

Johann Sebastian Bach

CD1

1 Harpsichord Concerto in A, BWV 1055 (Finale)

Today we can say without fear of confusion or misunderstanding that that is some music by Bach. In 17th and 18th century Germany, though, that information would be woefully inadequate. Back then, in Germany, the name Bach was almost a byword for ‘musician’. They were a big family who prospered for well over a century in a relatively small part of Germany known as Thuringia, but their curiosity about the wider world seems to have been remarkably small. Despite their tradition of musical distinction – and distinction of a high order – very few of them ever left their native land, and many never wandered much beyond the borders even of Thuringia. Unlike their namesake in the natural world (the name Bach is the German for ‘brook’), they seem to have stood almost still, geographically. They seem also to have been remarkably unresourceful when it came to Christian names. Not only was Thuringia thickly populated with musical Bachs, but most of them were called Johann. Of the eight children born to Maria Elisabeth and Johann Ambrosius Bach, the fifth, Marie Salome, stuck out like a sore thumb. Her father, as we’ve seen, was Johann Ambrosius, and her siblings, to take them in chronological order, were Johann Rudolf, Johann Christoph, Johann Balthasar, Johannes Jonas, Johanna Juditha, Johann Jacob, and bringing up the rear, Johann Sebastian. And they all had grandparents and uncles and cousins whose names were also Johann, something. Johann Sebastian’s own children included Johann Gottfried, Johann Christoph, Johann August, Johann Christian, and Johanna Carolina. They were not only a big family but a close one. And they had to be, or risk the consequences. Grim though it may sound, one of the great binding agents of family life in that time was the fact – well more than that, the ever-present threat of death. Not only through war, though there was plenty of that, but in daily life. Infant mortality was high, the death of women in childbirth was commonplace, and by the standards of our own time, the life expectancy of women and men was depressingly short. It would be wrong, though, to think that bereavement, because it was common, was in any way less painful or traumatic than it is today. And by the time he was ten, Johann Sebastian was already a veteran in the experience of grief. His brother Johann Balthasar had died in 1691, his beloved uncle Johann Christoph in 1693, and in the year after that he lost his mother. His father remarried the already-twice-widowed Barbara Keul six months later but less than three months after that, he too died, leaving his new wife a widow for the third time, at the age of thirty-five, and Sebastian an orphan at the age of nine. Since their stepmother was unable to look after them, Sebastian and his brother Jacob were taken to the town of Ohrdruf where they lived with their eldest brother, who now effectively became their adoptive father, and who certainly provided Sebastian with his basic training as a musician. But sadly, he also provided him with his first experience of completely incomprehensible injustice. As one prominent member of the family recalled many years later,

‘The love of our little Johann Sebastian for music was uncommonly great even at this tender age. In a short time he had fully mastered all the pieces his brother had voluntarily given him to learn. But his brother possessed a book of clavier pieces by the most famous masters of the day – and this, despite all his pleading and for who knows what reason, was denied him. His zeal to improve himself thereupon gave him the idea of practising the following innocent deceit. This book was kept in a cabinet whose doors consisted only of grillwork. Now, with his little hands he could reach through the grillwork and roll the book up (for it had only a paper cover); accordingly, he would fetch the book out at night, when everyone had gone to bed and, since he was not even possessed of a light, copy it by moonlight. In six months’ time he had these musical spoils in his own hands. Secretly and with extraordinary eagerness he was trying to put it to use, when his brother, to his great dismay, found out about it, and without mercy took away from him the copy he had made with such pains. He did not recover the book until after the death of his brother in 1721.’

Though who knows how much of it he already carried in his head. The fact is, we know very little about Bach’s musical education. There’s nothing to suggest that he was in any way a child prodigy, yet by the time he was twenty he was very possibly the greatest organist of his time. He also played the violin, viola and viola da gamba to a professional level, and before his voice broke, surprisingly late, he’d been a truly remarkable boy soprano. As far as his composition goes, not so much as a scrap has survived from his childhood and only a single work from his teens, nor is there any mention of it from any source whatever.

Despite that confiscation of his copied anthology in childhood, brotherly love in the Bach family ran very deep and it was thought until very recently that the earliest of Bach’s works to survive into the permanent repertoire, his *Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother*, was prompted by the departure of his brother Jacob in 1704 to become a bandsman in the army of the King of Sweden. It now turns out that the departing brother of the title was not in fact Bach’s brother at all, but his close friend Georg Erdmann. In those days it was apparently common to refer to one’s close friends as ‘brother’. It also turns out that the piece was almost certainly written two years earlier, making Bach seventeen at the time. Quite untypically, it’s a piece of programme music, each movement depicting a different scene. In the two we’ll hear now, we hear the crack of the postillion’s whip and the sounding of the posthorn as the coach sets off, followed by a fugue picking up on the postillion’s theme and representing the waves and farewells of friends and family as Erdmann sets off not, like Jacob to Sweden, but merely to Luneberg in Germany.

2 Capriccio on the Departure of his Most Beloved Brother

The final two movements of the seventeen-year-old Bach’s *Capriccio on the Departure of his Beloved Brother*.

3 The one thing we know for certain about Bach's musical education, and this specifically as an organist, is that he went to considerable trouble to go and hear the greatest organists around, and as far as we can tell, he always went on foot, often for very considerable distances (he walked fifty miles to hear Dietrich Buxtehude, not only an eminent composer but one of the greatest organists of all time). When he was seventeen, he reached the end of his formal schooling and was now on his own, fending for himself wherever he chose to. Information here is very sparse, but we do know that in 1702, despite his youth and lack of experience, he was offered the job of church organist in the town of Sangerhausen. The next year found him employed very briefly as a 'lackey' – this was the formal job description – at the court of Weimar, where he seems also to have been active as both organist and violinist. In 1703, Bach was appointed organist at the Neuekirche in the German town of Arnstadt. He was just the latest in a long line of Bachs who had looked after the music in Arnstadt since around 1620. He was now eighteen years of age and was already well known not only as an organist but as an expert assessor of organs. Though he never, as far as we know, had any training as an organ builder, he brought to the testing of organs a builder's expertise. Apart from his innate sensitivity to the acoustical properties of instruments and the buildings which housed them, he made the most meticulous judgements of wind pressure and voicing, even of the thickness and quality of the metal used for the organ's pipes. It was also at around this time, at the very outset of his career, that he wrote what's probably his best-known work, and certainly the most famous organ piece ever composed – the dramatic and very extensive Toccata and Fugue in D minor, which we'll hear now in its entirety.

4 Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565

The Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565.

5 It's with his appointment as organist and Capellmeister in Arnstadt, when he was still only eighteen, that the biographer first strikes lucky. Bach remained there for the next four years or so, and from the records of the Town Council alone we begin to get a clear picture of this strong-willed young man, whose genius by now was clearly apparent. So, too, was an aspect of his character which made trouble for him, and for others, throughout his life. In certain respects Bach found it less easy to control his volatile personality than to control his music, whether playing or composing. Like many geniuses, he didn't, as the old saying has it, 'suffer fools gladly' – in fact he found it hard to suffer fools at all. Or ineptitude, which isn't the same thing at all. That he did learn to handle, as any teacher must – and Bach spent a very large part of his professional life as a teacher. But he had a quick temper, and he wasn't always as careful about other people's feelings as he might have been – particularly in his youth. Hence his involvement in a street brawl when he was twenty – one of the more colourful episodes in his biography, though happily not as colourful as it might have been. No blood was actually spilt, but it was a close run thing. In the words of the report issued by the Arnstadt Consistory:

‘Minutes, August the fifth, 1705.

Johann Sebastian Bach, organist here at the New Church, appeared and stated that, as he walked home yesterday, fairly late at night, coming from the direction of the castle and reaching the market square, six students were sitting on the “Langenstein” (the Long Stone), and as he passed the town hall, the student Geysersbach went after him with a stick, calling him to account: Why had Bach made abusive remarks about him? Bach answered that he had made no abusive remarks about him, and that no one could prove otherwise, for he had gone his way very quietly. Geysersbach retorted that while Bach might not have maligned him, he had maligned his bassoon at some time, and whoever insulted his belongings insulted him as well; he had carried on like a dirty dog etc., etc. And Geysersbach had at once struck out at him. Since he had not been prepared for this, he had been about to draw his dagger, but Geysersbach had fallen into his arms, and the two of them tumbled about until the rest of the students who had been sitting with him had rushed toward them and separated them so that Bach could continue on his way home. He had said to Geysersbach, to his face, that he would straighten this out tomorrow, and that it would not be becoming to him and his honour to duel with him. Since he, Bach, did not deserve such treatment and was evidently not safe on the street, he humbly requested that said Geysersbach be duly punished, and that he, Bach, be given appropriate satisfaction and accorded respect by the others, so that henceforth they would let him pass without abuse or attack.’

Well that sounds reasonable enough. But then that’s the case for the defence. As you might expect, the defendant told a rather different story:

‘The defendant Geysersbach denied that he attacked the plaintiff Bach. Rather, having been invited by the shoemaker Jahn for the christening feast of his child, and while giving a serenade with the girls who were sponsors, Bach, tobacco pipe in his mouth, was crossing the street, whereupon Geysersbach asked same whether he admitted to having called him a nanny goat bassoonist. Inasmuch as he could not deny this, Bach, proceeded to draw his dagger; he, Geysersbach, had to defend himself; otherwise he would have suffered some harm. He denied that he maligned Bach as claimed, though admitted that he might have struck out when Bach went at him with his dagger.’

And who could blame him? But Bach, of course, was having none of it. He was unprepared to concede the possibility of guilt in any form, and introduced his cousin Barbara Catharina, who’d been with him at the time, as a witness for the defence.

‘As I was about to cross the market square with my cousin Johann Sebastian, there were several students, coming from a christening feast, who were sitting on the “Long Stone.” Geysersbach, on seeing us, at once got up and stepped in front of Sebastian, asking why he had maligned his bassoon, and stating as quoted, that whoever maligned his belongings, maligned him, and that is what a dirty dog would do. Whereupon Geysersbach hit my cousin in the face, and Sebastian drew his dagger, but did not hurt him with it. Then they tumbled about, and Geysersbach dropped a stick; the other students gathered around, refereeing, and took my cousin by the hand, prompting him to go on his way, since if they had

some arguments with one another, this was taken care of. I must add, however, so as to see the truth recorded, that my cousin had no tobacco pipe in his mouth.'

So, not only did she serve the cause of truth, she cast doubt, without ever saying as much, on the reliability of Geyersbach's testimony. The Consistory duly noted this and the hearing came to an end with an observation which could easily have been made at the outset with the full agreement of all concerned.

'If the defendant had some argument with Bach, it would have been better to settle it through others, and not to pursue it in public, on the street.'

Within a year Bach came before the Consistory again, only this time it was he who was the defendant. And he can hardly have been surprised. He'd requested, and been granted, a leave of absence for four weeks and had then proceeded to stay away for four months. His employers, needless to say, were not pleased. But it says something for the esteem in which the still twenty-year-old Bach was held that he wasn't sacked on the spot.

