

Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel: In Remembrance of the Three-Hundredth Anniversary of Their Births

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Because of the many musical anniversaries, the Council of Europe proclaimed 1985 the European Music Year. Heinrich Schütz¹ was born four hundred years ago; Domenico Scarlatti² three hundred years ago; Johann Christian Bach³ two hundred and fifty years ago; and Alban Berg⁴ one hundred years ago. Also born three hundred years ago, within four weeks of each other, were two of the Western world's greatest composers: George Frederick Handel—whose German name was Georg Friedrich Händel⁵—and Johann Sebastian Bach. The tercentenary year of their births has been celebrated with special concerts, performances, lectures, and publications. Since both men have so greatly enriched our lives with their music, it is appropriate that we refresh our memories and recall some of their most impressive accomplishments.

BACH AND HANDEL

Bach and Handel were born just a month apart, and their birth places, Eisenach and Halle, are located only approximately seventy miles from each other and less than that from the town of Freiberg, where the new LDS temple was dedicated, also in 1985. Although they grew up in such close proximity, knew of each other, and were acquainted with some of each other's compositions, their paths took different directions, and, as far as we know, they never met. We do not know the reason for this. There certainly were opportunities for a meeting. The two composers, on various occasions, worked and visited in places close to each other, and since they both traveled they could have arranged the opportunity for such a meeting, but it seems that they did not. Perhaps they deliberately avoided each other.

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Since Bach and Handel were contemporaries and their music covers some common ground, and since they inherited the same musical tradition, they are often thought of together. They are now considered the greatest composers of the baroque period, climaxing both the Renaissance and baroque styles. In their own time, however, their genius was not universally recognized, and Bach was renowned more as an organist than as a composer. Their contemporaries rejected some of their compositions as out of style, foreign, or too old-fashioned and considered Bach and Handel very different from each other, both musically and personally.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the Italians dominated music—especially opera, a genre which Handel preferred for many years and in which he excelled. Opera was written in the Italian style, which meant placing supreme emphasis on melody for its own sake and on vocal virtuosity at the expense of simplicity and austerity. Besides opera, a variety of vocal forms had been developed including the oratorio, the passion, and the cantata.⁶ Instrumental music had also reached a high level of development. The opera, the oratorio, the cantata, the passion, and the concerto were the musical forms Bach and Handel encountered, carefully studied, at first imitated, then developed, refined, and led to heights which—with the exception of opera—have not been surpassed since.

Bach centered his life and work mainly around the church, while Handel concentrated on secular endeavors: the opera and, finally, the oratorio, which—with the exception of the *Messiah*—were primarily based on historical texts. Bach never traveled abroad, and he rarely traveled in Germany. Handel, on the other hand, traveled extensively: in Italy, Holland, England, Ireland, and, of course, in Germany. Bach married twice and fathered twenty children; Handel remained a bachelor and had no posterity. Bach came from a musical family—some seventy members of the Bach family were accomplished professional musicians—but Handel's ancestors appear to have had no musical talent. While Handel was highly acclaimed during much of his lifetime, earned a comfortable living, and mingled with kings and queens at the English court in London, and while his star continued to rise steadily after his death, Bach's life consisted of constant hard work and of a basically unheralded career which was forgotten within a few years after his death. His son, Johann Christian, is supposed to have called him the "old wig" because his contrapuntal medium of four part harmony and abstruse fugues was considered unfashionable and passé.⁷ His magnificent *Passion According to St. Matthew* was practically unheard until Felix Mendelssohn revived it in a memorable performance in 1829. Since then Bach's stature has steadily risen and today his fame is undisputed and far surpasses that of Handel. Handel's forty-one operas,

which were so fashionable in his day, are now rarely performed, though some have been revived recently, mainly for historical reasons. Our tastes have changed and so have the voices for which the arias were composed, notably the castrati, surgically altered male sopranos whose vocal power and awesome technical ability and breath control thrilled audiences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ Of his twenty-four oratorios only the *Messiah* has become a regular concert staple. It was acclaimed as a masterpiece from the beginning and has enjoyed unparalleled popularity ever since. Handel's great choruses, especially those from the *Messiah*, are well known, particularly in England and the United States, and are frequently performed by choirs great and small. Bach's most popular choruses are also well known and require exceptional skill on the part of the performers. Most, however, are not usually recalled and hummed by the average concertgoer after a performance.

