

TELEMANN

David C F Wright

If I were to say that Telemann was as good a composer as Bach, or even better, some would object, and so I will not say that.

Georg Philipp Telemann was born in Magdeburg on 14 March 1681 into a good family with strong ties with the Protestant Church.

Whatever is said, he was a great composer and, unlike many composers, he was a thoroughly decent man. He had trouble which could have wrecked both his career and himself. His second wife had many affairs and when she deserted Telemann, she left him with massive gambling debts. His first wife died in 1711, fifteen months into their marriage.

Telemann was very fond of flowers and plants. He was something of an expert on roses.

He was profoundly admired by J S Bach who asked him to be the godfather of his son, C P E Bach.



Telemann's parents were not in favour of George Phillip having a career in music. His father, Heinrich, was a deacon of the Church of the Holy Spirit and died in 1685 when his son was a teenager. His mother was born Maria Haltmeyer and was the daughter of a clergymen from Regensburg.

Telemann had many relations who worked for the church but only a few were musicians.

With his father's death, Maria had the sole responsibility of raising the children. Georg studied at the Alstadtisches Gymnasium and the Domschule. He was taught the catechism, Latin and Greek. He took singing lessons and briefly studied the keyboard. However, he taught himself the recorder, violin and zither. He was a very clever child and began to write compositions, which were mainly choral works and instrumental pieces. He completed his first opera, Sigismundus, when he was only twelve years of age.

His mother and other family members were not pleased with this and confiscated his musical instruments. Georg had to continue to compose furtively for fear of being found out. At school, the superintendent realised Telemann's talents and helped him with theory and composition and, in the confines of the school, Telemann played instruments including the double bass and composed music for the school choir.

When he was about eighteen, he moved to Hildesheim entering the popular Gymnasium Andreanum. His talents were immediately recognised and the Rector commissioned music from him. Telemann travelled to Hanover and to Brunswick to assess the other music styles that were in fashion such as the works of Caldara, Corelli and Rosenmuller who may have influenced him. Georg taught himself more instruments such as the flute, oboe, chalumeau, viola da gamba and the bass trombone. He graduated from the gymnasium with the highest honours and in the final months of 1701 went to Leipzig University to study law. He was twenty years old. The choice of subject was from his mother who was still against any career in music.

In the years 1701 to 1706, Telemann made his name in Leipzig. He encouraged students with whom he formed ensembles. They gave many concerts. In 1702, he became the director of the opera house and became the organist and choir master at the Neukirche but usually gave his students the organist's roles. He wrote eight operas, four of which were premiered in Leipzig and four at the Weissenfel Court. It is said that these works were influenced by Handel whom he had met in 1701.

The major influence on Telemann was Johann Kuhnau, the cantor at St Thomas's Church and director of music in Leipzig. Telemann always spoke well of Kuhnau and recounted how much he had learnt from him.

But, as often happens, a conflict arose between them... largely because of Telemann's successes. Kuhnau felt that Telemann's students were too involved in opera and, consequently, church music was being neglected. Kuhnau denounced Telemann as a mere opera composer and the council forbade Telemann to appear on the operatic stage.

There is skulduggery in music. The constant trouble caused by Elgar at the Three Choirs Festival was due to his arrogance and narcissism. Britten was evil towards the three women who rang CEMA during World War II and his treachery was so that he could take over and avoid being called for military service and these were acts of his spite, cowardice and pomposity. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was the conflict between the supporters of Brahms and Wagner.



In 1704, Telemann was invited to become the Kapellmeister in the Court of Count Erdmann II at Sorau. He had to serve out his time in Leipzig but arrived in Sorau in June 1705. Here, among other interests, he studied French music particularly that by Lully and Campra. The Court spent six months at what is now Pszcyna where Telemann had the joy of studying Polish and Moravian music.