'February the 21st, 1706

The organist in the New Church, Bach, was interrogated as to where he had lately been for so long and from whom he obtained leave to go. The defendant replied that he had been to Lübeck in order to comprehend one thing and another about his art, but had asked leave beforehand from the Superintendent.

The Reverend Superintendent, however, affirmed that the defendant had asked for only four weeks, but had stayed four times as long. Speaking for himself, the defendant said he had hoped that the organ playing had been so taken care of, by the one he had engaged for the purpose, that no complaint could be entered on that account.'

But there were plenty of other complaints, and Bach's relations with the students continued to be a cause for concern. By this time, his employers were growing tired of what looked to them like rank insubordination, but they continued doggedly to give him the benefit of the doubt.

'Minutes, November the 11th, 1706

It is pointed out to the organist Bach that he is to declare whether, as already instructed, he is willing to make music with the students or not; for if he considers it no disgrace to be connected with the Church, and to accept his salary, he must also not be ashamed to make music there with the students assigned to him – until other instructions are given.'

It was only a matter of time before Bach decided that he'd had enough of Arnstadt, and the feeling was mutual. It's easy to dismiss the Consistory as a bunch of hidebound old fuddy-duddies, but it wouldn't be fair. Their complaints about this insolent upstart, barely out of his teens, were perfectly legitimate. In fact, given his unexplained absence of four months, they were extraordinarily lenient. And they probably realized that even at eighteen he'd been vastly over-qualified for the job they'd given him. It was also a mistake – and a challenge Bach couldn't satisfactorily meet – to appoint an organist no older, and in some

cases perhaps even younger, than many of the students whose training and discipline were his responsibility. At the time of the street brawl with Geyersbach, after all, he was only twenty himself. Not yet, perhaps, a great composer (though he was certainly on the threshold), but already a great organist and harpsichordist; and by now a violinist of distinction. In addition to his musical genius he had a powerful intellect and a breadth of knowledge which was unusual in a 'mere' musician who'd never been to university. In 18th century Germany a university education was rare, in any case. All in all, this was nobody's ordinary twenty-one-year-old, and his disciplinary problems with the student-choristers of Arnstadt were hardly surprising. That said, there's no getting around the fact that Bach, whether he was twenty-one or sixty-one, did have his problems getting along with people, professionally – or anyway, four particular categories of people: those who were lazy, interfering, incompetent or arrogant. His standards of personal industry, though, were unrealistically based on his own apparently limitless capacity for hard work. When, in later life, anyone commented on his stupendous genius as a composer, instrumentalist and improviser he came out with more or less the same line every time.

'I was obliged to work hard; whoever works equally hard will succeed equally well.'

It seems inconceivable that he really believed that, but nothing we know about him suggests false modesty. He has to have known that he was probably the greatest organist of the century (his only rival was Handel), but he dismissed his accomplishments with his characteristically deadpan humour.

'There's really nothing remarkable about it. All you have to do is to hit the right key at the right time and the instrument plays itself.'

6 Trio Sonata in E flat, BWV 525

Part of the Trio Sonata in E flat, BWV 525.

7 On the 15th of June, 1707, Bach was appointed organist at the St. Blasius Church in Mühlhausen. It wasn't great, but it wasn't Arnstadt. He was to take up his appointment in mid-September. In the meantime he remained in Arnstadt, where the prospect of his leaving did wonders for his relations with the Consistory. He also came into a small inheritance. With this and his new appointment, he felt ready to propose marriage to his second cousin, Maria Barbara. She accepted, and they were married in the village of Dornheim, not far from Arnstadt, a little over a month after Bach had taken up his new position. By law, Bach was required to pay a marriage fee to the Arnstadt city council. But this particular story has a happy ending. As an unexpected token of good will, respect and even affection, despite his various transgressions, the fee was refused.

Bach and his wife were both now twenty-two and they embarked on their new life together with a combination of joy, vigour, the highest of hopes and (on Bach's part) great

ambitions. His official salary at Mühlhausen was no greater than at Arnstadt, but it came with extras which were something new. These included, in addition to the money,

‘54 bushels of grain, 2 cords of wood, 1 beech and 1 oak or aspen, and 6 times threescore faggots for kindling, to be delivered to the door in lieu of acreage.’

In a later appointment, a similar list was augmented by thirty pails of beer from the castle brewery, tax-free. Not hard to see why Bach didn't remain a thin man.

As a career move, Bach's appointment at Mühlhausen represented a step up. From a strictly musical point of view though, it was no better than Arnstadt. The pastor of the Church was a so-called 'Pietist', who believed that music in the church should be kept simple and not distract in any way from the spirit of austere devotion. The church was not a fit place for the exercise of music as an art. Especially not the kind of art Bach lived for. A mere nine months after taking up his post, Bach petitioned for his dismissal, so that he could take up a new appointment at the court of Weimar, not this time as a mere lackey but as court organist and chamber musician to Duke Wilhelm Ernst.

It was in his first year at Weimar that the first of Bach's twenty children was born – a daughter, Catharina Dorothea. And the year also saw the birth of a new friendship, with the highly musical nephew of his rather formidable employer, the stern and puritanical Duke Wilhelm Ernst. The musical education of the Duke's youngest nephew, Prince Johann Ernst, had been entrusted entirely to Bach, and both were delighted. The prince was eleven years younger than his new teacher, making him only twelve at the time of Bach's arrival, but his influence on Bach was almost as significant as Bach's was on him – though not quite so directly.

Even at twelve, the prince was musically sophisticated and already an accomplished keyboard player. In the course of the next few years he developed into a player and composer of professional calibre. At fifteen he went to Holland to study at the University of Utrecht, and when he returned, two years later, he brought with him a stack of musical scores, many of them concertos by the new wave of Venetian composers, headed by Antonio Vivaldi. These were a revelation to the now twenty-eight-year-old Bach, who set about arranging many of them for the keyboard, sixteen for harpsichord, six for organ – partly for the further education of the prince, but mostly for himself. These were no mere note-for-note transcriptions but fascinating re-compositions through which Bach discovered as never before his own true voice as a composer.

8 Concerto for four harpsichords, BWV 1065 (arranged from Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins, RV 580)

Part of Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins in B minor, arranged by Bach for four harpsichords.

9 In terms of worldly sophistication, Bach, for all his genius and expertise, was still a provincial. His experience of life up until his arrival in Weimar had been confined to a handful of dukedoms and principalities which in world terms were comparatively little ponds, in which Bach was incomparably the biggest fish. Weimar, while still a comparatively minor court, was something rather different. In itself, it was actually smaller than Mühlhausen. But it was the capital city of the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, which boasted a population of more than fifty thousand. Like most cities in central Germany it was still recovering from the ravages of the Thirty Years' War but it was well on its way to becoming the cultural citadel which was later to attract such luminaries as Goethe, Schiller, Hummel and Liszt. For generations it had been in effect a double duchy, ruled by successive pairs of dukes from the Ernestine-Saxon dynasty.

Five years before, during his brief service there as an official lackey of eighteen, Bach hadn't been in a position to take advantage of it. Now he was.

To begin with the Weimar job looked good and the music which now tumbled from Bach's pen was fairly brimming over with confidence, vitality and, he made no attempt to hide it, with sheer unadulterated brilliance. Up to now Bach had been primarily a performer. Unlike Mozart and Schubert, and Mendelssohn and Bizet after him, there are no teenage masterpieces by Bach. But if he was a relatively late bloomer by their standards, he was a fast bloomer without equal. Most of the great organ works which would have assured his immortality even if he'd never written anything else, were written during these years at Weimar and in many of them he achieved a greatness which all but eclipsed the Italian composers who'd been the catalysts in this near explosion of self-discovery. And on what a scale; this magnificent, huge Prelude and Fugue in A minor for instance.

10 Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 543

The Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 543.

11 The court at Weimar was well aware of the genius it now held in its midst, and the reigning Duke left no doubt of his convictions. At the age of twenty-three, Bach had been given a salary substantially higher than his predecessor's and within three years he was paid the same as the venerable Capellmeister Drese, the most high-ranking musician at the court, whose own pay had remained unchanged for fully a third of a century.

If Bach thought, though, as he seems to have thought, that he could stand aside from the political tensions that all but divided the Weimar court then he was surprisingly naïve. He was no longer just a musician, however brilliant. He was an investment. He was a very large feather in his employer's cap, and getting larger all the time. The money Wilhelm Ernst paid him wasn't simply the just reward of a deserving employee, it was a means of keeping him that way. The duke had no son and heir, and it's quite possible that he saw

himself as a father figure to the young Bach. His own marriage had been unhappy as well as childless and he now lived alone. For the first eight years or so of Bach's service the two enjoyed an excellent working relationship, though without intimacy on either side. After 1716, though, they deteriorated rapidly, for various reasons, mostly to do with the duke's intensifying hatred of his nephew and co-ruler Ernst August, at whose palace Bach, in the Duke's view, spent altogether too much time. But Bach was only one of several. Duke Wilhelm began imposing heavy fines on any musician of his own household who dared to play also at his nephew's. Bach predictably found this intolerable and brazenly ignored it.

In December of 1716 the Weimar Capellmeister Drese died after a long illness. By right of talent and distinction Bach should have got the job automatically. He was the brightest musical jewel in Weimar's crown. When the job went to Drese's son, by all accounts a very mediocre musician, Bach got the message. If he wanted the much-coveted title of Capellmeister, which he did, then he'd have to look elsewhere. And he didn't have to look for long. Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, whose sister had married Ernst August earlier that year, offered Bach the post of Capellmeister at his court, at a salary well above what Bach was getting at Weimar. But you didn't openly snub a reigning duke and expect to get off lightly, especially if the duke in question had paid you exceptionally well and given you every opportunity for advancement. Even with their relations poisoned beyond repair, Wilhelm Ernst repeatedly refused to let Bach go. But it was when Prince Leopold actually started crediting Bach with his salary, even while he remained in Weimar, that the Duke really outdid himself. He had Bach arrested and imprisoned. In the words of the ducal court's official report,

'The quondam concertmaster and organist Bach was confined to the County Judge's place of detention for too stubbornly forcing the issue of his dismissal.'

As the weeks rolled slowly past, and separated not only from his family but from any kind of instrument, Bach, at the lowest part of his life so far, took the opportunity of his imprisonment to compose in his head a substantial part of his greatest keyboard work, the 48 preludes and fugues to which he gave the collective title, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

12 The Well-Tempered Clavier: Prelude in E flat minor

The Prelude in E flat minor from Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

13 After a month or so, during which Bach made no concessions whatever, the Duke seems finally to have accepted that he was fighting a losing battle. Bach was released, and sent packing, with his wife and four children, with a notice of 'unfavourable discharge'. A sad end to a story which had begun so well. But Weimar's loss proved to be the world's gain, in a flood of music which has long since become immortal.