To state as a fact that Bach's choral music is generally not intrinsically vocal, that it is difficult to sing, implies not the slightest criticism. Indeed I consider it one of the fortuitous virtues of Bach's music in general that it does demand self-discipline and long arduous hours of practise on the part of those who would perform it.⁹

For a number of years, as a schoolboy, Bach sang in church choirs and, later in his life, conducted choirs "thereby gaining an insight into the subtleties of choral composition and a sympathetic approach, as a composer, to the problems of choral style—and that, I may say, puts a heavy burden on the credulousness of the conductor and singer of Bach's music."¹⁰ Most choral singers find Handel more melodious than Bach. Handel knew what the public wanted and what singers loved to sing. In his decorative choral passages, "once Handel sets the pattern he generally preserves it."¹¹ One can anticipate Handel but not Bach.

Handel loved opera, the most dramatic, spectacular, and lucrative musical genre of the time. He wanted to be a successful opera composer, and, although he succeeded for a while, in the end he failed. Bach, on the other hand, eschewed opera entirely. Handel became the unrivaled master of the oratorio, and Handel's oratorios, like all his compositions, were written for the public. Bach composed mainly for himself and for the glory of God, and his greatest works are church cantatas and organ music.

Both masters knew tragedy in their lives. As a young boy, Handel lost his father; Bach lost his father and his mother, his first wife, and ten of his children. Both had to overcome opposition and adversity, ignorance and intolerance. Both composers became blind during the last years of their lives, but this malady did not stifle or appreciably

interrupt their creativity and vitality. Handel's last oratorio, the *Triumph of Time and Truth*, is considered as vibrant and brilliant as his early works; and Bach's valedictory work, the choral prelude *When We Are in Deepest Need*, dictated to his son-in-law because the master was totally blind, has all the power of the compositions of his youth.

After this general comparison of the two masters, we will now look at the life and accomplishments of each individually.

GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL

Handel's ancestors, like those of Bach, came from Eastern Europe, Silesia and Bohemia, and settled in Saxony. They had become converted to the Lutheran church and left their homeland in order to practice their religion freely. Handel's father, Georg (1622–97), was a barber–surgeon and became the court physician to the duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. His first wife had died, and he had married Dorothea Taust, the daughter of a prominent Lutheran pastor. She was thirty years younger than her husband and bore him two sons and two daughters. The oldest son died; the second was George Frederick. George Frederick was born on 23 February 1685, in Halle, which belonged to the territories ruled by the elector of Brandenburg.¹² Handel's gift for music became apparent very early in his youth. Initially, his father seems to have been opposed to a musical education for Handel, but musicians and other influential men at the court prevailed upon him to allow George Frederick to take lessons. His first teacher was Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, a fine musician and a composer of average talent, who taught young Handel composition, organ, piano, harpsichord, violin, and oboe. When Handel's father died in 1697, the boy's music lessons were intensified. He also learned Greek and Latin at the *Gymnasium* and later studied at the university in Halle, where in 1702 he became organist at the cathedral for one year.

A well-rounded education for an artist usually included travel to cities and countries where other well-known artists worked and were available for tutoring. After his year as cathedral organist in Halle, Handel traveled to Hamburg, a major trading center in the north whose wealthy merchants had established the first opera stage in Germany in 1678. The opera house was more a place of popular entertainment than of culture. Although the music of the operas performed there was passable, the texts were common and crude and were usually based on recent historical events with which everyone was familiar. They emphasized the comical, farcical, and risqué. Handel came in contact with several of the local musicians and earned a fair amount of money by playing the violin and the piano for the opera company and by composing several operas which were apparently performed with great

success. He was able to save a substantial amount of money, which made it possible for him to accept an invitation to visit Italy, the country where, at that time, opera and other musical genres were cultivated and developed. He visited Florence, Venice, Rome, and Naples and thereby came in contact with such famous composers as Scarlatti and Corelli and with cultured and influential leaders of the Roman Catholic church and of the European aristocracy, who gave him support and referrals and thus influenced his future career. He enjoyed tremendous success both as a performing musician and as a composer. He composed operas, cantatas, church music, and an oratorio, all of which were performed in front of enthusiastic audiences. In Venice his opera *Agrippina* was played a number of times and was wildly acclaimed.

Members of the court of Hanover were present during the Venice presentation, and they invited Handel to Hanover where George of Brunswick ruled. (He later became King George I of England.) Handel accepted the position of kapellmeister at an annual salary of one thousand ducats, a very substantial sum of money and considerably more than Bach earned as cantor in Leipzig in his later life.¹³ The terms of his employment allowed Handel to travel extensively. The courts of London and Hanover maintained warm relations with each other, and English noblemen invited Handel to visit London, an invitation he accepted late in 1710.

