



Bach Bits



A compilation by David Gordon for the Carmel Bach Festival

Today Johann Sebastian Bach's name and music are known virtually around the world. Amazingly, during his lifetime he never traveled more than about 200 miles from the town where he was born.

Going back many generations, Bach's family tree was filled with so many musicians, that in Northern Germany by the time little Johann was born the word "Bach" was simply used as a nickname for any "musician."

Bach and Handel were born within weeks of each other in 1685, in towns less than 80 miles apart. Bach was a middle-class family man, while Handel was a superstar who roamed to Italy and became an English citizen. The two men never met.

In Bach's day a member of the instrumental musicians' guild was called a "Stadtpeiffer" - town piper. Every one of these "union" members was expected to play an array of instruments including violin, oboe, viola, cello, flute, horn, and trumpet.

JS Bach was an active music teacher, and he once gave some disarmingly direct advice to one pupil: "Just practice diligently and you will do very well. You have five fingers on each hand just as healthy as mine."

Bach once offered an organ student some remarkably simple advice. Organ playing he said, "...is nothing remarkable..., all one has to do is hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself."

Johann Sebastian Bach was certainly a family man. He had 20 children, the largest family of any of the great composers. He was survived by nine of his children, several of whom became renowned composers themselves.

Four of Bach's sons -- Carl Philipp Emanuel, Wilhelm Freideman, Johann Christoph Friedrich, Johann Christian -- went on to significant musical careers. By and large, they practiced the fashionable "galant" style and regarded their father's music as complicated and passe.

JSB's youngest son Johann Christian studied opera in Italy. This Johann Junior then went to England where he was known as John Bach, and for a while gave music lessons in London to the young Mozart.

While serving as a court musician, J.S. Bach compared the playing of a certain bassoonist to the bleating of a nanny goat. When the player and two others confronted Bach on the street and threatened him with clubs, Bach drew a small ceremonial dagger that was part of his kappellmeister livery, and they fought briefly. School authorities later severely admonished Bach for failure to get along with his musicians. The other young men were not punished.

In mystical numerology, B is 2, A is 1, C is 3 and H is 8. The total is 14. 14, and its mirror, 41, were among Bach's favorite numbers. Scholars find these numbers hidden countless times within the notes and musical structure of Bach's music.

In fact, Johann Sebastian Bach's compositions are filled with hidden musical and graphic symbolism and numerology. Scholars believe he was simply amusing himself with his own private word and number games even as he was composing his greatest masterpieces.

Johann Sebastian Bach probably was unaware of the his monumental importance to future generations. He was known primarily as a virtuoso organist, and as the choir master of the St. Thomas boy's choir school in Leipzig.

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Of all Bach's vocal compositions, only one brief civic celebration cantata ("Gott ist mein König" BWV 71) was actually printed and published during his lifetime. All of Bach's other choral and vocal works (the Passions, Cantatas, motets, etc.) existed only in handwritten manuscripts in his own library.

Bach worked as Director of Music for the City of Leipzig for the final 27 years of his life. Yet, after he died the town council voted to reduce the pension to his widow, Anna Magdalene. She died in poverty ten years later.

After J.S. Bach's death, all his musical manuscripts were divided among his family. Some of the music was sold, much of it lost. Today we probably know less than half of all the music Bach actually composed during his lifetime.

Bach was buried in Leipzig following his death in 1750. His remains were exhumed in 1894 by Professor Wilhelm His for "scientific" study. It was concluded, among other things, that Bach's height was 5'7", and, based on his skull measurements, his ears were exceptionally suited to music!

Johann Sebastian Bach's religious devotion, artistic discipline, and musical inspiration gave the world a musical and artistic legacy which Richard Wagner described as "the most stupendous miracle in all of music."

"Bach" is the German word for a little stream or brook. Of Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven famously said: "His name should not be Brook, it should be Ocean."

