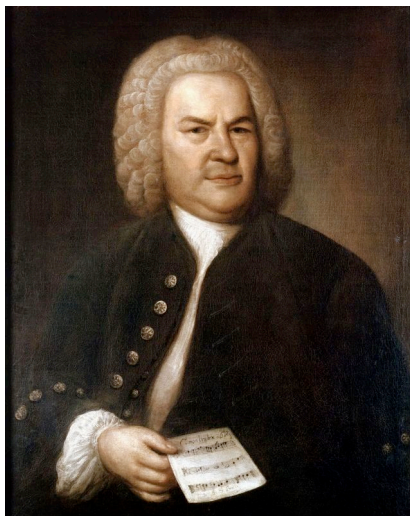




Johann Sebastian Bach



On the first day of spring in the year of 1685, Johann Sebastian Bach was born in the town of Eisenach, Germany.

Even as long ago as 1685, there had been so many musicians in the family of Bach that the people there often called musicians "Bachs." There had been organists and music teachers in the family for generations. There were violinists and singers and makers of musical instruments. Even the Bachs who were not musicians by profession could play some instrument well, and sang in their church choirs.

So it was natural for the family to expect that another musician had been born with Johann Sebastian Bach.

He was a quiet, happy child. Since he was much younger than most of his brothers and sisters, he spent most of his time with his parents. He did not really miss playing with other children, for life with his parents meant music. And that was what Sebastian always wanted.

Many important events in his life took place in the spring of the year. The first of these was never forgotten by Sebastian. His father gave him a small violin when he was four years old. To the amazement of everyone in the family, he played it the first time he held it in his hands.

Then his father began to teach him all he could, and the little boy was excited and joyful. Now he would be able to join in the family music festival, held by the Bachs - all the Bachs - each summer. This time it was to be in Eisenach, at home.

Sebastian's older brothers and sisters were proud of the little boy, and were anxious for the visiting relatives to hear him play. But they were no more anxious than the child himself. Each day, when his father came home, Sebastian ran to him with his violin and asked for the lesson to begin.



"I cannot wait for our music festival this year," he said one day. "May I really play my violin with the rest of our family, Papa? And will they let me play some of my own music on it?"

"We shall see how it goes, my son," answered the father. "Let me hear you play, now."

Sebastian touched his bow to the strings and made the little violin sing. His parents looked at each other proudly. Then an older brother, Jakob, came running in. He, too, listened in wonder and admiration.

"Bravo!" Jakob cried. "Sebastian will have to play for our festival this year."

"Yes, you are right, Jakob," the father agreed. "He will be the youngest Bach musician-composer at the festival."

That summer there were so many Bachs gathered together in Eisenach that the little house could hardly hold them. They sang for each other, and played for each other. Then they went up the mountainside to the ancient castle of the town. There they sang and played for all who wished to hear them.

After the big festival, Sebastian was allowed to stay up in the evenings whenever his parents and brothers and sisters made music together. As time went by, the youngest Bach seemed able to play any instrument and to invent melodies easily.

"I like to sing and play the music I hear in the air," Sebastian declared one night. "In the air, in the forest, in the church. In people's voices, too - in the crying and the laughing. And in the wind!"

His father laughed and said, "Well, Sebastian! Let us hear the music instead of speeches."

"All right, Papa. Here is the music of the forest." Sebastian picked up his violin. He played a melody that did seem to come from the sounds and rhythms of the forest.

Father Bach nodded. "Yes. It is a nice theme. Some day when you learn more about writing music, you must develop it, and others you have played. Soon I think you will be ready to study composition. I will start you with a book by the master musician, Buxtehude. You will enjoy that."



Sebastian's eyes were shining. He enjoyed everything he did, so he was sure he would like to study composition. "Everything is good!" he exclaimed. "Good and beautiful!"

It was a long time before he could say those words again. That spring, his mother and father were stricken during an epidemic, and within a very short time, both died.

The daughters of the family went to live with an older sister. Sebastian felt that his whole world had fallen apart when he and his brother Jakob were sent to another town, to live with their married brother Christoph.