London, at that time a city of half a million people, was a major European cultural center, the home of such renowned authors and philosophers as John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, John Locke, George Berkeley, and Isaac Newton. Music in London, however, did not enjoy the same renown as literature and philosophy; in fact, since the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, it had reached a low point. The aristocracy was enamored with Italian opera. With his training and experience in Hamburg and Italy, Handel had mastered Italian opera and was eminently qualified to satisfy the taste of London high society. He composed and performed his opera *Rinaldo*, which became an instant and resounding success. Handel himself accompanied the singers on the harpsichord, and his brilliant improvisations thrilled the audience, as did also several of the melodies from the opera, which soon became tunes for popular marches and drinking songs. The march from the third act became the "Royal Guard March" and was used by John Pepusch in *The Beggar's Opera*. The aria "Il Tricerbero humiliato" became a popular drinking song with the text "Let the waiter bring clean glasses." Almirena's saraband—Handel's own favorite melody—"Lascia ch'io pianga" is sung to this day in the Church of England as the hymn "Father in Heaven."¹⁴ Romain Rolland calls the *Rinaldo* a turning point in the history of music since it marks

the moment when German composers (Handel, Hasse, Gluck, and Mozart) wrote better Italian operas than the Italians.¹⁵

Handel returned briefly to Hanover, but in 1712 settled permanently in London and in 1726 became an English citizen. Queen Anne awarded him an annual stipend of two hundred pounds, which was raised to four hundred pounds by George of Hanover, who had become king of England in 1714. John Mainwaring, one of the early biographers of Handel, reports that Handel regained King George's favor with his performance of the *Water Music* on the occasion of a party on the "water," presumably the river Thames, but this account is probably anecdotal.¹⁶

The *Water Music* is undoubtedly the best developed and most popular of Handel's instrumental compositions. It consists of three suites: the first in F major for oboes, bassoons, horns, strings, and basso continuo; the second in D major, adding trumpets to the first set of instruments; and the third in G major for flutes, piccolos, oboes, strings, and basso continuo. The music of the suites in F and D is open-air music because of the brilliant flourishes of the trumpets and the horns. No brass is used in the suite in G and it has a more pastoral, chamber-like character and can be more readily performed indoors. Handel's superb mastery of instrumental music is evident in these three suites which are not martial like the *Fireworks Music* but uniquely capture more of the social air and spirit of the royal court.

The king, the court, and English high society adored Handel, and the twelve years following his arrival in London marked his greatest success, culminating in the establishment of the "Royal Academy of Music" in 1720, a precarious commercial venture. The purpose of the academy was for the investors to earn large sums of money from musical performances, primarily opera. Handel was appointed the director and labored valiantly to make the enterprise successful, but in the end failed. The Italian style, with its irrational and sometimes ludicrous actions on stage, had long annoyed English intellectuals who, with wit and satire, criticized the operas and called for a national theater that would perform works more to the liking of the English. The deadly blow to the academy—which closed permanently in June 1728—and eventually to Handel's operatic productions came in 1727 when *The Beggar's Opera* was performed for ninety nights to cheering audiences. The text by John Gay was bawdy, vulgar, very witty, and written in English so that everyone could understand it. John Pepusch had borrowed many of the tunes from Purcell and Handel. It was the death knell of Handel's operas and the Italian singers.¹⁷

Handel continued to write operas until 1741, but the complete failure of his last works convinced him that his opera career was finished, though not his career as a composer and musician.¹⁸ His fortunes soon changed for the better.

In the summer of 1741, Handel received an invitation from William, duke of Devonshire, who was the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to visit Dublin. Handel had just completed his *Messiah* and planned to perform it in Dublin and donate the proceeds to charity. The performance was a resounding success. The *Dublin Journal* wrote on 17 April 1742:

On Tuesday last [the 13th] Mr. Handel's Sacred Grand Oratorio, the MESSIAH, was performed at the new Musick-Hall in Fishamble-street; the best Judges allowed it to be the most finished piece of Musick. Words are wanting to express the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crouded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, and the Tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestick and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear.¹⁹

Handel had composed the music and filled in the instrumentation in only twenty-four days. "Considering the immensity of the work, and the short time involved, it will remain, perhaps for ever, the greatest feat in the whole history of musical composition."²⁰