In 1707 or 1708, he was employed by Duke Johnn Wilhelm of Saxe-Einanch. Telemann became Kapellmeister in August 1709. During this time, he composed a wealth of music including sonatas and concertos and many church cantatas as well as about fifty secular German cantatas. He returned briefly to Sorau to marry Amalie Louise Julianne Eberin who was a lady-in-waiting to Countess Promnitz. Amalie's father was the musician, Daniel Eberlin. The newly-weds returned to Eisenach. In January 1711, Amalie gave birth to a daughter; the mother died soon afterwards.

This had the effect of awakening Telemann's Christian views. Prestige was not that important after all, and he was tired with the pomp of Court life. He declined an invitation to join the Dresden court but applied to be the city director of music in Frankfurt and he arrived in that city on 18 March 1712.

His duties were like those he had at Leipzig. He continued to compose and revived the music department at the city's museum. He became treasurer and administrator of the Hans Braunfels charitable foundation and the administrator of a tobacco collegium.

He remarried on 28 August 1714 to Maria Catharina Textor whose father was a council clerk. Although they had nine children the marriage was disastrous. Maria was unfaithful and a serial adulteress.

The Cantor of the Johanaeum Lateinschule in Hamburg was Telemann's next position from 10 July 1721. He was also the director of the city's five main churches. These appointments meant that Telemann stayed in Hamburg for the rest of his life. He came under criticism particularly from the collegium musicum's performance of operas which were said to incite lasciviousness, and he was criticised for having the words to his settings of the Passions printed. It is sad to relate that his operas did not fare well and the city's opera house closed down in 1738.

With the death of Kuhnau on the 5 June 1722, this spurred Telemann to apply for the post of cantor at St Thomas's in Leipzig. He was their choice but he turned it down over a matter of his pay. The post was offered to Christopher Graupner who also declined it and this paved the way for J S Bach to take on that position for the rest of his life.

Telemann published his own works in Hamburg including literary works and, in 15 years from 1725, there were some 40 volumes of his music, which were in great demand across Europe. He was far more popular than Bach.

The selling of his music was necessary as he needed the income. His wife had built up an enormous gambling debts and she was having many affairs some concurrently. He was saved from bankruptcy. Maria left him in 1736 and eventually died in a convent in Frankfurt in 1775, eight year after her husband's death.

In 1737, he took leave from Hamburg and went to Paris where, to his horror, he found unauthorised copies of his music. In the next few years, his musical output declined and he became more interested in the theory of music composing his work Neues Musicalisches System around 1743. He became a reliable correspondent with such people as C P E Bach, Franz Benda, Agricola and many others.

His son, Andreas, died in 1755 and G P Telemann took responsibility for his grandson, Georg Michael, who also became a composer. As for himself, he continued to compose and some of his finest works date from this time. But his eyesight was failing and he had other health problems.

He died during the evening of 25 June 1767 of what was said to be a chest ailment. He was buried four days later in the Johannisfriedhof and his Hamburg post was taken by C P E Bach.

If I were to say that Telemann was as great a composer as Bach or superior to Bach, there would be a hue and cry.

He composed over 3000 works, was the link between the Baroque and the classical, admired by musicians of his time and students used his works as models for their own. His popularity stretched from the Netherlands to Spain, France to Belgium, and Switzerland to Poland.

In the nineteenth century, the appreciation of his music declined. He was castigated for writing too much music and J S Bach was now in the ascendancy thanks to the sterling efforts of Mendelssohn. Albert Schweitzer adored Bach and severely criticised works by Telemann only to discover that some were not by Telemann but by Bach as proved by later research.

Telemann was a really decent person, as was Haydn. He appreciated people and roses in particular. He

was not a troublemaker or narcissistic. How he put up with his evil wife I cannot say. It is probably because he was such a decent man that he did not wish to disgrace her publicly.

He was a very great composer.

(This is a précis of Dr Wright's book on Telemann published in 1966).

(1637)

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