14 Violin Concerto in E major, BWV 1042 (Mvt 3)

CD 2

1 Prince Leopold and his court at Cöthen must have seemed to the Bachs – did seem – to be a dream come true. Unlike the despotic Wilhelm Ernst, Leopold himself was young (twenty-three), instantly likeable, highly cultured and a fine musician to boot: an excellent singer who also played the violin, bass viol and harpsichord to a professional level. He'd studied in Berlin for two years and put the finishing touches to his musical education in Italy, France, England and the so-called Low Countries, especially Holland and Belgium as we now say. A real cosmopolitan. By the time he came of age and succeeded his mother as ruler he'd assembled an excellent orchestra, many of whose members had been imported from the recently disbanded court orchestra in Berlin.

Among the incidental pleasures of Bach's new job was the amount of travelling he was able to do, both with and without his patron prince. Even so, he never in his life set foot outside Germany. Compared to his exact contemporary, the cosmopolitan and much celebrated Handel, he was a rank provincial. While Bach comfortably pursued his art at a minor German court, Handel was known throughout Europe and was now enjoying a life of fame and glamour in England where he effectively eclipsed all the local talent. In the Spring of 1719, Handel visited Germany to recruit singers for the London opera season. When Bach heard that Handel was staying a mere twenty miles away from Cöthen, he eagerly boarded a stagecoach and set off to meet the great man. Unfortunately, he arrived at his destination only to learn that Handel had just left. Strange to say, these two giants of music, both of them Germans, born in the same year, never did meet, which was a great regret of Bach's to his dying day. But his disappointment at missing Handel was dwarfed to insignificance by the calamity which engulfed him in the spring of the following year.

In May 1720 he accompanied his patron prince to the fashionable spa town of Carlsbad in Bohemia, leaving Maria Barbara in Cöthen to look after their children. The change of scene did him good and he returned to Cöthen newly refreshed and invigorated, only to discover that his beloved wife of thirteen years had very suddenly died and was already buried. The cause of her death isn't known, but it's been suggested that it may have been due to some complication in a seventh pregnancy. Whatever the cause, her death put an end to the happiest chapter in Bach's life, and it gives added poignancy to the lovelorn intertwinings of the slow movement from the Double Violin Concerto which dates from around the same time.

2 Concerto in D minor for two violins and strings, BWV 1043 (Mvt 2)

The slow movement from the Double Violin Concerto.

3 Bach was now not only a court musician but a single parent with four children under ten to look after. How he also found time to immerse himself in composition is anybody's guess. But he did – in fact most of his orchestral and instrumental music was written during his five years at Cöthen – just as most of his organ music dates from the Weimar years. Ironically, though, the most famous of all the works to come out of Cöthen are the six concertos for various combinations of instruments known ever since as the *Brandenburg Concertos*. Ironic because they were dedicated not to Prince Leopold, nor to anyone at Cöthen, but to a distant outsider, the Margrave of Brandenburg, hence their unofficial name. But when I say 'dedicated', that isn't the half of it. In 18th century Germany they really understood about these things:

'To His Royal Highness My Lord Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg
(etc. etc. etc.)

Your Royal Highness,

As I had a couple of years ago the pleasure of appearing before Your Royal Highness, by virtue of Your Highness's commands, and as I noticed then that Your Highness took some pleasure in the small talents that Heaven has given me for Music, and as in taking leave of Your Royal Highness, Your Highness deigned to honour me with the command to send him some pieces of my own composition, I have, in accordance with Your Highness's most gracious orders, taken the liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present concertos, begging Your Highness most humbly not to judge their imperfection, with that rigour of the fine and delicate taste that the whole world knows Your Highness has for musical pieces; but rather to infer from them, the profound respect and the most humble obedience that I attempt to demonstrate therewith. For the rest, Sire, I beg Your Royal Highness, very humbly, to have the goodness to continue Your Highness's gracious favour towards me, and to be assured that nothing is so close to my heart as the wish to be employed on occasions more worthy of Your Royal Highness and of Your Highness's service –

I, who without an equal in zeal am, Sire,
Your Royal Highness's most humble and obedient servant,

Johann Sebastian Bach.'

Hard to believe that the man who wrote that grovelling nonsense also wrote this magnificent and historic movement for flute, violin, harpsichord and strings.

4 Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D, BWV 1050 (Mvt 1)

The first movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No.5. The chief feature which makes that piece historic is the prominence of the solo harpsichord part, and especially, of course, that long and completely unprecedented solo cadenza, which paved the way for the virtuoso keyboard concerto, perfected by Mozart half a century later.

5 Whichever Brandenburg Concerto you happen to hear, it's almost impossible to believe that a man who wrote music like that was in all likelihood coping with perhaps the greatest grief he'd ever known. And in the 18th century, as already noted, grief was a far commoner part of life than it is today. At the time of Maria Barbara's sudden and unexplained death, Bach, now thirty-five, had already lost both parents, three of his own children (nine more were to follow in his own lifetime), two brothers, one sister-in-law and his beloved Prince Johann Ernst of Weimar. What sustained him throughout all his losses was his absolutely unshakeable religious faith, and his total belief in the joy of the afterlife. Like all truly devout Christians he saw death not as a terminal but as a gateway. And far from being morbid, his music concerning death (and there's a lot of it) is often jubilant or seraphically peaceful. No composer's music is so permeated by joy. And the range and depth of its spirituality has never been surpassed and very seldom equalled – even then, perhaps, only by Beethoven. The only emotion, if you can call it that, which has no place in Bach's music is despair. Which is partly what makes him, for very many people, the most uplifting and inspiring composer who ever lived.

6 **'Et Resurrexit' from Mass in B Minor, BWV 232**

'Et Resurrexit' from the great Mass in B minor.

7 In many ways, Bach's first years at Cöthen had represented the highpoint of his life. All the more so for the fact that he'd arrived there fresh from imprisonment in Weimar. Reunited with his wife and children, well paid by a patron prince in a million, he'd found himself with an orchestra of exceptional quality, ready to play, at first sight, anything he wrote for them. In the space of a few days, he seemed to have gone from one extreme to the other. After the death of his wife, though, it could never be the same again. Every detail of the place reminded him of the happiness they'd known together, and he now began to think of moving on. Towards the end of the year, he travelled to Hamburg, where the post of organist at the Jacobkirche had become vacant. The city was also particularly well endowed with superb instruments, and in the course of his visit, Bach tried out all of them, causing general astonishment wherever he played. Needless to say, he was offered the job, but decided, on balance, to decline it.

Back in Cöthen, he had more important things on his mind. For some months he had been drawing closer and closer to a young singer at the court, one Anna Magdalena Wilcke. On the third of December 1721, she became his second wife. She was twenty, he was thirty-six. And though neither of them was probably thinking of it at the moment, she was to bear the last thirteen of his children, and had already become in all but name a devoted stepmother to the four surviving children of his first marriage.

Anna Magdalena is best remembered today because of the musical notebooks which Bach compiled for her and which have come down to us in her name. In these, and the similar

collections made for his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, we find many of the pieces which make up the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the first drafts of the Two- and Three-part Inventions, and perhaps most beautiful of all, the ‘sarabande’ which was later to become the theme of the famous ‘Goldberg’ Variations.

8 Aria in G from Goldberg Variations, BWV 988

The Aria in G from the Anna Magdalena Notebooks, better known as the theme from the ‘Goldberg’ Variations. And this might be a good moment to scotch a myth which has stubbornly clung onto the ‘Goldbergs’ for more than two and a half centuries. Namely that they were written to put the insomniac Count Keyserlingk to sleep. Not so. They were written to console and occupy his mind and spirit during the sleepless hours of his nights. And Goldberg, a pupil of Bach’s, was the name of the court musician who played them.

9 The Anna Magdalena Notebooks are not made up exclusively of works by Bach himself, they contain pieces by some of his children, and others by people who have no family connection, though these aren’t all attributed to their true composers. For very many years, very many decades, the lovely song *Bist du bei mir* was thought to be by Johann Sebastian himself. Now, though, we know it to be the work of an almost totally forgotten composer, one Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel. In the version Bach copied into the Notebook of Anna Magdalena, the song is accompanied very simply by the harpsichord, so Anna Magdalena, who was a very fine soprano, could accompany herself as she sang it. But today it’s sometimes heard, as here, in a version with orchestral accompaniment.

10 Stölzel: Bist du bei mir

11 The Anna Magdalena Notebooks weren’t restricted to music. Occasionally Bach would slip in a bit of poetry – well, verse anyway – purely for her amusement, and they add to the general picture of the Bachs’ home life. This little meditation on tobacco may very well be by Bach himself:

‘Whene’er I take my pipe and stuff it
And smoke to pass the time away,
My thoughts, as I sit there and puff it,
Dwell on a picture sad and grey:
It teaches me that very like
Am I myself unto my pipe.

Like me, this pipe so fragrant burning
Is made of naught but earth and clay;
To earth I too shall be returning.
It falls and, ere I’d think to say,

It breaks in two before my eyes;
In store for me a like fate lies.

No stain the pipe's hue yet doth darken;
It remains white. Thus do I know
That when to death's call I must hearken
My body, too, all pale will grow.
To black beneath the sod 'twill turn,
Likewise the pipe, if oft it burn.

Or when the pipe is fairly glowing,
Behold then, instantaneously,
The smoke off into thin air going,
Till naught but ash is left to see.
Man's fame likewise away will burn
And unto dust his body turn.

How oft it happens when one's smoking:
The stopper's missing from its shelf,
And one goes with one's finger poking
Into the bowl and burns oneself.
If in the pipe such pain doth dwell,
How hot must be the pains of Hell.

Thus o'er my pipe, in contemplation
Of such things, I can constantly
Indulge in fruitful meditation,
And so, puffing contentedly,
On land, on sea, at home, abroad,
I smoke my pipe and worship God.'

For Bach and Anna Magdalena, the start of their married life was a happy mixture of domesticity and musical activity in an environment which nurtured both. But all that was about to change. Not long after their own wedding, Prince Leopold himself was married, and his bride too was only twenty. Unlike Anna Magdalena, though, she had no taste for music, (a strange choice, given the Prince's passion for it) in fact she had no taste for culture of any kind (making her an even stranger choice). For her, the Bachs, and the Prince's musical household in general, were nothing but a waste of money. Bach himself referred to her dismissively as an 'amusa', a Latin term of abuse, in his terms anyway, and it was only a little time before the happy relations between him and the Prince became strained. The congenial atmosphere gave way to an uneasy formality, and though his job at Cöthen was never at risk, Bach now decided to move on.