Christoph Bach was also a musician, but he was very different from Sebastian's gentle, affectionate father. Also, he and his wife had children of their own. Two extra growing boys in his family meant a real burden, and Christoph was very cold and stern.

It was an unhappy spring for Sebastian. He needed love and understanding and could find none. Frightened and lonely without his parents, he longed to pour his heart out in music. But he was never allowed to play the violin at all, nor any of his own compositions on the clavier. He was allowed to play only scales and exercises. Nothing was allowed in the way of games. In this stern household, months and then years went by.

One evening, as Sebastian sat at the clavier practicing, he remembered some of the melodies his father had told him to develop. Before he thought, he began to play one of them. How should he develop it? he wondered.

Suddenly Christoph strode angrily into the room. "Sebastian! How often must I tell you to stop that ridiculous improvising? Play what is written!"

"I am not improvising, Brother Christoph," the boy said. "I am trying to develop a theme I composed long ago. Father suggested that I do so."

"Father indulged you far too much. Practice your scales now."

"Yes, Christoph."

Sebastian turned again to the clavier and to the scales he had practiced over and over again. He could play them better than Christoph himself. Now his eyes brightened and he looked hopefully at his older brother.

"Please, Christoph, when I have finished, may I play my violin tonight? I used to do it every night for Father and Mother. Please?"



When Sebastian saw the look on his brother's face, he bit his lips to keep back the tears.

"There!" exclaimed Christoph. "This is just what I mean! Always wanting your own way. When will you learn discipline? That, too, is important in music."

"Discipline - and love," murmured Sebastian under his breath.

"Silence! I am talking to you. You are not to play your violin at all. Play these scales for me now."

Sebastian sighed deeply. Dutifully, he played the scales. Tears filled his eyes, and he blinked hard to keep Christoph from seeing him cry.

He discovered that Christoph now possessed the book by Buxtehude which had been his father's - the book which could teach one how to write music. How he longed to study it! His father had wanted him to do so. Surely Christoph would let him have the book, he thought.

So he said to his brother, "Christoph, Father was giving me lessons in harmony and composition. He was about to begin with Buxtehude's book when -- when he died. You know the book, Christoph. You have it here now. May I study it, as Father wished?"

Sebastian could not go on, but Christoph could, and did.

"Buxtehude's book, indeed! Nothing could be more ridiculous! That is too hard for you. You are far too young and untalented for such advanced study. You must rid yourself of the idea that you are a genius, Sebastian! You are an ordinary boy not yet twelve years old. You have much to learn, and you will do as I say."

As Sebastian walked past the book shelves to go to bed, the volume by Buxtehude seemed to sparkle and shine in the moonlight. Sebastian turned to look again as he went out the door, and suddenly he had an idea.

"I could copy it," he thought, as he went slowly up the stairs. "When the moon shines the way it does tonight, I could see well enough without a light. Nobody would have to know, if I did it at night, without a candle, after everyone has gone to sleep. Would it be wrong, dear Father and Mother? Would it, dear God? I cannot believe that it would."



When the house was quiet and the moon was high in the sky, Sebastian crept down the stairs, softly, not making a sound. Yes, the moonlight still shone on the precious book. But the bookcase was locked, and Christoph had the key. The wooden bars of the shelves were far enough apart for Sebastian to reach through with his hand, but the books were too tightly packed in for him to wiggle out the treasured one.

The boy was about to give up his daring plan when he noticed that one of the wooden bars, close beside the book, was loose. Carefully he jiggled it. Out it came. In a moment the precious book was in his hands!

Joyously he carried it to the window. With the quill pen he used for his school work, and an unused copy book his father had given him, Sebastian Bach began to copy the musical text, note for note.

When the moonlight faded into darkness and Sebastian could see no more, he put the book in its place, carefully replaced the loose wooden bar and crept into bed, tired but happy.

For six long months, every moonlight night, Sebastian worked at his task. Sometimes he would be so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open. But he did not give up until he had finished copying the entire book. The night he did so, even the moon seemed to look smilingly down on the boy in the window.

