

Tafelmusik

Bach: Keeping it in the Family

PROGRAM NOTES

By Charlotte Nediger

Johann Sebastian Bach, in 1735, set down detailed observations about his ancestors in his *Ursprung der musicalisch-Bachischen Familie* (Origins of the musical Bach family). This genealogy traces the family as far back as the mid-sixteenth century. By the turn of the seventeenth century, the musical family was so widespread in the Thuringian region that the name “Bach” had come to be regarded as synonymous with “musician.” From birth, it was assumed that virtually every male member of the family would become a musician, and the combination of inherited talent and training from the earliest age assured their success. Yet, as the increasingly popular bourgeois music culture of the late eighteenth century led to a sharp decline in the importance of leading musical institutions (court orchestras, Stadtpfeifer bands, and Cantoreien), traditional music dynasties such as the Bach family quickly disappeared. In 1843, at the ceremonial unveiling in front of the Thomaskirche of the Leipzig Bach monument donated by Mendelssohn, Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst (the then 84-year-old grandson of J.S. Bach) was the sole representative of a family with a musical tradition of over 250 years.

Bach’s relationship with his sons can best be understood in view of this family tradition. He was keenly aware of his responsibility to pass on his legacy to his children, and was proud to record in a letter to a friend written in 1730, that his children “are all born musicians, and I can assure you that I can already form an ensemble both *vocaliter* and *instrumentaliter* within my family, particularly since my present wife sings a good, clear soprano, and my eldest daughter, too, joins in not badly.” Of Bach’s twenty children (seven with his first wife, Maria Barbara, and thirteen with his second wife, Anna Magdalena), ten survived infancy. Of these, four were female and six male. Little is known of the four girls, though the quote above suggests that they were well trained in music. Both of Bach’s wives came from musical families. There is no evidence that Maria Barbara was a practising musician herself, but Anna Magdalena was a very gifted soprano. Already at age twenty she was among the most highly paid musicians employed at the court in Cöthen, and continued singing there after her marriage to Bach. She seems to have left her performing career aside upon the family’s move to Leipzig (thirteen pregnancies in nineteen years may have been a significant factor!), but was one of Bach’s principal copyists, and was clearly actively involved in the children’s musical education. One daughter, Elisabetha Juliana (1728–81), married Johann Christoph Altnikol, a pupil of her father; the other three daughters remained single, living with their mother until her death in 1760. Their brother Carl Philipp Emanuel supported them financially from that point. The youngest daughter, Regina Susanna, outlived all of her siblings, and was supported in her final years through a fund raised by the editor of the Leipzig *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, in honour of her father.

Of the six sons, four became successful musicians: Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–84), Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–88), Johann Christoph Friedrich (1732–95), and Johann Christian (1735–82). The two middle sons apparently also possessed considerable musical talent, but one suffered from a mental disorder, and the other, as stated by his father, “unfortunately turned out badly,” leaving an excellent post of organist to wander about the country, dying at age 24.

J.S. Bach spent a great deal of time and energy in the education of his sons, particularly in that of his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann. In 1720, he wrote the *Clavierbüchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (Little keyboard book for W.F. Bach), a basic course in keyboard playing and composition. Indeed, all of his “pedagogical” works, such as *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Inventions and Sinfonias, the *Orgelbüchlein*, and the *Clavier-Übung*, must have been written initially with his sons and other pupils in mind. Their course of study would also have included the analysis and performance of the countless works of other German, French, and Italian composers collected by J.S. through his life. He also took care not to neglect their general, non-musical education. He stated that one of the principal reasons for accepting the post of Cantor in Leipzig was to enable his sons to enroll at the Thomasschule, and more importantly, the University of Leipzig.

Johann Sebastian continued to support his sons professionally until his death, finding positions for them, writing letters of reference, and visiting them whenever possible. C.P.E. and J.C. were to eventually exceed their father in contemporary fame: by 1780, when anyone spoke of “Bach,” it was more often one of these who was intended and not the father. Given his great respect for his family’s tradition, this in itself may have been considered by Johann Sebastian to be amongst his greatest accomplishments.

J.S. BACH OVERTURE, AFTER BWV 194

In 1723, J.S. Bach directed the performance of his Cantata 194, “*Höchsterwünschtes Freudenfest*” (Most desired festival of joy) at the church in Störmthal, a village near Leipzig. The church had recently been rebuilt, with a new organ by Zacharias Hildebrandt, a young graduate of the workshop of the famed German organ builder Gottfried Silbermann. Bach had been asked to approve the instrument, and the cantata was performed at the dedication service. The organ is one of only a few instruments known to have been played by Bach that remains in its original condition.

