



Great Thinkers' Opinions of Johann Sebastian Bach

Compiled by David Gordon for the Carmel Bach Festival



“Not Brook but Ocean should be his name.”

Ludwig Van Beethoven

(“Bach” is the German word for “brook”)

“Now there is music from which a man can learn something.”

W. A. Mozart

(on hearing Bach choral motets in Leipzig)

“Study Bach: there you will find everything.”

Johannes Brahms

“To strip human nature until its divine attributes are made clear, to inform ordinary activities with spiritual fervor, to give wings of eternity to that which is most ephemeral; to make divine things human and human things divine; such is Bach, the greatest and purest moment in music of all time.”

Pablo Casals

“Bach is like an astronomer who, with the help of ciphers, finds the most wonderful stars.”

Friederick Chopin

“And if we look at the works of JS Bach—a benevolent god to which all musicians should offer a prayer to defend themselves against mediocrity—on each page we discover things which we thought were born only yesterday, from delightful arabesques to an overflowing of religious feeling greater than anything we have since discovered. And in his works we will search in vain for anything the least lacking in good taste.”

Claude Debussy

“In Bach the vital cells of music are united as the world is in God.”

Gustav Mahler

“She played Bach. I do not know the names of the pieces, but I recognized the stiff ceremonial of the frenchified little German courts and the sober, thrifty comfort of the burghers, and the dancing on the village green, the green trees that looked like Christmas trees, and the sunlight on the wide German country, and a tender coziness; and in my nostrils there was a warm scent of the soil and I was conscious of a sturdy strength that seemed to have its roots deep in mother earth, and of an elemental power that was timeless and had no home in space.”

W. Somerset Maugham

(from his short story ‘The Alien Corn’)

“...the greatest music in the world...if life had taken hope and faith from me, this single chorus would restore all.”

Felix Mendelssohn

“Bach is the beginning and end of all music.”

Max Reger

“I had no idea of the historical evolution of the civilized world’s music and had not realized that all modern music owes everything to Bach.”

Niccolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Continued...

“Bach is thus a terminal point. Nothing comes from him; everything merely leads to him.”

Albert Schweitzer

“O you happy sons of the North who have been reared at the bosom of Bach, how I envy you.”

Giuseppe Verdi

“...the most stupendous miracle in all music!”

Richard Wagner

“The poetry, the atmosphere, the intensity of expression, the beauty of the preludes and fugues grip, overwhelm, and stimulate us. Let us not be afraid of the supreme contrapuntal science of the fugues, nor be overawed by the stern appearance and heavy wig of Father Bach. Let us gather around him, feel the love, the noble goodness that flow from each one of his phrases and that invigorate and bind us by ties strong and warm.”

Carl Friedrich Zeltler

(letter to Goethe, 9 June 1827)

Zeltler introduced the young Felix Mendelssohn to Bach's music, and thereby brought about the great Bach revival in the 19th century

“Bach is a colossus of Rhodes, beneath whom all musicians pass and will continue to pass. Mozart is the most beautiful, Rossini the most brilliant, but Bach is the most comprehensive: he has said all there is to say. If all the music written since Bach's time should be lost, it could be reconstructed on the foundation which Bach laid.”

Charles Gounod

“Bach is the supreme genius of music... This man, who knows everything and feels everything, cannot write one note, however unimportant it may appear, which is anything but transcendent. He has reached the heart of every noble thought, and has done it in the most perfect way.”

Pablo Casals

“Any musician, even the most gifted, takes a place second to Bach's at the very start.”

Paul Hindemith

“If one were asked to name one musician who came closest to composing without human flaw, I suppose general consensus would choose Johann Sebastian Bach...”

Aaron Copland

And finally...

A wide variety of music, including some by Bach, was sent into the far reaches of outer space on the two Voyager Spacecraft in the 1970s. When eminent biologist and author Lewis Thomas was asked what music he would want sent from Earth into outer space, he answered, “I would send the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach.” After a pause, he added, “But that would be boasting.”