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JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, in Thuringia, in 1685 and died at Leipzig in 1750. He lived in Protestant north Germany in the days when music there made up an important part of the splendor of the courts, municipal dignity, religious observances, and the daily happiness of the people. He occupied successively the posts of choirboy, violinist in the orchestra of a prince, organist of town churches, chief musician in a court, and cantor of a municipal school in charge of the music in its associated churches.

His last position was at Leipzig, in the St. Thomas Church and School of which city his name is chiefly connected, since he remained there for almost the last thirty years of his life, at first composing much of the vast output of church music which, though apparently the product of a short period, gives him the distorted reputation of bring primarily a "religious composer;" then producing monuments of his art such as the *Goldberg Variations*, the *Musical Offering*, and the *Art of Fugue*, finally collecting his works for future preservation. He returned from court life to the life of a church musician with some reluctance and experience a good deal of that tribulations that often comes from contact between the clerical outlook and the artistic temperament. He played many instruments, and as clavichordist, harpsichordist, and organist was supreme in his day.

Twice married, and the father of twenty children, he suffered failing eyesight toward the end of his life and his last months were spent in total darkness.

An indefatigable student of his art, he eagerly learned from whatever he could procure of the production of other nations. His work closes a "school," that of the later contrapuntal style, of which the

(more)

fugue is the most definite expression, and (more narrowly considered) that of north German Protestantism, to which the chorale was an element of inspiration. He represents too, the period when the suite (as distinct from the sonata) reached its highest point.

After his death the trend of musical interest was in such a direction that temporarily left his work aside. Their revival is due to enthusiasts of eighty to a hundred years later, such as Mendelssohn in Germany and Wesley in England. After another eighty to a hundred years the whole musical world rallied to the movement these men inaugurated and the works of Bach have become as much a part of the world's accustomed musical enjoyment as they were to the citizens of Leipzig at the middle of the eighteenth century.

His production may be divided roughly into three chronological periods: (l) that of organ accompanist; (2) that of composition for other instruments, including the orchestra of his day; and (3) that of church composition.

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Source: *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Tenth Edition