As luck would have it, a suitable vacancy soon arose for one of the most prestigious jobs in Germany – so prestigious that even Georg Philipp Telemann, then a far more famous composer than Bach, was among the applicants. The position in question was the so-called 'Cantorship' at the Thomasschule in Leipzig – the choir school attached to the Thomaskirche, one of the two most important churches in Leipzig and the hub of musical

life in that city. Unsurprisingly, he got the job, but his employers in Hamburg refused to release him. So, the job was given to the runner-up among the five applicants, Johann Christoph Graupner. But his employers, this time in Darmstadt, refused to release him. So it fell eventually to the No.3 man – Johann Sebastian Bach. ‘As the best men could not be had,’ one Councillor Platz is quoted as saying, ‘we were forced to fall back on mediocrities.’

12 Magnificat in D, BWV 243

The opening of Bach’s Magnificat – aptly named in more ways than one.

13 The job of the Cantor at the St. Thomas School was two-pronged. On the one hand Bach was the teacher and choir director of the boys in the school, on the other he was to provide ceremonial music for civic occasions and to supervise the church music of the city as a whole, in the hope of stemming the tide of secularization that was increasing on an almost daily basis in cities across the land. As it turned out, he enhanced both, beyond anyone’s dreams, dividing his time between Leipzig’s four churches and Zimmermann’s Coffee House (but that comes later). His oaths of office were many and various, and many, too, were well below the station of one of the greatest musicians who ever lived. Come to that, they were well below his status as Capellmeister at Cöthen. He was required to teach music and other subjects, especially Latin, to the boarders at the upper school, and to give them individual tuition whenever he thought it was needed; he was to direct the choir in each of Leipzig’s four churches on alternate Sundays, often composing the music himself; he was to supervise the organists and other musicians in each place; he was to take charge of ordering and inspecting all the musical scores and parts – and all the instruments as well – for the services in all four churches . . . and those were only some of his strictly musical duties. Every fourth week it was his responsibility to get all the students up at 5-o’clock in the morning, after which, according to the school regulations,

‘He is to ensure that fifteen minutes later all are assembled for prayers in the auditorium downstairs. He is to say prayers again at 8 p.m., and to note that no-one is absent and that no lights are taken into the dormitories. While supervising meals he must see that there is no boozing, that Grace is said in German before and after every meal, and that the Bible or a history book is read during the repast. It is his duty to make sure that the scholars return in full number and at the proper hour from attending funerals and weddings etc.. He must particularly satisfy himself that none comes home having drunk too much. He shall hold the key to the infirmary and visit all patients there confined. Absence from his duty during the day entails a fine of four groschen, and at night of six.’

The thought of Bach being a dormitory inspector and meal supervisor for twenty-seven years fairly boggles the mind. Hardly more so, though, than his daily routine and the range of his activities. A sixteen-hour working day was normal, and he plotted it with all the precision of a military campaign. Academic lectures were scheduled daily between 7.00 and

10.00 in the morning and from 1.00 to 3.00 in the afternoon. In addition to these were the daily singing exercises plus individual vocal and instrumental lessons. And then there were the regular services at the four churches, as well as frequent special services such as weddings and funerals. For long stretches, Bach would be composing weekly cantatas, in addition to other music, and in addition to fitting in his such demanding extra-curricular projects as the Collegium Musicum concerts at the Coffee House, his ever-more-famous organ recitals, his thriving sub-career as an instrumental teacher to the aristocracy, the various calls on his services as an assessor of organs and harpsichords, and so on. Nor should we forget, as he never did, his devotion to his wife and ever-expanding family, whose living quarters also accommodated eight harpsichords, one pedal harpsichord, two so-called 'lute claviers' (a strange hybrid, designed and more or less invented by Bach himself), one spinet, four violas, two cellos, a viola da gamba and a lute. For a chamber orchestra and small choir, Bach didn't even have to leave the house. Most of his family played at least two instruments and all of them could sing. And by the way, he also conducted various private business enterprises, hiring out and selling musical instruments, books, and scores, and he was involved in a small mining business. As one of the most organized minds in human history, he accounted for virtually every minute. For his weekly cantata, he followed a detailed plan which he wrote out for himself, and followed religiously. Even so, his achievement, in quality and quantity alike, seems more miraculous than methodical.

14 Cantata: 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott', BWV 80 (Duetto)

The duet from Bach's Cantata No. 80, well it's called a 'duet' but with those oboe and violin parts it's really a kind of 'quartet'.

15 Bach wrote cantatas for just about every kind of occasion and on a wide number of subjects, including such unlikely ones as the love of coffee. Weddings played a large part in his professional life, so, of course, did funerals. And funerals brought in good money. This is why he used to complain, not entirely seriously, if there were long spells of good weather in winter. More people died in a hard winter, which meant more money for everyone in the funeral business. And Bach had earned the right to make jokes about it the hard way. Of his twenty children, ten had died by the time he was fifty-five.

Few things are more frustrating for the Bach biographer than the total disappearance of all the letters he ever wrote to members of his immediate family, and of theirs to him. True, he was seldom away for very long after the time of his first marriage, but there were the odd exceptions. One was the trip to Carlsbad with Prince Leopold, from which he returned to find that his wife had died; another was a visit to Berlin in 1741 to visit his son Carl Philipp Emanuel. And here history looked horribly like repeating itself. Bach received a letter from Leipzig saying that Anna Magdalena who was pregnant, just as Maria Barbara had been, was very dangerously ill. Fearing the worst, he hurried back to Leipzig and was overjoyed

to find his wife still living, but she was very much weakened, and her recovery was slow. A month later she wrote to a relative, regretfully cancelling a planned visit.

‘Most Noble Sir, Most Highly Respected Sir Chamberlain, Highly Esteemed Patron!

Your most highly honoured letter of September 8, Most Noble Sir, worked such a change in my spirits that it almost if not completely made me forget the most acute pains of the body, since in it you give me and my household the strongest assurance of Your Honour’s invaluable favour through your kind invitation. But my past and continuing sickly condition robs me, alas, of such pleasant hours, and the advice of my family forbids me to undertake such a journey, on which, in their opinion, might hinge either a noticeable improvement or the complete ruin of my health.

If, meanwhile, Your Honour should kindly grant our repeated prayer and should graciously honour our house with Your Honour’s most esteemed and desired presence, I assure Your Honour that for us all the greatest pleasure would spring therefrom. I remain, my life long, and with most obedient compliments, Your Honour’s most humbly devoted servant,

Anna Magdalena Bach’

As the principal copyist of her husband’s works, Anna Magdalena developed a musical handwriting which was almost indistinguishable from Bach’s own. It would seem that the same thing applied to her style as a letter-writer.

As husband, father, teacher and friend, Bach was big-hearted, generous, even gregarious, and full of humour. But unsurprisingly, especially remembering that street brawl with Geysersbach back in Arnstadt, he had a volcanic temper, especially when confronted by incompetence in people who should know better.

‘On one occasion the organist of the Thomas-Kirche, who was in a general way a worthy artist, so enraged him by a mistake on the organ during the rehearsal of a cantata, that Bach tore the wig from his own head and with the thundering exclamation “You should have been a cobbler!” threw it at the organist’s head.’

But we’re not told what happened next. Nor do we know why Bach was so fond of ‘cobbler’ as a term of abuse, which he apparently was.

The fact is, though, that even with his volatile temper Bach was a born teacher. Whether he was a born school-teacher is another matter. But in the testimony of those who studied with him individually, as in the treasury of masterpieces that he wrote for instructive purposes, the impression of a truly great teacher is unavoidable. One of his many indebted pupils was the composer Johann Kirnberger:

‘The method of teaching is the best I have ever encountered, for he proceeds steadily, step by step, moving gradually from the easiest to the most difficult, and as a result even the step to the fugue has only the difficulty of passing from one

step to the next. It is on this ground that I hold the method of Bach to be the best and only one. How sad it is that this great man never wrote anything theoretical about music, and that his teachings have reached posterity only through his pupils.'

Not so, Mr. Kirnberger. As Ernst Ludwig Gerber reveals in a reminiscence of his father, who was also a pupil of Bach's.

'Bach treated my father with particular kindness because he came from Schwarzburg, and always thereafter called him his compatriot. He promised to give my father the instruction he desired and asked at once whether he had industriously played fugues. At the first lesson Bach set before him his own *Two-part Inventions*. When he had studied these through to Bach's satisfaction, there followed a series of suites, and then *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. This latter work Bach played altogether three times through for him with his unmatched art, and my father counted these among the happiest hours of his life, when Bach, under the pretext of not feeling in the mood to teach, sat himself at one of his fine instruments and thus turned these hours into minutes.'

All the supreme instrumentalists have taught by example. But Bach did more than that. He taught through his own compositions, many of which were expressly conceived for educational purposes. He didn't need to write a theoretical treatise. He put everything he knew into his music. And he made no distinction between learning and joy. His short preface to the Two and Three-part Inventions not only demonstrates Kirnberger's point about the methodical advancement, one step at a time, it tells us something absolutely vital about Bach's music generally, and how he wanted it to sound. In a lengthy subtitle, he describes the collection in his own very characteristic way.

'Upright Instruction, wherein the lovers of the clavier, and especially those desirous of learning, are shown a clear way not alone to learn to play clearly in two voices but also, after further progress, to deal correctly and well with three parts; furthermore, at the same time not alone to have good inventiones [ideas] but to develop the same well – and above all, to arrive at a singing style in playing.'

16 Sinfonia (Three-Part Invention) No. 5 in E flat major, BWV 791

The Three-Part Invention in E flat.

17 Among the many great keyboard works which Bach wrote specifically with a view to their educational properties are the six Partitas and the 'French' Overture, the 'Goldberg' Variations and the so-called 'Italian' Concerto – one of the most invigorating pieces he ever wrote.

18 Italian Concerto, BWV 971 (Mvt 3: Presto)

19 Inevitably, given Bach's uncompromising musical idealism – and, I suppose one has to admit, his pride – it was only a matter of time before he tangled with the various authorities he had to deal with – in Leipzig, as everywhere else. And the time came remarkably quickly. He started work towards the end of May and by the end of September was already deeply embroiled in a dispute with the University of Leipzig, about his rights, both musical and financial. The details hardly matter. What does matter, though, when it comes to our understanding of the man, is the fact that when he failed to win his case with the University in Leipzig, he then wrote directly to a higher authority – to the King, no less. His letter begins with the expected salutation:

‘To His Most Serene Highness, the Most Mighty Prince and Lord, Frederick Augustus, King in Poland, . . . My Most Gracious King, Elector, and Master. Your Most Serene Highness, Most Mighty King and Elector, Most Gracious Master!’

And with the salutation taken care of, Bach now launches his opening sentence, which we now hear in its entirety:

‘May Your Royal Majesty and Serene Electoral Highness most graciously deign to permit it to be pointed out, with most humble obedience, how the Directorship of Music of the Old and New Divine Service at a Worshipful University at Leipzig, with the compensation and incidental fees of the same, has always been connected with the Cantorate of St. Thomas's here, even during the life of my predecessor, but during the vacancy that followed the death of the latter, it was given to the organist of St. Nicholas's, and on my entering upon my new post, the directorship of the so-called Old Service was again left to me, but the compensation therefore was later withdrawn and given with the directorship of the New Service to the above-mentioned organist of St. Nicholas's; and although I have duly addressed myself to a Worshipful University, and made application that the old arrangement should be left intact, yet the best I have been able to obtain is an offer of half the salary, 12 gulden.’