It was the achievement of a giant inspired—the work of one who, by some extraordinary mental feat, had drawn himself completely out of the world, so that he dwelt—or believed he dwelt—in the pastures of God. What happened was that Handel passed through a superb dream. He was unconscious of the world during that time, unconscious of its press and call; his whole mind was in a trance. He did not leave the house. His manservant brought him food, and as often as not returned in an hour to the room to find the food untouched, and his master staring into vacancy. When he had completed Part II, with the "Hallelujah Chorus," his servant found him at the table, tears streaming from his eyes. "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!" he exclaimed. Of a certainty, Handel was swept by some influence not of the world during that month—an influence not merely visionary. Never in his life had he experienced the same emotional sense, and he never experienced it in the same measure again. For twenty-four days he knew those uplands reached only by the higher qualities of the soul.²¹

As we would expect, some modern skeptics doubt this account and reject it as "excess romanticism."²² For Latter-day Saints, however, who believe that God can and does reveal himself through beautiful art and for whom the *Messiah* is a revered masterpiece frequently performed on appropriate occasions, the report that Handel was inspired and heard "heavenly choirs" is entirely plausible.

In later years, when Handel had returned to London, he performed the *Messiah* annually for charity and raised substantial amounts of

money for the poor and the sick.²³ The beautiful music stirred thousands of listeners, and when the *Messiah* was first performed in London, the audience, including the king, were so deeply affected that they rose to their feet while the “Hallelujah Chorus” was sung.

When that chorus struck up, ‘For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth,’ they were so transported, that they all, together with the king (who happened to be present), started up, and remained standing till the chorus ended: and hence it became the fashion in England for the audience to stand while that part of the music is performing.²⁴

The *Messiah* consists of instrumental music based mainly on the string section occasionally embellished by flutes, oboes, and bassoons. Trumpets and drums are used for the great climaxes. The continuo—consisting of cello, bass, harpsichord, and, during the climaxes, the organ—forms the basic fundament of this as of every baroque orchestral composition. The solo voices are soprano, contralto, tenor, and bass. The oratorio is divided into three parts: the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, the sufferings and the death of the Savior, and the Resurrection.

Highlights include the first tenor aria “Every Valley Shall Be Exalted” followed by the chorus singing “And the Glory of the Lord.” Somewhat later in the first section occurs the famous “For unto Us a Child Is Born” with its powerful rendition of “and His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” To many, this chorus is the most beautiful and inspiring part of the entire composition because of its spirit of hope and promise, and the grandeur, power, and majesty of the music. It certainly is one of the most inspiring and uplifting choral compositions in all of religious music. It is followed by a touching and tender pastoral symphony that contrasts magnificently with the preceding powerful chorus. The highlight of the second part is the “Hallelujah” chorus, during which the audience still traditionally stands. The third section is introduced by the soprano aria “I know that My Redeemer Liveth” and closes with the chorus “Worthy Is the Lamb That Was Slain,” climaxing in the final “Amen.”

Handel continued to compose and to perform during the 1740s and 1750s. He wrote other oratorios and concertos, some considered excellent by critics, but none as exquisite as the *Messiah*. A high point was the commission of the *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, performed in 1749 in front of a vast audience of more than twelve thousand people. The music, composed for outdoor performance, is of martial nature and was performed originally by an orchestra consisting of nine trumpets, nine horns, twenty-four oboes, twelve bassoons, one contrabassoon, kettledrums, and drums. The opening “Overture”

is the finest part of the composition, powerfully setting the mood with a courtly *grave* section played by the entire orchestra. This indeed is royal music, the stately music of the court. The brilliant allegro emphasizes the roll of drums and the fanfares of the trumpets. The “Rejoicing” section is played three times—first by the trumpets, then by the horns, and the third time by the entire orchestra. This triumphal music enjoyed immediate success and along with the *Water Music* still ranks with the finest orchestral music of the eighteenth century.

In his last years, Handel’s health failed and he became blind, but he did not lose his courage or his creative power. He wanted to die on Good Friday, but did not pass away until the morning of the next day, 14 April 1759, and was buried in Westminster Abbey on Friday, 20 April.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Because he became converted to the Lutheran faith, Vitus Bach, Johann Sebastian’s second great grandfather, had to flee from Hungary and settle in Wechmar, near Gotha, in Thuringia. He was a baker, but his descendants became town musicians. There are seventy professional musicians in the family, not counting all those who played instruments for their own pleasure.²⁵ Bach’s father, Johann Ambrosius, (1645–95) was a town musician²⁶ in Erfurt.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born on 21 March 1685 in Eisenach, a small Thuringian town. Bach, the youngest of three children, was given music lessons by his father and his uncle and attended the Latin school in Eisenach where he became a member of the boys’ choir. He was an excellent student who learned Latin, Greek, mathematics, logic, rhetoric, and music. He memorized the Lutheran catechism, the Gospels, and the Epistles in the New Testament and graduated second out of a class of eighty. When he was nine years old, his mother died; one year later, his father also died. His oldest brother, Johann Christoph, who later became a musician at the royal court of Sweden in Stockholm, took care of Johann Sebastian and continued his music lessons. When he was fifteen, young Bach transferred to the Michaelis-Gymnasium in Lüneburg where he received free room and tuition in exchange for singing in the elite Mettenchor, which sang daily in the church services. In 1703, when he was eighteen, he accepted an offer as violinist in the orchestra of the duke of Weimar, but after only a few months moved to Arnstadt where he became church organist at an annual salary of eighty-five gulden.²⁷ He stayed until 1707 when he became church organist at St. Blasius in Mühlhausen. Since Bach had excellent knowledge of organ construction, he was also given responsibility for

