

J. S. Bach:

An Irreverent Look at the Man Behind the Mass

We all know J. S. Bach as a sober-minded, religious fellow who spent his days rapturously composing magnificent church music to the glory of his decidedly Lutheran God. And for some of us, that's all we know. Actually, the guy had a pretty colourful life, if you believe what's on the internet these days. Here's a little safari into the behind-the-scenes life of the Bach you thought you knew (or didn't). It all started in 1685...



1. Bach the Babe

Have you ever felt obligated to follow in your family's footsteps? Poor Johann Sebastian was born into a family of super-musical Bachs. His brothers, father, uncles, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and great-great-grandfathers had been in the music business since Martin Luther started causing trouble two hundred years earlier. No pressure...

To make matters worse, the poor little guy was orphaned at age nine, and sent to live with his big bro, Johann Christoph (Johann being a severely overused name in the Bach family, for undetermined reasons). Naturally, J. C. took over J. S.'s musical training. But unlike you and me, little Sebastian never needed to be reminded to go and practice his scales. In fact, he was bored with the kids' stuff that his brother made him play, and spent six months secretly copying a forbidden adult organ manuscript by moonlight, only to have both copies quickly confiscated when Big Brother found out. Shucks.

2. Bach Hits Puberty

Yes, it happens to the best of us. Bach became a teenager. At 15, he and his buddy traveled 180 miles on foot to join a choir, only to find his "uncommonly fine treble voice" morph into something truly uncommon: a double voice. That's right: his high voice and his low voice sounded in octaves whenever he tried to speak. It took eight days for his kid-voice and his man-voice to fight it out, but finally the low voice won, and he lost his choir gig. Fortunately, he had a bit of a flair for the harpsichord and violin, so they kept him around anyway.

3. Bach the Bachelor

Now, how old were you when you finally finished your formal education and were ready to enter your profession? Well, young J. S. did some fast-tracking. By the time he was 18, he had traveled throughout Germany studying everything from Latin to organ-building, and was ready for his first job. He worked as a violinist for a duke (sounds posh, doesn't it?) and then ditched the duke at 20 to become a church organist. Who knew he would become such a rebel? He refused to work with the rowdy boys' choir, made scandalous music with an unnamed damsel in the choir loft, and returned three months late from a visit to yet another famous organist, only to subject his bewildered parishioners to all sorts of new-fangled ideas with "surprising variations and irrelevant ornaments which obliterate the melody and confuse the congregation." Oh, Bach. You rogue.

4. Bach Ties the Knot...

...with his cousin, Maria Barbara. Time to settle down, stud. You're 22. Get a real job, and start paying the bills. Become an organ guru. Start siring children. Seven will do, to start. Find a new duke to work for, and astound audiences everywhere with your crazy organ fingers flying all over the keyboard. Who's intimidated now? Louis Marchand, that's who: the leading French organist, who entered an organ competition and then hoofed it back to France as soon as he found out that J. S. Bach was his contender. Wuss.

5. Bach the Jailbird

Well, things went sour with the old duke, who was in a tiff with the local prince. "My musicians won't talk to your musicians any more," the nobles pouted. Then Bach was passed over for a promotion in favour of the boss's kid, and what did feisty J. S. do? He defected to the enemy prince, of course, and was promptly thrown in jail. Fortunately, he was quite capable of writing organ music in his head, so at least he got something done while he was there.

After a month they let him go, and at 32 he began a happy six-year stint working for a Calvinist prince who didn't like church music. "No matter," thought Bach. "I'll write instrumental music instead. Lots of it. And the prince will jam with me, and we'll travel all over the place for months at a time with our funky folding harpsichord."

Oh, yes, it sounds glamorous. But disaster loomed. When he was 35, Bach returned from a tour with his rock-star prince only to find his beloved cousin-bride dead and buried. It seems no one thought to text him that she was ill.

6. Bach Robs the Cradle

Being a resilient fellow on the rebound, Bach was not in mourning long. By age 36 he'd scored a new wife, a 20-year-old soprano named Anna Magdalena. She gladly bore him another 13 children, in between mothering her new step-children, keeping house, and copying out her hubby's reams of sheet music. Handy to have a live-in nanny-slash-secretary, isn't it, Johann? Well, they were reportedly very happy together for 28 years, and you needn't worry *too* much about poor Anna having to look after 20 little ones. Sadly, only ten survived infancy, so Anna likely spent as much time grieving as she did nursing.

7. Blue-collar Bach

Meanwhile, the rock-star Prince Charming was celebrating his own nuptials, and his dour new princess disapproved of her man's musical frivolities. So off Bach went to seek his fortunes once again, toting his tribe of little Bachs with him. They moved to the big, cosmopolitan city of Leipzig, where the boys could go to college and their dad could spend the rest of his life laboring under unappreciative superiors in appalling working conditions for inadequate pay.

Yes, gone were the days of traipsing around the country with the royal caravan. Poor Bach was now a lowly schoolteacher responsible for 54 unruly choir boys, of which he said that "17 are competent, 20 not yet fully, and 17 incapable." He parceled the worst of them off to the least important churches and kept the best to sing the 300-odd cantatas he wrote for the snazzier churches. Eventually a "progressive" new schoolmaster came in with the crazy idea that students should be learning more practical subjects than music, theology and Latin, and drastic cuts were made to the music program. Sound familiar? Mr. Holland would have to write his opus elsewhere.

8. Bach Goes Clubbing

Well, Mr. Bach kept his annoying day job, but his heart had gone downtown. At 44 he had his own little mid-life crisis, Baroque-style, and started doing weekly gigs at Zimmerman's Coffee House and other trendy hotspots. He began writing music for town and college bands, where he was appreciated at last. As he aged, he cavorted with the likes of Frederick the Great, had many visitors to his six-clavier household, and composed the incomparable B Minor Mass.

9. Blind Old Bach

All of that moonlight music-copying finally caught up with old Bach, however, and his vision started to go. When he was 65 he had cataract surgery on both eyes, which turned out to be a very bad idea. He spent his last days in a darkened room dictating sacred compositions to his student-turned-son-in-law. Then, oddly, he woke up one day with the ability to see clearly in broad daylight, and promptly had a stroke and died.

10. Bach's Bare Bones

J. S. Bach was buried in an unmarked grave that was somehow rediscovered in 1894, when his bones were exhumed and placed in a church sarcophagus that was bombed in World War II. Fortunately, someone thought to rescue old Bach's bones, and buried them safely in 1949 in the alter-room of the church that had so underestimated the greatness of its cantor. And that's where they are today, if in fact they're actually his.

More important than the bones, though, is the staggering body of musical work that Bach left behind for his sons to either preserve or squander, as they saw fit. Fortunately, C. P. E. Bach had the good sense to look after his share of his old man's scribbings, which set the course of Western music for centuries to come.