But Sebastian was so tired he fell asleep before he had put the book away. He slept resting his head on both books. Christoph found him there the next morning.

"So, Sebastian! It is just as I said. You have learned no discipline whatever! Even worse, you have deliberately disobeyed my orders. You shall learn to obey and you shall be punished until you do. You are never to see either one of these books again - the original which you took without my permission, or your copy of it."

Sebastian said quietly, "Brother Christoph, I did not wish to disobey you. I thought it could not be wrong for me to borrow the book, since Father had planned for me to study it."

Christoph's voice was cold. "You are living in my home now, Sebastian."

Sebastian nodded his head. "Yes, I know. You are right, of course. But - but it was beautiful music! And . . . even if I never see it again, it is mine, now. Because I remember every single note of it. I shall be able to play it, always."



"What are you saying?" Christoph looked scornful.

But his little brother answered firmly. "I am saying I have learned it now, as Father wished me to do. So I shall always be able to play it, or use what I have learned from it. That is what I am saying! And that is something you cannot take from me."

It was about this time that Sebastian's luck changed, and good things began to happen.

He was singing in the choir at the family's church, where the choirmaster took a great interest in him. This musician declared to Christoph that Sebastian was greatly gifted, quite possibly a genius.

"I shall do all that I can for the boy," the choirmaster said. "He must have the best musical training obtainable. The other church musicians feel as I do. Sebastian is remarkable -- quite remarkable!"

From that moment on, Christoph never again stood in the way of his young brother's progress in music, even though he did not fully share the choirmaster's enthusiasm.

When Sebastian was twelve, it was decided that he should try for a place in the choir school of St. Michael's Church, in the town of Luneburg. He was to go to Luneburg with another boy. They would try out together, and, if they failed to win places in the school, they would return home together.

So twelve-year-old Sebastian Bach and his friend, George Erdman, started out together, on foot. There was no money for carriages or for stopping at inns. From Ohrdruff, their home, to Luneburg was a two-hundred-mile journey over rough, hilly roads. But it was spring, and blossoms were beginning to brighten the forests and dingy fields. That helped to raise the spirits of the boys. Sometimes they were given a ride in a farmer's cart. Often they slept in a loft or on beds of pine needles under sheltering trees.

At last they arrived in Luneburg and set out to look for the choir school. There it was, near the church, an ancient building with a red brick tower. When the two tired young boys appeared at the door and announced that they had walked nearly all of the miles from Ohrdruff, they were welcomed with warmth and kindness.

Sebastian and George were only too glad to rest, to eat, to wash and change their clothing at last. The next morning, they found their own clothes clean and waiting beside



their cots. Gratefully, they dressed and presented themselves to the director to try out for the choir school.

The director looked at the boys thoughtfully, and smiled encouragingly.

"You are both to be congratulated," he said. "I only hope that you are qualified for the positions you have so bravely come here to find. The only qualities that count when we select boys for the choir are character and the ability to sing - to sing very well indeed, if you would belong to the choir of St. Michaels."

Sebastian nodded solemnly. When the music was given to him, he sang with such joy and read the music so expertly that the choirmaster embraced him.

"Yes, yes," said the choirmaster, "you know music! You *are* music, my boy. Your voice will lift up the choir."

George Erdman, too, was accepted, and so a good new life began for the two boys. They were to live in the church school, to have lessons on the various instruments, to take part in all the musical activities of St. Michael's, as well as to do regular school work.

To Sebastian Bach, it was the happiest time of his life since before he had lost his beloved parents. Here, as at home in Eisenach, the world was music. There was a library filled with music books which he could study to his heart's content. He could play what he wished when practice hours were over and lessons were finished. He could learn to play all the instruments for which there was time. Best of all, he could play his violin whenever he wished.

The choirmaster watched him with great interest and growing excitement. One day as he saw Sebastian sit down at the clavier, he said to him, "Sebastian, you already play the clavier beautifully. Why not have a try at the organ in the church today?"

"Maestro! You mean I have permission? That is wonderful!"

The boy ran to the loft like the wind. He sat reverently at the big church organ. Instinctively, he touched the wooden foot pedals and explored the rows of keys with his fingers. He began to play, improvising melodies which resounded through the church in beautiful tones.



