

JOHANN CHRISTIAN BACH

by

Dr David C F Wright

To my mind, Johann Christian is the finest of the Bachs. His music appeals to me since the form and structure of his work is exemplary. Although three years younger than Haydn, he contributed to symphonic music in a big way with symphonies, concertos and sinfonia concertantes. His sacred works are often very fine and he was probably one of the first composers to write high quality works for wind instruments.

I was a little deterred when I first saw the portrait of him by Thomas Gainsborough. Bach looked like a tubby solicitor with whom no one would dare to argue. But, perhaps, there was a twinkle in his eye.



He was born in Leipzig on 5 September 1735, the eleventh of 13 children of Johann Sebastian Bach and his second wife Anna Magdalena. By the time he was 10, he had had lessons with his father and his second cousin, Johann Elias, who lived with the family for five years from 173 and who may have helped with his additional education.

His father died when he was fifteen and an half. With a handsome share of the estate and, also having been bequeathed three harpsichords, J C went to live with his brother C P E in Berlin who was two years his senior. Here he received good training in music. He became a fine keyboard player and composed much for his instrument.

A certain mystery now follows. In 1754 he travelled to Italy in the company of an Italian female singer. Bologna seemed to fascinate him and it is here that he studied with Padre Martini for whom he developed a great respect perhaps bordering on the sycophantic. Count Agostino Litta of Milan became Bach's patron. It is probably due to the opportunities the Count could give him, that J C became a Roman Catholic circa 1757. Most of his sacred music was written before his conversion to Catholicism. His gamble paid off. In 1760 he was appointed assistant organist at Milan cathedral.

Sadly, he did not take his duties seriously. He wanted personal advancement. He was absent during a long period in 1761. Having received a commission from Teatro Regio in Turin for an opera the result was 'Artaserse' premiered there on 26 December 1760. The librettist was Metastasio. Naples was his next commission requiring an opera to celebrate the name day of Charles III of Spain. The result was 'Catone in Utica' performed at the Teatro Saint Carlo on 4 November 1761. It proved to be his most successful opera and was repeated in Milan in 1762, Parma, Pavia and Perugia in 1763 and in Brunswick in 1768.

When he was in Turin he had met and was romantically interested in a ballet dancer named Colomba Beccari and, when they were both in Naples, the involvement was more earnest.

That the composer Hasse could not be released from his tiring duties in Vienna, Naples commissioned another opera from Bach, 'Alessandro nell'Indie', premiered on 20 January 1762 to celebrate the King of Spain's birthday. It was not as well received as 'Catone', but Saint Carlo wanted to engage Bach. He had also received invitations from London and from Vienna. He requested the cathedral authorities in Milan for a years leave to compose two operas for the King's Theatre in London.

His London experience was not altogether satisfactory. Opera was a business to make money and Bach was not satisfied with the available singers. His opera, 'Orione', was given on 19 February 1763. It was acclaimed. 'Zanaiidi' followed on 7 May.

Then there was trouble.

The management of the King's Theatre changed and the composer Giardini took over. He feared rivals and did not like non-Italians. Bach was no longer required. Naples invited him back but he stayed in London.

As with other composers, and there is one of two British composers who have done likewise, Bach became a toady. Queen Charlotte was of German birth and so he dedicated his Opus 1 concertos to her. These are for harpsichord, two violins and cello and are in B flat, A, F, G, C and D respectively. Queen Charlotte was married to George III and was to have fifteen children. Bach had her royal patronage and was allowed to advertise himself as the Queen's music master. It was probably she who granted the privilege for the publication of his works.

During his time in London he shared lodgings with Colomba Mattei who was the director of the King's Theatre. When she returned to Italy, Bach shared rooms with Carl Friedrich Abel. Apparently they had been boyhood friends since their days in Leipzig. They arranged concerts known as the Bach-Abel concerts, the first being in Spring Gardens in 1764. Not long afterwards the eight-year-old Mozart arrived in London and stayed for just over a year. The boy adored Bach and was greatly influenced by him. That year the management of the King's Theatre changed again and Bach was re-employed. In January 1765 his opera, *Adrian in Siria*, had seven performances but it was not a success.

The 1765 subscription concerts, organised by Theresa Cornelys at Carlisle House, Soho, numbered ten and the following year it was fifteen. Among the works performed were Bach's symphonies Opus 3 and the symphonies Opus 18. The Opus 3 set are in G, D, E flat, B flat, E flat and G minor. The opus 18 set are often referred to as six grand overtures. They are in E flat, B flat, D, D, E and D respectively and are scored for double woodwind, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and string orchestra. Opus 6 and opus 9 were sets of symphonies. The symphonies of Opus 6 are in G, D, E flat, B flat, E flat and G minor respectively and the three symphonies of opus 9 are in B flat, E flat and B flat respectively.