Well. If Bach's way with notes had been like his way with words, I doubt any of us would ever have heard of him. But fortunately, it wasn't.

20 Cantata: ‘Herz und Mund und Tat and Laben’, BWV 147 (Opening)

CD 3

1 The letter whose first sentence we waded through a moment ago was the first of three which Bach addressed to the King. Three immensely long letters. Pages and pages.

Well the thing dragged on for almost three years before the King eventually found, more or less, in Bach's favour. But by that time, Bach seems basically to have lost interest in the whole thing.

It's interesting that Bach never broke his links with Cöthen, either with Prince Leopold himself or with his court. As it happens, the Prince's unmusical wife died hardly a year into their marriage at the cruelly early age of twenty-one. And before long, the musical scene at Cöthen returned to something like its earlier form. Sebastian and Anna Magdalena, whose life together, after all, was born there, went back on several occasions as very welcome guest performers. And when Prince Leopold's son Emanuel Ludwig was born in 1726, Bach not only dedicated his B flat keyboard Partita to the new heir, he celebrated its publication with an accompanying poem which makes one wonder why he didn't write more of them. Perhaps his way with words wasn't so bad after all:

'Serene and Gracious Prince, though cradle cov'rings deck thee,
Yet doth thy Princely glance show thee more than full-grown.
Forgive me, pray, if I from slumber should awake thee
The while my playful page to thee doth homage own.
It is the first fruit of my strings in music sounding;
Thou the first son round whom thy Princess's arms have curled.
It shall for thee and for thy honour be resounding,
Since thou art, like this page, a firstling in this world.
The wise men of our time affright us oft by saying
We come into this world with cries and wails of woe,
As if so soon we knew the bitterness of staying
E'en this short time in weary travail here below.
But this do I turn round about, instead proclaiming
That thy sweet childish cries are lovely, clear, and pure;
Thus shall thy whole life be with gladness teeming -
A harmony complete of joys and pleasures sure.
So may I, Prince of all our hopes, e'er entertain thee,
Though thy delights be multiplied a thousandfold,
But let, I pray, the feeling evermore sustain me
Of being, Serene Prince, Thy humblest servant,

BACH'

2 Partita No. 1 in B flat, BWV 825

The 'Courante' from the Partita No. 1 in B flat, and before it, its poem of dedication also by Bach.

3 Bach was now forty-one, almost twenty years older than he had been back in the old Arnstadt days. He'd now worked for five different employers, married twice, fathered eleven children, and acquired extraordinary renown as a performer, composer, teacher and expert in the building and maintaining of organs. And as no-one in Weimar was likely to forget, he'd even done time in jail. His genius was in full flood, in spite of many adverse circumstances, and he was producing one masterpiece after another at a rate which still makes the jaw drop. Yet in terms of his personal relations, especially with officialdom of any stripe, he seems to have learned almost nothing. He was now much in demand both as recitalist and as an assessor of new and renovated organs, but would leave the city to fill these engagements without even seeking much less receiving permission, and there were a whole slew of other, more minor misdemeanours. The Council voted unanimously to cancel some of Bach's financial extras. It wanted explanations. Bach delivered instead a long, and fascinating, memorandum itemising his needs to do his job properly and the Council's failure in meeting them. Only through this do we get the full measure of what he had to put up with. He entitled it,

'A Short But Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music, with certain modest reflections on the Decline of the Same. Anno Domini 1730. Leipzig.'

The vocalists in this place are made up of the pupils of the St. Thomas School, being of four sorts, namely, sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. In order that the choruses of church pieces may be performed as is fitting, the vocalists must in turn be divided into 2 sorts, namely concertists – those who can be entrusted with solos – and ripienists, who cannot. The concertists are ordinarily 4 in number; sometimes also 5, 6, 7, even 8; that is, if one wishes to perform music for two choirs. The ripienists, too, must be at least 8, namely, two for each part. The instrumentalists are also divided into various kinds, namely, string players, oboists, flautists, trumpeters, and drummers.

The number of the resident students of the St. Thomas School is 55. These 55 are divided into 4 choirs, for the 4 churches in which they must partly perform concerted music with instruments, partly sing motets, and partly sing chorales. In the 3 churches, namely, St. Thomas's, St. Nicholas's, and the New Church, the pupils must all be musical. St. Peters receives the residue, namely, those who have no understanding of music and can barely even sing a chorale.

Every musical choir should contain at least 3 sopranos, 3 altos, 3 tenors, and as many basses, so that even if one happens to fall ill, as very often happens, a double-choir motet may still be sung, though it would be still better if one could have 4 subjects on each voice and thus could provide every choir with 16 persons. Hence the number of those who must understand music comes to 36 persons in all.'

Mind you, he's only talking here about singers, not yet about instrumentalists. But a number of his finest works are intended for singers alone, though a very modest instrumental bass line is sometimes used. One of these is the uplifting and virtuosic motet *Singet dem Herrn*.

4 Motet: Singet dem Herrn, BWV 225

Part of the great motet *Singet dem Herrn*, which, incidentally, quite overwhelmed Mozart when he first heard it almost forty years after Bach's death.

5 But back now to the second part of Bach's *Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music*, in which he details his ideal requirements where instrumentalists are concerned.

'The instrumental band consists of the following: 4 or even 6 violins, 4 violas, two cellos, one double-bass, 2 or 3 oboes, 1 or 2 bassoons, 3 trumpets and 2 kettle drums – totalling 18 persons at least for the instrumental music, though the addition of 2 flutes, often required, makes altogether 20 instrumentalists.'

Yet what Bach actually had at his disposal, on a regular basis, was a mere eight players: four town pipers, plus three professional fiddlers and one amateur. Well, I say 'professional' but as Bach discreetly put it,

'Modesty forbids me to speak at all truthfully of their qualities and musical knowledge. Nevertheless it must be remembered that they are mostly elderly and not at all in such practice as they should be.'

Nor was he much luckier at the opposite end of the age range. Many of the boys from whom he had to draw his choir were a liability, to say the least.

'It cannot remain unmentioned that so many poorly equipped boys, and boys who have no talent at all for music, have been accepted into the school to date that the quality of music has necessarily declined and deteriorated. And those who do bring a few precepts with them when they come to school are not ready to be used immediately, as is required. For there is no time to instruct such pupils until they are ready to be used. And each year some of those who have managed to accomplish something in music leave the school and their places are taken by others who either are not yet ready to be used or who have no ability whatsoever. In conclusion I must leave it to riper reflection whether in such circumstances the music here can continue to be maintained at all, or whether its still greater decline is to be feared.'

And by way of a p.s. he gives his assessment of the current crop:

'17 usable, 20 not yet usable, 17 unfit.'

It almost beggars belief. Here we have the greatest musical genius of the age, perhaps of all ages, occupying a supposedly prestigious position and confronting a situation which would drive many a lesser man to thoughts of suicide, or at least mass murder. No wonder Bach liked his drink. And no wonder that he had to get away now and again without waiting for official permission. His beloved Anna Magdalena and his ever growing brood must have wished him Godspeed every time. But the most extraordinary thing of all is that through all this he was fantastically productive, often churning out a whole cantata every week, among other things, and most of them masterpieces. It was here, in this job, that he wrote the Magnificat, the St. John and St. Matthew Passions, the B minor Mass (which many people regard as the greatest work ever written) – and knowing all the time that he would probably never hear a halfway adequate performance of any of them. He simply wouldn't believe our luck today.

6 St John Passion, BWV 245

The opening chorus of the St John Passion.

7 Given the conditions he had to work in, it comes as no surprise to learn that Bach began seriously to consider leaving Leipzig for good. That much is plain in a long, fascinating letter that he wrote to his old school friend Georg Erdmann. They'd seen each other once or twice since their student days, and exchanged letters, but nothing like this. This is the most personal, unguarded, almost intimate letter that we have of Bach's, yet it's couched in the same grandiloquent formality of style that we notice in his letters to the King, and to the Margrave of Brandenburg, and that we'll encounter again before too long. I have to say that when I first read this, I thought Bach was joking, that he was mocking the system, as it were. But no. This is, apparently, how even friends addressed each other, and it takes some getting used to. Erdmann, incidentally, was not a musician but a civil servant, now working in Gdansk, in Poland, as a representative of the Russian government.

'Most Honoured Sir,

Your Honour will have the goodness to excuse an old and faithful servant for taking the liberty of disturbing you with the present letter. It must be nearly four years since Your Honour favoured me with a kind answer to the letter I sent to you; I remember that at that time you graciously asked me to give you some news of what had happened to me, and I humbly take this opportunity of providing you with the same. You know the course of my life from my youth up until the change in my fortunes that took me to Cöthen as Capellmeister. There I had a gracious Prince, who both loved and knew music, and in his service I intended to spend the rest of my life. It must happen, however, that the said Serenissimus should marry a Princess of Berenburg, and that then the impression should arise that the musical interests of the said Prince had become somewhat lukewarm, especially as the new Princess seemed to be quite unmusical; and it pleased God that I should be called hither to be Director of Music and Cantor at the St. Thomas School. This post was described to me in such favourable terms that finally I cast my lot in the name of the Lord, and made the change of position.

Here, by God's will, I am still in service. But since (1) I find that the post is by no means so lucrative as it was described to me; (2) I have failed to obtain many of the fees pertaining to the office; (3) the place is very expensive; and (4) the authorities are odd and little interested in music, so that I must live amid almost continual vexation, envy, and persecution; accordingly I shall be forced, with God's help, to seek my fortune elsewhere. Should Your Honour know or find a suitable post in your city for an old and faithful servant, I beg you most humbly to put in a most gracious word of recommendation for me – I shall not fail to do my best to give satisfaction.

Now I must add a little about my domestic situation. I am married for the second time, my late first wife having died in Cöthen. From the first marriage I have three sons and one daughter living. From the second marriage I have one son and two daughters living. The children of my second marriage are still small, the eldest, a boy, being six years old. But they are all born musicians, and I can already form both vocal and instrumental ensembles within my family, particularly since my present wife sings a good, clear soprano, and my eldest daughter, too, joins in not at all badly. I shall almost transgress the bounds of courtesy if I burden Your Honour any further, and I therefore hasten to close, remaining with most devoted respect my whole life long Your Honour's most obedient and devoted servant...'

'Johann Sebastian Bach'. All three names, in a letter to an old friend. The linguistic equivalent of the wigs, perhaps.