Thus did Johann Sebastian Bach discover the greatest joy of music for him - playing the organ. From the very beginning, he composed music especially for the organ, music that will live as long as there are people on earth to hear it.

Sometimes while Sebastian was in the choir school in Luneburg, he saw his cousin, Maria Bach. She understood his need for music. They were good friends and often confided their dreams and hopes to each other. One day Sebastian told Maria how much he wanted to go to Lubeck to hear the great Buxtehude play the organ.

"Oh, yes," Maria said, "Buxtehude! Isn't he the master whose book you copied, in the moonlight?"

Sebastian nodded with a little smile. "Yes, Maria. Poor Christoph. He was very angry. He thought I was so foolish. He would think me even more so if he knew I wanted to go three hundred miles just to hear Buxtehude play. I suppose it is too far and would keep me away from my work here too long. It would not be fair to the choir school."

"No, I suppose not," Maria agreed. "But Sebastian, there is a fine organist in Hamburg. Reinken - is that not his name?"

"Reinken, yes," Sebastian said. "I know he plays in Hamburg."

"Well, you might go there, Sebastian. It would help in your own playing. And your choirmaster at school might think it is a good idea. Hamburg is not so far."

Sebastian was pleased with that idea. Hamburg was only thirty miles away.

"I could walk and be there in good time if I started early in the morning," he said. "It's a wonderful plan, Maria. I'll go tomorrow, if Maestro says I may."

Sebastian did exactly that. He walked the thirty miles to Hamburg one day, and thirty back, the next.

Tired but happy after his long journey, he sat down for a moment on the bench in front of the inn where Maria worked. Maria ran outside and sat down beside her cousin.

"Did you go, Sebastian? You look so tired. You must have walked all the way. Come inside and have something to eat."

"Thank you, Maria, but I can't. I spent what money I had in Hamburg."



"Please, Sebastian, let me lend you some. If not, the innkeeper is very kind. He would be glad to give you your supper."

Sebastian was too proud for that. He said, "I wouldn't think of such a thing! Anyway, I am not hungry, not a bit. Just tired. Thank you, Maria."

Then the girl ran to the innkeeper. "Please, sir," she said, "can you help me? My cousin has walked all the way to Hamburg and back, without enough to eat, I know. Just so he could hear some organ music! I would like to give him some money, but he refuses to take it. What can I do? He must eat!"

"Hmmm," said the innkeeper. "I have an idea. There used to be a rich old fellow who lived here. He would watch out the window, and when he saw someone who looked tired or hungry, he would throw a coin or two down the road. The traveler would pick it up and, nine times out of ten, come in and eat his first good meal in days. Let's try that trick!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Maria laughed happily and ran to get some coins. She dropped them from an upstairs window to the ground at Sebastian's feet, and watched to see what would happen.

Sebastian picked up the coins, looked at them curiously, and jumped so high he almost bumped his head on the innkeeper's sign.

"Maria!" he shouted. "Maria, look! What wonderful luck! Money fell from the sky like manna from heaven."

"How wonderful, Sebastian," cried Maria, running outside again. "now you can come in and eat."

"Eat!" Sebastian looked at Maria as if she were joking. "Did you say *eat*? Oh no, Maria! How could I waste these precious coins on food? Reinken is going to play in Hamburg again tonight. I was longing to hear him. Now I can! Good-by, Maria dear. You have brought me good luck."

And as Maria stood there speechless, Sebastian kissed her soundly on both cheeks, threw his cap into the air, caught it happily and started off as though he had rested for a week.

Maria went inside to tell the innkeeper what had happened. He too was looking up the road, scarcely able to believe what he saw.



"Whatever will happen to him?" asked Maria.

"Only something good," answered the innkeeper slowly. "When anyone loves life and music that much, only something good."

Those long walks of Johann Sebastian Bach were the first of many others. He did walk to Lubeck to hear Buxtehude, later on - when he lived a little closer to Lubeck! All his life he thought nothing of walking miles for music he could hear in no other way.