In January 1765, Abel and Bach took over the management of the concerts and moved them to Almack's Assembly Rooms in St James's.

Towards the end of 1766 the soprano Cecilia Grassi came to London to sing in serious opera. Her sudden poor health prevented her taking part in Bach's new opera 'Carattaco' which was not a success

Bach performed before the Prince of Wales who was four at the time and was attending his first concert.

J C put on performances of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (London premiere), a Passion by Jomelli, Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. Bach's own oratorio, 'Gioas, re di Giuda', was booed and hissed by the audience and the boys taking part laughed so much that some accidentally wet themselves on the stage.

Benjamin Britten, who had a proven unhealthy sexual interest in boys, particularly choir boys, told us that he would like to stage this work with himself conducting, hoping that history would repeat itself and the present day boys would laugh and wet themselves which Britten admitted in a serious remark would be a real sexual turn on for him personally since it would draw Britten's attention to the boys penises. As it is known, Britten was engaged in pederasty and was a loathsome character.

Johann Baptist Wendling was the first flautist in the Mannheim orchestra. He visited London in 1772 with his wife Dorothea the prima donna of the Mannheim opera. They lodged with Bach and Abel. This group, with a cellist named Dupont, put on a benefit concert. In April, Bach moved to his own house in Queen Street. Wendling and Grassi took part in his new cantata, 'Endimone'.

The connection with Wendling was the reason for Mannheim's commission for an opera. Bach accepted and went there in September enjoying the home of the Wendlings. It was said that Bach fell in love with their daughter, Augusta, who was born in 1756 and twenty one years Bach's junior. The opera, 'Temistocle', was a great success. Another opera commission came and he set 'Lucio Silla' but it did not fare well. Three years later Mozart looked at the score and admired it.

Bach often commuted to London giving the Queen lessons and directing the Queen's Band. He also gave lessons to her rapidly increasing family. He also accompanied the King when he played the flute.

It is probable that Bach married Grassi in 1773. They visited the West Country giving concerts in Blandford and Salisbury. They set up home at 80 Newman Street, London and Abel had to find somewhere to live. But in mid-1774, Bach, Abel and one Giovanni Andrea Gallini purchased a property in Hanover Square and had a concert hall built in the garden. The first concert was in February 1775. The venture lasted just under two years and the partnership collapsed. It is thought that Gallini's father-in-law, the Earl of Abingdon, baled them out and the concerts continued.

Bach continued to compose. In 1776 Martini asked for a portrait of Bach and asked his friend Gainsborough to fulfil this commission.

Paris had performed Bach's works regularly for over a decade. In 1778 he received a commission to write an opera for the Royal Academy of Music and so he visited Paris in August to meet the proposed singers. He wrote the opera, 'Amadis de Gaule', in London. It was premiered in December 1779 before Marie Antoinette in Paris. It was a failure but quickly revised and performed in this version, but it never caught on.

Bach was in decline and money was not coming in from the subscription concerts and so when he put his house in Richmond up for sale his creditors hounded him to settle their respective accounts. Then it was discovered that his housekeeper had forged receipts for bills and absconded with about £1000. He was in financial trouble. He was not wanted in the opera houses or as a teacher since J S Schroter was now the blue-eyed boy in that department. J C's health was in decline and he moved to Paddington for the strange reason of wanting a change of air. He made his will making his wife his sole beneficiary. He died on New Year's Day 1782 and was buried in St Pancras Churchyard. He left debts of over £4000 which were never fully cleared. A benefit concert on 27 May 1782 helped to meet some of those debts. The Queen, gracious as ever, contributed and paid for Cecilia to return to Italy. Some sources say that the Queen paid Mrs Bach a pension for the rest of her life.

Bach's death went comparatively unnoticed. The music public is fickle. It forgets the service of such musicians whenever a new rising star or two appears. It is still the same today.

Among his finest works are some of his sinfonia concertantes. His first was for two violins, cello and orchestra in G dating from 1772. Three years later came the the A major for violin, cello and orchestra. There are several that are lost.

Of his sacred works, the 'Domine ad adiuvandum in G' for two solo singers, chorus and orchestra of 1760 as is the 'Magnificat in C' for four solo singers, choir and orchestra of 1758. There are two settings of both these titles. The 'Requiem for double choir and orchestra is also worthy.

His premeditated plan to impress Queen Charlotte is shown in his chamber cantata, 'Ode on the Auspicious Arrival and Nuptials of Queen Charlotte', which took place on 8 September 1761. Bach also arranged some folk songs and wrote his sets of 'Vauxhall Songs'. His keyboard sonatas are many... opus 5 comprise six and another six appear in the set known as Op 17.

Mozart's work imitated the melodic and graceful style of J C Bach. Mozart and all of us who enjoy his music have a very great deal to thank J C Bach for.