours . . . Heinrich Gerber as reported by son Ernst Ludwig Gerber (1790)

His method is the best, for he proceeds steadily, step by step, from the easiest to the most difficult, and as a result even the step to the fugue has only the difficulty of passing from one step to the next. On this ground I hold the method of J. S. Bach to be the best and only one. It is to be regretted that this great man never wrote anything theoretical about music and that his teachings have reached posterity only through his pupils. Johann Phillip Kirnberger

Here Kirnberger's regrets are unfounded, short sighted. If Bach never wrote an *Art of Playing the Harpsichord*, or a *Treatise on Harmony* he leaves us in his works, a complete encyclopedia of skills, approaches, styles and every musical option. How do you write a suite in the French style? How many ways can you employ and mutate imitative counterpoint? How can canon be both correct and compelling? How can you vary a theme, a bass line? How can you set a text clearly yet dramatically? How far can the voice go to impress or express? How richly colored can harmony be? Bach's work is a data base for, in modern terms, FAQ (frequently asked questions). Most of the answers are found in collections of works that the composer compiled to illustrate these very points, but if they are not found in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the *Art of Fugue*, the *Goldberg Variations*, they can be found in the cantatas, 371 chorales, sonatas and suites. Every measure offers information for the mind and the soul.

Because of a dearth of well-executed examples, the mystery of fugue has for some time been rather scantily maintained. Great masters have often guarded it jealously . . . While the rules we were given were good and abundant, the needed examples were lacking. Yet one knows how fruitless instruction is without illustration, and experience shows what unequally greater advantage one draws from practical elaborations rather than from meager theoretical direction. The present work (Art of Fugue) is throughout practical and indeed accomplishes what many skillful men have suggested in their writing over the years. C. Ph. E. Bach in the preface to *Art of Fugue* (1751)

I have had to work hard; anyone who works just as hard will get just as far.
Johann Sebastian Bach

Bach believed in the efficiency of education and often said that his own accomplishments were nothing out of the ordinary but simply the outcome of guidance and industry. If such statements were honest expressions of modesty and humility, we might very well wonder if Bach ever understood the magnitude of his genius. Before the Romantic age - when the composer became a hero and when music and philosophy were linked - could Bach know that he was writing works that would reach out so powerfully centuries later? Could he predict that his *Well-Tempered Clavier* would be a sign post for all human accomplishment, his *St. Matthew Passion* the measure of suffering and faith? Could he imagine that 250 years after he gave his final lesson, a group of 16 farmers, traveling over the ocean from a Lutheran Church in Wisconsin, would gather in a circle around his grave site in Leipzig with their hometown hymnals in hand and sing his harmonized chorals to the man who best defines for them spirit and love?

Andrew Appel c. 2010

Monday, March 22, 2010
The New-York Historical Society
THE FOUR-NATIONS ENSEMBLE

**HOME SCHOOLING
THE BACHS**

Charles Brink, traverso Krista Bennion Feeney, violin
Loretta O'Sullivan, cello Andrew Appel, harpsichord and director
Guest Artist
Christine Brandes, soprano

THE SUSAN AND WILLIAM GINBSERG MEMORIAL CONCERT

PROGRAM

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| Prelude and Fugue in C major, Well Tempered Clavier I | J. S. Bach
(1685-1750) |
| <i>Gen Himmel zu dem Vater Mein</i> , Buxwv 32
Cantata for soprano, violin, cello and continuo | Dieterich Buxtehude
(1637-1707) |
| Suite 8 in F minor
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Ciacona | Georg Bohm
(1661-1733) |
| Sonata II for violin and harpsichord in A Major, BWV 1015
Dolce
Allegro
Andante un poco
Presto | J. S. Bach |

INTERMISSION

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| Sonata in D Major for flute and continuo
Adagio
Allegro ma non troppo
Cantabile | Johann Gottfried Mützel
(1728-1788) |
| Two Arias
<i>Schweigt, ihr Flöten</i> BWV 210
Prelude for cello BWV 1007
<i>Angenehmer Zephyrus</i> BWV 205
Adagio ma non tanto, e dolce (arr. W. F. Bach?) BWV 1044 | J. S. Bach |

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