Shortly after the two trips to Hamburg, Sebastian was offered a place in the court orchestra of the Duke of Weimar. He was on his own at last in the world of music, though he was still only a boy in his teens.

A little later, he became church organist in the town of Arnstadt. Maria went with him to hear him practice for his first Easter services there. As she listened, she tried to think what music Sebastian was playing.

"What is it?" she asked at last. "It is so beautiful. Such lovely music for Easter! Surely I should know it, but I cannot seem to place it."

"No wonder, Maria, since it was never played before," said Sebastian. He was pleased with Maria's understanding and knowledge of music. But then, of course, she was a Bach! "It is a melody that came to me just now, when I began thinking of music for Easter."

"It makes me feel like singing," Maria said softly. "The words of St. Matthew would be good for it."

Sebastian had been thinking of the same thing. The Easter story in the Bible, told by St. Matthew, seemed to him so wonderful that he must write music to accompany it.

"Sing, then, as I play, Maria."

Maria sang some of the words she knew, fitting them to Sebastian's music.

That was the beginning of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which is sung at Eastertime still.

Neither Sebastian nor his cousin noticed anyone enter the church while they were playing and singing. As the last chord of music faded into silence, a stern voice rang out harshly.



"What is going on here?"

It was the deacon of the church who spoke. He was angry and shocked. Maria looked frightened. Sebastian stood up and bowed politely.

"Sir, I was trying out some new music I have written, and --" The church official cut him short. "Herr Bach, your ideas of music are ridiculous! The music we have used for two hundred years is not good enough for you? And now you bring a strange maiden into the sacred halls of the Holy Church right before the Easter services! I shall report this to the elders and see that you are dismissed at once.

Before Sebastian could answer, a gentleman stepped forward from the shadows and addressed the angry deacon.

"I beg your pardon, deacon, but I must speak. This morning I was walking in the village, when suddenly I heard this beautiful music and could not resist stepping inside the church. I would not have missed it for anything."

Before the stranger could go on, the deacon interrupted him.

"Humph! The young man's behavior is inexcusable!"

"I cannot agree with you, Sir," said the stranger emphatically. "His music will rank with the finest in the world. You had better think well before criticizing him, for he is a genius. And furthermore, he -- "

"*You* are an expert, I suppose?" snapped the deacon.

"I am considered so by some," answered the stranger quietly. "My name is Buxtehude."

Sebastian and Maria gasped. Sebastian looked more closely at this stranger who was defending him. Yes! It was the great Buxtehude, whom he had recently seen in Lubeck. He could not contain his excitement.

"Sir!" he exclaimed. "Maestro! I heard you play in Lubeck last month. It was wonderful. Your writing on music has meant much to me, too. Once I copied every note in your book of harmony and composition. All my life I have longed to meet you. You are a great master!"



"Thank you, my boy," said Buxtehude with pleasure. "Now, that music you were playing - tell me about it."

"Well, sir, it was music that came to me as I thought of St. Matthew's Easter story. The same thought occurred to my cousin, Maria, here - so perhaps it is right. The music, for St. Matthew's gospel, I mean."

"It is right, Herr Bach," the famous musician assured him. "You must not fail to write it out. It is very beautiful, also. So beautiful that I think it will someday be heard all over the world, at Eastertime."

The Deacon looked on in wonder as the great Buxtehude bowed before young Sebastian Bach.

Sebastian and Maria were married, later on. Sebastian became a happy, hard-working man, and spent his life as an organist, teacher, and composer. The list of his compositions is almost endless. His music -- especially his music for organ and for a choir of voices -- is admired by all the world.

He became the greatest in the musical family of Bach, and one of the greatest composers of all time. Some people think him the king of all musician-composers. His music has given beauty and joy to the world for more than two hundred years.

~Wicker, Irene. Young Music Makers. E.M. Hale and Company, 1961

Recommended Pieces to listen to

- "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"
- Invention in A minor
- "First Prelude" from Well-Tempered Clavier
- Suite No. 2 for Flute, Strings and Basso Continuo
- Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor
- Mr. Bach Comes to Call