Cantata 194 opens with a chorus in the style of a French orchestral overture, with a grand opening followed by a faster fugal section. As the chorus sings only in the fast section, and even then is doubled by instrumental parts, Alfredo Bernardini has taken the liberty of transcribing the movement for orchestra alone. He retains Bach’s original scoring, for three oboes, bassoon, and strings. In the opening section, Bach gives the main material to the winds and continuo, with the upper strings interjecting with unison scales as a sort of commentary. When the material returns at the end, he reverses the instrumentation: this time the strings and continuo prevail, and the oboes offer the commentary.

J.S. BACH CONCERTO FOR VIOLIN IN E MAJOR

Although only two concertos for solo violin by Johann Sebastian Bach have survived, it is possible that he composed others. Both of the extant concertos exist in alternate versions for solo harpsichord, and some of the other harpsichord concertos are thought to have had their origin in lost violin concertos. The violin was certainly one of Bach's favoured solo instruments: he turned to the violin as a counterpart to the solo voice in countless arias in cantatas and passions. Although primarily a keyboard player, Bach was also a capable violinist and violist, and he understood fully that the violin could be played on the one hand with great energy and virtuosity, and on the other with the most sublime and tender expression. This is witnessed in the contrasting movements of the violin concertos, which have long been a favourite of violinists and audiences alike.

C.P.E. BACH CONCERTO FOR OBOE IN E-FLAT MAJOR



J.S. Bach's concertos — both for violin and harpsichord — would have been featured regularly at performances of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum, and the soloists in the harpsichord concertos would invariably have been his sons. It is no coincidence, then, that both Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel wrote numerous harpsichord concertos. C.P.E. wrote no fewer than 52 keyboard concertos, spanning his entire career. A few of these exist in alternate versions: at least three each for flute and violoncello, and two for oboe. The two oboe concertos were written in 1765, during his employ at the Prussian court of Frederick the Great in Berlin. It is likely that they were written for a specific player, either

one of the court players, or perhaps more likely, a visitor to the court. It seems from the manuscripts that the oboe concertos were composed prior to the keyboard versions.

C.P.E. was in Frederick's employment for nearly 30 years, and it was not always the most stimulating environment, as the king had rather staid musical tastes and favoured the "galant" style. In retrospect clearly the most gifted of the many musicians at the Prussian court, C.P.E. was nonetheless underpaid and underappreciated. Fortunately, his creativity, strength of character, and determination enabled him to create an impressive body of work despite the limiting environment, and he offers in his music a truly unique voice. He carried this voice to Hamburg, where he replaced Telemann as Cantor and Music Director for the city from 1768 until his death 20 years later. He had three children: one son became a lawyer; the other (named Johann Sebastian, after his grandfather) was an accomplished painter, but his career was cut short by his early death. His daughter did not marry, and C.P.E. had no grandchildren.

W.F. BACH SINFONIA IN F MAJOR



Wilhelm Friedemann held prominent postings in Dresden and Halle, his organ playing renowned throughout Europe. After his father's death in 1750 he had repeated difficulties with his employers, and spent the end of his life in poverty in Berlin, his aloofness, intemperance, and desultory behaviour earning him few friends. His music is an intriguing reflection of both the strength of his talent and education, and the eccentricities of his character. Whereas C.P.E. blended the baroque style of his youth with the new to forge a unique blend, W.F. tends to shift from old to new, not only between pieces, but often within a piece. This can be heard in the capricious Sinfonia in F Major, composed in Dresden. In writing notes for Tafelmusik's recording of the work, the musicologist

Peter Wollny suggests the influence of Zelenka, and in the "tender" Andante, of Hasse. The trio of the Menuet is a clever canon, with the bass echoing the violins. The unexpected turns in the first movement earned the Sinfonia the nickname of "Dissonance": the dissonances here are not meant to stir the passions, but rather are full of wit.

TELEMANN SUITE IN D MINOR



Telemann was godfather to Carl Philipp Emanuel, and a great support to him both personally and in terms of his career, so we have included him as an honorary member of the Bach family in this week's concerts. With Alfredo Bernardini joining us, it gives us the opportunity to perform Telemann's Suite in D Minor, scored for three oboes, bassoon, and strings. The use of three oboes, rather than the more usual two, offers a wonderfully rich *tutti* sound, and gives Telemann the chance to explore the contrasting colours of two four-part ensembles: the three oboes and bassoon versus the string ensemble. It was a texture also favoured by J.S. Bach, used in several cantatas (such as Cantata 194, the opening of which begins

our concert), and the Fourth Orchestral Suite. In his orchestral suites, Telemann often leaves aside the traditional arrangement of dance movements for a selection of pieces with fanciful titles. In this suite, he retains the dances throughout, but imbues them with a great deal of character, leaving the musicians and listeners to invent the images they depict or the stories they recount.

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