Well, it didn't work out. Erdmann had nothing to offer, and Bach stayed in Leipzig. But he widened the sphere of his activities, taking on the direction of the so-called Collegium Musicum which Telemann had established in 1702 and which met every Friday evening at Zimmermann's Coffee House. The players and singers were a mixture of professionals, university students and a number of family groups. These evenings, which were held every week throughout the year, were open to the public and played a major role in establishing the institution of the public concert in Germany. And here Bach found himself in his element. When it came to the actual making of music, whether composing, teaching or performing it, Bach gave himself to it with an energy, concentration and passion which could be almost exhausting to behold. The description by Johann Gesner of Bach in rehearsal – presumably with the Collegium – is justifiably famous.

'Ah! If you could only see him, not only singing and playing at the same time his own parts, but presiding over thirty or forty musicians all at once, controlling this one with a nod, another by a stamp of the foot, a third with a warning finger, keeping time and tune, giving a high note to one, a low one to another, and notes in between to some. This one man, standing alone in the midst of loud sounds, having the hardest task of all can yet discern at every moment if anyone goes astray and can keep all the musicians in order, restore any waverer to certainty and prevent him from going wrong. Rhythm is in his every limb, he takes in all the harmonies by his subtle ear and utters all the different parts through the medium of his own voice. Great admirer as I am of antiquity in other respects, I yet deem this Bach to comprise in himself many Orpheuses and twenty Arions.'

8 Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F major, BWV 1046 (Mvt 1)

The first movement of the first so-called Brandenburg Concerto.

9 As well as their regular concerts at Zimmermann's Coffee House, the Collegium provided the music for a number of ceremonial occasions, both academic and royal. One particularly memorable event was the first anniversary of the Elector of Saxony's accession to the throne of Poland.

'On the 5th of October, the Coronation Day of His Royal Majesty was celebrated in the greatest gala style. While Their Majesties were at their noon dinner, and when their healths had been drunk, a signal was given from the Apel house to the tower of the Castle, from there to the tower of St. Thomas's, and finally from there to the Castle, that the pieces of artillery should make a brave sound, although the Constables were not able to load them. At seven in the evening a cannon was fired as a signal, and then the whole town was illuminated. The Rathhaus tower and the balcony were very splendidly decked out with many variegated lamps; the towers of St. Thomas's and St. Nicholas's were beautifully and properly illuminated from the balcony to the belfries and this could be seen for some miles out into the country. And the illumination lasted until twelve o'clock. Many people came in from the country to see it, and at seven o'clock in the morning one could still see some lamps burning. About nine o'clock in the evening the students at the University here presented Their Majesties with a most submissive evening serenade with trumpets and drums, which the Hon. Capellmeister, Johann Sebastian Bach, Cantor at St. Thomas's, had composed. For this, six hundred students carried wax tapers, and four Counts acted as marshals in presenting the music. The procession made its way up to the King's residence. When the musicians had reached the Weigh House, the trumpets and drums went up on it, while others took their places in another choir at the Rathhaus. When the text was presented, the four Counts were permitted to kiss the Royal hands, and afterward his Royal Majesty together with his Royal Consort and the Royal Princes did not leave the windows until the music was over, and listened most graciously and liked it well.'

10 Orchestral Suite No.3 in D, BWV 1068 (Ouverture)

Music from the Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D.

11 Bach's hopes of escaping from Leipzig were set back, of course, by Erdmann's failure to turn up anything on his behalf, but they were in no way dashed. He now concentrated his attention on Dresden, where his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, had recently been appointed organist at the Church of St. Sophia. He made a number of visits to the city, gave organ recitals himself and practically bombarded the royal court with new

works, mostly cantatas. In July 1733, he made his first direct move, dedicating to the new King the 'Kyrie' and 'Gloria' which later became part of the great B minor Mass. But this was a dedication with a difference. It had a double motive which Bach did nothing to hide.

'To His Most Serene Highness, the Prince and Lord, Frederick Augustus, Royal Prince in Poland and Lithuania, Duke in Saxony,...My Most Gracious Lord, Most Serene Elector, Most Gracious Lord!

To Your Royal Highness I submit in deepest devotion the present small work of that science which I have achieved in musique, with the most wholly submissive prayer that Your Highness will look upon it with Most Gracious Eyes, according to Your Highness's World-Famous Clemency and not according to the poor composition; and thus deign to take me under Your Most Mighty Protection. For some years and up to the present moment, I have had the Directorium of the Music in the two principal churches in Leipzig, but have innocently had to suffer one injury or another, and on occasion also a diminution of the fees accruing to me in this office; but these injuries would disappear altogether if Your Royal Highness would grant me the favour of conferring upon me a title of Your Highness's Court Capelle, and would let Your High Command for the issuing of such a document go forth to the proper place. Such a most gracious fulfilment of my most humble prayer will bind me to unending devotion, and I offer myself in most indebted obedience to show at all times, upon Your Royal Highness's Most Gracious Desire, my untiring zeal in the composition of music for the church as well as for the orchestra, and to devote my entire forces to the service of Your Highness, remaining in unceasing fidelity Your Royal Highness's most humble and most obedient servant...'

Et cetera, et cetera. But mysteriously, the ploy failed. The King didn't respond and there's no evidence that the 'Kyrie' and 'Gloria' were ever performed.

Meanwhile, back in Leipzig, a storm was brewing. Bach's friend Johann Gesner, the Rector of the St. Thomas School, resigned his post to go off and become a university professor and he was succeeded by a young man (twenty-seven years old, and twenty-two years Bach's junior) who was the proverbial 'new broom'. Johann August Ernesti, a great admirer of the philosophers Locke, Descartes, Voltaire and Leibniz, was determined to re-fashion the entire school according to the principles, as he understood them, of the so-called 'Enlightenment'. The idea of music as a 'handmaid to theology', to use Martin Luther's phrase, had no appeal for him, in fact he seems to have been opposed to the very idea of school music. A head-on collision between Cantor and Rector was therefore inevitable, and it wasn't long in coming.

Bach was never very keen on the disciplinarian aspects of his job and was only too happy to delegate these things to someone else, normally his head prefect. On one occasion, the young man in question – name of Krause – exceeded his brief, and badly over-punished one of the choristers. Ernesti was delighted. Here was a perfect opportunity to undermine Bach's authority, which he did by sentencing the prefect to a public caning. The prefect promptly disappeared and a replacement was immediately appointed – not by Bach, whose

decision it should have been, but by Ernesti. His choice, presumably by design, fell on the one boy in the senior class who was least qualified for the job – a musical incompetent whose bad character was known throughout the school, and whose name, by extraordinary coincidence, was also Krause. Bach was predictably enraged, and after an unholy row with Ernesti, he sat down and added to his catalogue of indignant letters to the City Council.

‘Your Magnificences, Most Noble, Most Reverend, Most Distinguished, Respected and Most Learned, Most Highly Esteemed Masters and High Patrons,

According to the Regulations of a Noble and Most Wise Council concerning the School of St. Thomas, it is for the Cantor to choose as Prefects those whom he considers capable (and in choosing them he must keep in mind not only that they must have a good clear voice but must also be able to take over the direction of the chorus when the Cantor is ill or absent). Although such action has hitherto been taken by the Cantor alone, without the concurrence of the Rector, the present incumbent, Magister Johann August Ernesti, has sought to effect the replacement without my previous knowledge and consent. He has further refused to withdraw the appointment despite all the protests I have made to him. But since my acceptance of this situation, which, as I have said, is in violation of School Regulations, would prejudice the rights of my successors and work to the detriment of the choir, I humbly request that Your Magnificences and Most Distinguished Sirs graciously resolve this dispute by instructing Magister Ernesti that he is to leave the replacement of the Prefects to me alone, and thus to uphold me most graciously in my office.’

On two successive Sundays, a shouting Bach physically, and very publicly, ejected Ernesti’s choice from the choir-loft and put in his place a former member of the school who was now at the university and thus beyond Ernesti’s reach. But Bach’s complaints were not restricted to the musical.

‘The Rector Ernesti has not only very greatly transgressed, he has done me deep injury in the discharge of my office, and has sought to weaken, nay destroy, all the authority that I must have over the students in connection with the church and other music.’

But still the matter rumbled on. Two months after the incident which sparked this crisis, Bach still had not had satisfaction, either from the Council or from Ernesti. So, as once before, he appealed to the highest authority in the land by writing to the King himself, who had recently decided to give Bach, after all, the title he craved.

‘That Your Royal Majesty has most graciously deigned to confer upon me the title of Court Composer, I shall gratefully appreciate with the most humble thanks all my life long. Just as I confide, therefore, with humblest assurance, in Your Royal Majesty’s most gracious protection, so also do I venture to ask for it in my present afflictions.

And he goes on to state the case again, which by this time he could probably have done in his sleep. But he wouldn’t have to. With the King’s reply, the whole sorry matter was

finally put to rest, almost a year and a half after it first blew up. If nothing else, this whole protracted affair demonstrates beyond any question the sheer stubbornness and tenacity which were a central part of Bach's psychological make-up.

Looking back on the year 1737, Bach could be forgiven for feeling that he was somehow fated at that time to be embroiled in controversy. Some months before the King put an official end to the 'Battle of the Prefects', the prominent theorist and minor composer Johann Adolf Scheibe caused a great rumpus by publishing an anonymous attack on Bach's music in a German musical journal. But the rumpus was caused more by the cowardice of anonymity than by the substance of what he had to say. In fact, he was voicing feelings which were held by increasing numbers of people. Nobody disputed Bach's pre-eminence as a performer and conductor, least of all Scheibe himself.

'He is an extraordinary artist on the clavier and on the organ. One is simply amazed at his ability, and one can hardly conceive how it is possible for him to achieve such agility, with his fingers and with his feet, in the crossings, extensions, and extreme jumps that he manages, without mixing in a single wrong note, or displacing his body by any violent movement.

12 Prelude in D major, BWV 532

The Prelude in D major, BWV 532.

13 Well if Scheibe's assessment of Bach the performer was suitably generous, his view of Bach the composer was anything but.

'great man would be the admiration of entire nations if he had more... amenity – if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art. Since he judges according to his own fingers, his pieces are extremely difficult to play; for he demands that singers and instrumentalists should be able to do with their throats and instruments whatever he can play on the keyboard. But this is impossible. Every ornament, every little grace-note, and everything that one thinks of as belonging to the method of playing, he expresses completely in notes: and this not only takes away from his pieces the beauty of harmony but completely covers the melody throughout. All the voices must work with each other and be of equal difficulty, and none of them can be recognized as the principal voice. In short, he is in music what Mr. von Lohenstein was in poetry. Turgidity has led them both from the natural to the artificial, and from the lofty to the sombre; and in both one admires the onerous labour and uncommon effort – which, however, are vainly employed, since they conflict with Nature.'

Well so does civilization. That, in many ways, is its defining characteristic. But in the middle of the 18th century it was becoming unfashionable to say such things. And not all

that long after Bach's death, Scheibe's view was shared in many ways by Bach's most famous sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel, the second-oldest, and Johann Christian Bach, the youngest. And as composers, they were both far more famous in their lifetimes than their father ever was in his.

What with the quite unprecedented rise in the power, size and affectation of the middle classes, what we call the bourgeoisie, the taste for polyphony, for counterpoint, that artful and highly disciplined weaving together of simultaneous melodic strands, was effectively dying on the vine. Not because it was associated with the aristocracy and the intellect, but because it was too demanding. Too difficult. It required concentration. Application. It took too much time and effort. The taste, increasingly, throughout western Europe, was for the simpler textures of melody on the one hand, and accompaniment on the other. Not that Bach couldn't do that too. He had done, many times, for many years. But it was a lesser art. Certainly as he saw it. Without the same scope for aspiration. Aspiration to the highest ideals of the human mind and spirit. But to characterize Bach's music, which Scheibe did, as 'turgid' and 'sombre' is more than unjust. It's simply ridiculous.

14 Concerto for Three Harpsichords in C major, BWV 1064 (Mvt 3: Allegro)

CD 4

1 Of all the main types of musical composition, only one is outstandingly missing from Bach's prodigious output, and that's opera. Which was unusual. His exact contemporary Domenico Scarlatti wrote ten operas, his other exact contemporary Handel wrote dozens, most of them smash hits, and his friend Telemann wrote more than Handel and Scarlatti put together – a staggering forty operas. So why did Bach leave the field untouched? There are a number of possible reasons. 1) He scarcely had the time to write even what he did write. Operas were a luxury he couldn't afford. 2) Outside of Hamburg, opera didn't, in Germany, enjoy anything like the high profile it had in Italy, France and even England. But there were other opera houses, most notably in Dresden; in Weimar; there actually was one in Leipzig – and in each of them Bach enjoyed opera as a member of the audience, and seems to have been very well-informed about it. Not only that, he enjoyed the friendship of a number of opera composers. Come to that, his youngest son, Johann Christian was to become a very prolific opera composer himself – but that, of course, came later. He was only fifteen when his father died.

But even though he never composed operas as such, Bach wrote a good deal of music which uses operatic conventions, often operatic styles – and in fact he was very widely criticized, in his lifetime and afterwards, for writing church music which was little more, to many people, than what you might call 'undercover' opera. And a number of his secular cantatas were almost straight operas by another name, though as operas go, they're a little on the short side. One of the most famous is the so-called 'Coffee' Cantata, which concerns the trials, tribulations and ultimate triumph of a young lady whose addiction to this barbarous brew has reduced her father to a state of deep parental concern, heavily spiced

with righteous indignation. In his determination to cure her, as he sees it, he threatens to prevent her forthcoming marriage unless she can kick the habit. She expresses her dismay, but she has a secret plan which will ensure that she gets her man and her coffee. She also gets one of those very many arias by Bach which are as irresistibly dance-like as they are irresistibly joyful.

2 ‘Coffee’ Cantata, BWV 211

An aria from Bach’s ‘Coffee’ Cantata.

And now the final chorus, in which the three characters (father, daughter and fiancé) join together to concede that coffee-drinking is a habit that’s here to stay.

‘Coffee’ Cantata, BWV 211

3 Another of Bach’s ‘undercover’ operas is the so-called ‘Peasant’ Cantata, where he does what a couple of decades later would have been unthinkable for any truly ‘moral’ and ‘upright’ artist (political correctness was not born yesterday). He dares to make fun of the peasantry. In the later 18th century, spurred on by the philosopher-composer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, peasants became almost objects of worship. Titled young ladies delighted in dressing up as cheerful milkmaids, and many beautiful old violins, violas and so on were broken up and reborn as hurdy-gurdies. This was peasant-fancying run riot. But Bach was neither the first nor the last great composer to make fun of rural society. Vivaldi, Mozart and Beethoven all mocked the peasantry at one time or another. In the ‘Peasant’ Cantata, the mockery begins before a note is sung. The disconnected, unrelated and largely incompatible phrases which open the orchestral introduction (and are then relentlessly repeated, echo-fashion) seem to have one clear implication: that those bumbling yokels who people the countryside are musically illiterate.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212 (Opening)

Enter two villagers – a husband and wife – who, in broad Saxon dialect, sing a duet to their new master, who gives them beer.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212

And we now hear the two of them in dialogue, using the very operatic device of so-called ‘recitative’. It hardly matters what they’re saying. And how many people can understand Saxon dialect anyway? The point here is how it sounds. It’s a technique which, in opera anyway, has everything to do with characterisation.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212

As in many a delightful opera, the plot is so flimsy it hardly counts. The fact that the husband here, in his first aria, is pleading with the local tax-inspector, is almost incidental to the music, which is a very long way from the churches of Leipzig or anywhere else.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212

Bach was a great lover of popular songs, as we’d call them today – not quite ‘pop’ – and in the ‘Peasant’ Cantata he throws in quite a number, such as the much-used Spanish dance ‘La Follia’, which turns up for no very obvious reason in an aria where the wife butters up the lord of the manor, for whom she and her husband both work.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212

All the arias in the ‘Peasant’ Cantata are delightful, but it’s the husband who gets the best, and the biggest. In the last of them, he adopts what he thinks is a sophisticated, urban style.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212

And the work ends with a jolly chorus in which the peasants wish their overlord the best of health and prosperity.

‘Peasant’ Cantata, BWV 212

Take that, Mr. Scheibe! The delightful (and decidedly unturgid) conclusion of the ‘Peasant’ Cantata.

4 Bach’s energy continued to be prodigious by any normal standard, but the strain of the Ernesti affair, the much-publicized controversy over Scheibe’s attack, the disgrace and early death of an errant son, the near-loss of his second beloved wife, and the almost perpetual strain of his relations with the civic authorities of Leipzig, all these were beginning to take their toll, if not of his energies, at least of his outlook. At fifty-four, he was beginning to grow perceptibly tired of the world around him. If there was one particular moment which changed his attitudes to composition, and to the role of music in his own life, it was yet another encounter – not even a very serious one – with yet another pettifogging bureaucrat. This one was called Bienengräber, and on the 17th of March, 1739, he reported to his employers on the city council.

‘Upon a Noble and Most Wise Council’s order I have gone to Mr. Bach here and have pointed out to the same that the music he intends to perform on the coming Good Friday is to be omitted until regular permission for the same is received. Whereupon he answered: it had always been done so; he did not care, for he got nothing out of it anyway, and it was only a burden; he would notify the Superintendent that it had been forbidden him; if an objection were made on account of the text, he remarked that it had already been performed several times.’

This was a new side of Bach emerging. In one sense, perhaps, the fight was going out of him. In another, he was drawing ever closer to what he felt to be the very essence of music. As far as composition was concerned, he would now do the minimum he could get away with and still keep his job as Leipzig's director of music. He would recycle as much as possible – like Handel, he was good at that – and concentrate more and more on what you might call 'music for music's sake'. He would grow less and less concerned with writing for an audience or for particular occasions. Ironically, he seemed in much of the music of his last ten years, to be almost determined to prove Scheibe right, to justify his claims, in retrospect. Many great creative artists have parted company with fashion at the end of their careers, often, of course, to their own cost – and in most cases without any consciousness that they were at, or even approaching, the end of their careers. It happened with Mozart, with Beethoven, with Chopin – it happened spectacularly with Liszt. And it happened with Bach – never more uncompromisingly than in his monumental compendium *The Art of Fugue*, in which he set out to explore and demonstrate every conceivable possibility of fugal technique. The use of fugue – a very highly disciplined contrapuntal technique rather than a particular form – had been a central feature of the entire Baroque period but by the end of Bach's life it was fast falling into widespread disuse. In effect what Bach was doing in this quite unprecedented work was to rescue what he regarded as the highest musical achievement of the past from the danger of oblivion in the future. And it's worth noting here that in Bach's day musicological scholarship such as we know it today simply didn't exist. The past, other than the very recent past, not much more than a hundred years, was an almost completely unknown quantity. Most of the music of the Renaissance Bach wouldn't have known at all. And Mozart didn't know any of Bach's music until he was at the highpoint of his career. Even in the first third or so of the 19th century much the same thing still applied. Bach's own music was about as far back as Schubert or Beethoven went, in terms of their own first-hand experience. Increasingly unfashionable though he may have been, Bach was widely known in his lifetime, even by his detractors, as the greatest master of fugal technique who ever lived. He was aware of this, and it's hard to believe that he wasn't at least conscious of posterity when writing *The Art of Fugue*. He has to have known that, barring some global cataclysm, his work, whatever might happen to it in the near future, would someday be rediscovered. As it happens, despite a popular myth to the contrary, his music never was forgotten. Not by musicians. Schubert and Beethoven probably didn't know of the existence of *The Art of Fugue*, but they both carried much of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in their heads. One thing seems absolutely certain, though, and that's that Bach was not setting out to please when he wrote this imposing masterpiece. He was setting out to discover and to record the essence of what he saw as musical truth.

5 The Art of Fugue, BWV 1080

Part of Bach's late and sometimes rather forbidding masterpiece, *The Art of Fugue*.

6 The turning inwards of Bach's music in the last decade of his life was not accompanied by a general withdrawal. It was largely confined to his composition. He continued to perform, to conduct (both in church and with the Collegium Musicum), his expertise with organs was as much in demand as ever, and he continued to take private pupils to the end of his life. He certainly retained his appetite, his love of wine, beer, tobacco and sex, not probably in that order, and in 1742, now in his fifty-eighth year, he fathered his twentieth child – a daughter, like his first, and the only one of his children to live into the 19th century. As in much of his music, so in his life, Bach combined a jubilant love of pleasure and spontaneity with a near-addiction to calm calculation and a realistic sense of proportion in all things. His response to a cousin who sent him a present of wine is a fascinating case in point.

'That you and your dear wife are still well I am assured by the agreeable note I received from you yesterday, accompanying the excellent little cask of wine you sent me, for which I send you herewith the thanks I owe you. It is, however, regrettable the little cask was damaged, either by being shaken up in the wagon or in some other way, for when it was opened for the usual customs inspection here, it was almost two-thirds empty, and according to the inspector's report contained no more than six quarts. It is a pity that even the least drop of this noble gift of God should have been spilled... Although you generously propose to oblige me with more of the liquor, I must sorrowfully decline your offer due to the excessive expenses incurred at this end. For since the carriage charges cost sixteen groschen, the delivery man two groschen, the customs inspector two groschen, the inland duty five groschen three pfennigs, and the general duty three groschen, my honoured Cousin can judge for himself that each quart cost me almost five groschen, which for a present is really too expensive.'

It should come as no surprise by now that Bach's gifts for music were not matched by his gifts of diplomacy. His attempts at the more refined social graces were at best indelicate and at worst inept. A man who writes thank you letters like that has not been to charm school. Yet it was precisely as an act of diplomacy that Bach paid a visit in 1747 to the still young King of Prussia, better known as Frederick the Great. Frederick was not only a military genius and a wily politician but a highly cultured man and a very accomplished musician whose compositions have stood the test of time and still give pleasure today. He was also a skilful flautist and his musical 'household', as they say, included some of the best musicians in Europe – prominent amongst them Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel. The diplomacy connected with Bach's visit was a child of recent history. Only six months earlier, Frederick's troops had withdrawn from Leipzig after a year's occupation in the course of the Second Silesian War, in which Frederick had successfully extended his domains, at the expense of Saxony, Austria and Poland. It seems clear that Bach's visit had been arranged with great care by the Prussian court, as a kind of gesture of peace, and that it originated with the King himself. In the words of Bach's first biographer, Johann Forkel,

'The reputation of the all-surpassing skill of Johann Sebastian was at this time so extended that the King often heard it mentioned and praised. He became ever more curious to hear and meet so great an artist. At first he distantly hinted to the son his wish that his father would one day come to Potsdam. But by degrees he

began asking him directly why his father did not come. The son could not avoid acquainting his father with these expressions of the King's; at first, however, he could not attend to them because he was generally too overwhelmed with business. But the King's expressions being repeated in several of his son's letters, he at length, in 1747, prepared to take this journey.'

Bach's visit marked the highpoint of his celebrity. The official press release after the event was picked up and reprinted by newspapers throughout the German-speaking lands, and the visit resulted, unexpectedly, in one of Bach's most famous works.

'The king used to have every evening a private concert, in which he himself generally performed some concertos on the flute. One evening, just as he was getting his flute ready and his musicians were assembled, an officer brought him the written list of the strangers who had arrived. With his flute in his hand, he ran over the list, but immediately turned to the assembled musicians and said, with a kind of agitation: "Gentlemen, old Bach is come." The flute was now laid aside; and old Bach, who had alighted at his son's lodgings, was immediately summoned to the Palace.

...the King gave up his concert for this evening and invited Bach to try his fortepianos, made by Silbermann, which stood in several rooms of the Palace. The musicians went with him from room to room, and Bach was invited to try them and to play unpremeditated compositions.

This in itself was an event of major interest to Bach, who had played a key role, almost literally, in the development of these instruments but hadn't yet sampled the results of his influence. He'd known Silbermann for a long time – Silbermann was one of the greatest of all makers of organs and clavichords – and had first tried out his new-fangled fortepianos sometime in the early 1730s. As Johann Friedrich Agricola later related,

'Mr. Silbermann had at first built two of these instruments. One of them was seen and played by Capellmeister, Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach. He praised, indeed admired, its tone; but he complained that it was too weak in the high register and too hard to play [that is that the action was too heavy]. This was taken greatly amiss by Mr. Silbermann, who could not bear to have any fault found in his handiworks. He was thus angry at Mr. Bach for a long time. And yet his conscience told him that Bach had been right. He therefore decided – greatly to his credit, be it said – not to deliver any more of these instruments, but instead to think all the harder about how to eliminate the faults Mr. Bach had observed. He worked for many years on this. And that this was the real cause of this postponement I have the less doubt since I myself heard it frankly acknowledged by Mr. Silbermann. Finally, when Mr. Silbermann had really achieved many improvements, notably in respect to the action, he sold one again to the Court of the Prince of Rudolstadt. Shortly thereafter His Majesty the King of Prussia had one of these instruments ordered, and, when it met with His Majesty's Most Gracious approval, he had several more ordered from Mr. Silbermann.'

And it was these that Bach was now invited to play.

‘After he had gone on for some time, he asked the King to give him a subject for a fugue in order to execute it immediately without any preparation. The King admired the learned manner in which his subject was thus executed; and, probably to see how far such art could be carried, he expressed a wish to hear also a fugue with six obligato parts. But as not every subject is fit for such full harmony, Bach chose one himself and immediately executed it to the astonishment of all present in the same magnificent and learned manner as he had done that of the King.’

And incidentally, we have it on good authority that Bach now gave Silbermann’s improved fortepianos his complete approval. A little while later we even find him becoming a kind of sales representative for the new models. So Bach on the piano is justified not only artistically but historically.

When Bach left the King and returned home to Leipzig, he had the King’s fugue subject prominently in his mind, and set about using it as the basis for a remarkable chamber work which has come to be known as *The Musical Offering*. The explanation lies in Bach’s written dedication to the King, which makes the flowery grovelling of his earlier dedications look positively puny by comparison.

‘Most Gracious King!

In deepest humility I dedicate herewith to Your Majesty a musical offering, the noblest part of which derives from Your Majesty’s Own August Hand. With awesome pleasure I still remember the very special Royal Grace when, some time ago, during my visit in Potsdam, Your Majesty’s Self deigned to play to me a theme for a fugue upon the clavier, and at the same time charged me most graciously to carry it out in Your Majesty’s Most August Presence. To obey Your Majesty’s command was my most humble duty. I noticed very soon, however, that, for lack of necessary preparation, the execution of the task did not fare as well as so excellent a theme demanded. I resolved therefore and promptly pledged myself to work out this right Royal theme more fully and then to make it known to the world. This resolve has now been carried out as well as possible, and it has none other than this irreproachable intent, to glorify, if only in a small point, the fame of a Monarch whose greatness and power, as in all the sciences of war and peace, so especially in music, everyone must admire and revere. I make bold to add this most humble request: May Your Majesty deign to dignify the present modest labour with a gracious acceptance, and continue to grant Your Majesty’s Most August Royal Grace to

Your Majesty’s most humble and obedient servant...

7 The Musical Offering, BWV 1079

A movement from the ‘Trio Sonata’ in Bach’s *Musical Offering*.

8 The fulsome dedication of *The Musical Offering* marked Bach's swansong as far as formal dedications were concerned, certainly dedications of this type. From now on he would write music almost exclusively for himself, or rather for the sake of the art itself, which he would now at last explore unhampered by anyone's expectations of him. But even this isn't quite true. His overriding priority from now on was to write music solely for the glory of God, and in the unfettered pursuit of what he understood to be musical, hence spiritual truth. The dedications he did attach to his final works were to like-minded men who could be counted on to understand and appreciate the true nature of his innermost artistic quest.

As he approached his middle sixties, Bach began encountering physical problems – well, one physical problem in particular – which made the pursuit of that quest increasingly difficult. And as his son Carl Philipp Emanuel points out, its roots lay in the distant past.

'His naturally somewhat weak eye sight, further weakened by his unheard-of-zeal in studying, which made him, particularly in his youth, sit at work the whole night through, led, in his last years, to an eye disease. He wished to rid himself of this by an operation, partly out of a desire to be of further service to God and his neighbour with his other spiritual and bodily powers, which were still vigorous, and partly on the advice of some of his friends, who placed great confidence in an oculist who had recently arrived in Leipzig.'

The man in question was a Dr. John Taylor, an Englishman, who prided himself, among other things, on such unlikely qualifications as his work with such 'singular animals', to use his own phrase, 'as dromedaries and camels'. But he was no quack. He enjoyed widespread admiration both in England and abroad, and his presence in Leipzig aroused great interest. He did operate on Bach, and readers of a respected Berlin newspaper were pleased to find his success confirmed by an article datelined Leipzig, April 4th:

'This Saturday past, and again last night, the Chevalier Taylor gave public lectures at the concert hall in the presence of a considerable assembly of scholars and other important persons. The concourse of people who seek his aid is astonishing. Among others, he has operated upon Capellmeister Bach, who by a constant use of his eyes had almost entirely deprived himself of their sight, and that with every success that could have been desired, so that he has recovered the full sharpness of his sight, an unspeakable piece of good fortune that many thousands of people will be very far from begrudging this world-famous composer and for which they cannot sufficiently thank Dr. Taylor. Owing to the numerous engagements the latter is obliged to discharge here, he will not be able to proceed to Berlin before the end of this week.'

But he was trading in false hopes. Bach had not by any means 'recovered the full sharpness of his sight'. In fact, he'd lost it altogether and was now totally blind. And there was more. As C.P.E., pointed out,

‘Not only could he no longer use his eyes, but his whole system, which was otherwise thoroughly healthy, was completely overthrown by the operation and by the addition of harmful medicaments and other things, so that, thereafter, he was almost continuously ill for full half a year. Ten days before his death his eyes suddenly seemed better, so that one morning he could see quite well again and could also again endure the light. But a few hours later he suffered a stroke; and this was followed by a raging fever, as a victim of which, despite every possible care given him by two of the most skilful physicians of Leipzig, on July 28, 1750, a little after a quarter past eight in the evening, in the sixty-sixth year of his life, he quietly and peacefully, by the merit of his Redeemer, departed this life.’

The greatest composer who had ever lived was buried in the cemetery of St. John’s, Leipzig, without so much as a gravestone to identify the spot. By the early 19th century, when Bach’s immediate family had all died, no-one could remember just where he was buried. Not until 1894 was the grave located. Bach’s remains were then dug up and identified, but it wasn’t until more than half a century later that they were at last afforded their final resting place, in St. Thomas’s Church, Leipzig, fully 200 years after the original burial. By that time, not only *The Art of Fugue* but all of Bach’s major works were familiar to musicians all over the world, his entire surviving output, running to well over a thousand works, most of them masterpieces, had been published and closely studied, and there was no doubt in the minds of millions of music lovers the world over that he was the greatest composer who ever lived, and ever would live. His music embraces virtually every aspect of human experience, but what it communicates more than anything else is a degree of joy and spiritual exaltation, a sense of exhilaration, of play, of dance, from the most serious to the most ecstatic, which has never been matched. The spirit of dance is in practically everything he wrote. Bach’s spirituality is matched by his physicality. Again and again, he makes it very hard to sit still. “This is music to die for!” said a colleague of mine after a performance of one of the cantatas – way before that phrase became a cliché. More importantly, this is music to live for. It’s music of almost overpowering health. For many people, and I plead guilty to being one of them, Bach’s music celebrates everything that’s best about being alive. In the fullest sense of the word, it’s life-enhancing. All the more so because it comes from a life which, looked at from the outside, was almost spectacularly ordinary, give or take twenty children. The amount of tedium in Bach’s day to day life (particularly in his twenty-seven years in Leipzig), the petty vexations of officialdom and uncomprehending bureaucrats, the frustrations of having to work with external resources which were usually way below his minimum requirements, none of this suggests the greatest fount of joy in musical history. His married life was almost infuriatingly happy and stable, from a biographical point of view. There were no torrid love affairs, no unrequited passions, no tormenting inner strife. He was a businessman – whose business was to churn out masterpieces, even if only a few around him realised what masterpieces they were. Outside of music and theology, he wasn’t particularly well-read (when would he have had time to be?); he wasn’t an intimate of the rich and famous; he was an averagely overweight middle-class citizen who didn’t look or talk like a genius. What was very striking indeed about his appearance, if the few portraits are to be believed, was the self-evidently incorruptible strength of that face. Apart from his genius, one thing that certainly was unusual about him – and it seems clear that he acknowledged this – was his quite

phenomenal capacity for hard work, backed up by an energy that from this remove looks almost superhuman. And why not? Who but a superman could possibly have created this?

9 Mass in B minor, BWV 232