keeping the organ in good repair. On 16 October 1707 he married his cousin Barbara Bach, who bore him seven children, four of whom lived. The second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, later became one of the most famous musicians and pianists of his time. He became a member of the orchestra at the court of King Frederic the Great of Prussia and, in 1767 after the king's death, replaced the renowned Georg Philipp Telemann as music director of the city of Hamburg. The oldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, was his father's favorite. He was gifted and talented as a composer and organist, but did not attain the fame and success of his father or younger brother.

In 1708 Bach returned to Weimar. Duke Wilhelm Ernst cultivated the arts and the sciences and laid the foundation for Weimar as the cultural center of Germany, which it became at the end of the century when such famous writers and poets as Wieland, Herder, Schiller, and Goethe resided and worked there. By now Bach was earning 252 gulden a year, three times the amount he had earned in Arnstadt. Of equal importance to Bach was his improved social standing. He was court concertmaster and court organist, and his reputation as organist, composer, teacher, and organ inspector rose considerably throughout central and northern Germany.

Bach was a perfectionist, and his working relationships with other people were often tempestuous. He had very high expectations of himself and of anyone who worked with him, and he was well aware of his own genius and ability. It was most difficult for him to be obedient to superiors who knew much less about music and instruments than he did and who treated him as a lowly servant and not with respect. Because social position was of utmost importance in society at that time, Bach constantly strove to improve his standing by seeking and accepting not only positions that paid well but positions that placed him in a higher social class. Titles and positions were so important—more so than they are today in European society—because they brought distinct social advantages, prestige, influence, and thus power. This meant that a person of high social position endured fewer humiliations and affronts than a person of lesser station. Unfortunately most members of the nobility and the bureaucracy lacked culture and intellect, and it was difficult to respect them. For us it is challenging to understand that Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Goethe were considered lowly servants who had to keep their distance from the noblemen and ladies at the court and, for example, had to eat their meals in the servants' quarters along with the gardeners and butlers. A title and a court appointment often meant considerable improvement of one's daily circumstances, and thus, when in 1717 Bach had a chance to become concertmaster of the court and at the same time double his salary, he accepted the position so quickly that he failed to follow

acceptable procedure for terminating his post in Weimar. The duke became so angry with him that he ordered him thrown in prison for three weeks.

At Köthen, Bach had reached the pinnacle of his social career. He was on a par with high military officers and court officials of the state, and only ministers and members of the nobility outranked him.²⁸ Nevertheless he was, of course, still a servant and had to observe the expected social norms and traditions carefully. Perhaps that was one of the reasons he eventually traded the courtly life for work in the city. Bach's first wife Barbara, whom he loved very much, died in Köthen in 1720 while the composer was on a concert tour. When he returned, she had already been buried. He needed companionship and a mother for his four surviving children, and a year later he married Anna Magdalena Wülcklin, the youngest daughter of the "Court and Field Trumpeter of the Music of His Highness the Prince of Saxe-Weissenfels."²⁹ She was also the court singer and earned almost half as much as her husband. Like the first marriage, the union with Anna was very happy. She soon became a supportive and valued companion who raised his four children from the first marriage (the first child was barely older than Anna) and gave birth to thirteen children herself, seven of whom she lost in their early childhood.

It is difficult to imagine the heartache which the death of his parents, his first wife, and ten of his twenty children must have caused Bach. These repeated tragic experiences undoubtedly account, on the one hand, for the preoccupation with death so prevalent in many of his compositions and, on the other hand, for the expression of deep faith and trust in the Savior. Anna Magdalena, who lost seven of her children, shared her husband's grief and was a source of strength and comfort to him. Her substantial musical ability made her an indispensable co-worker, for not only did she assist in teaching music to the children, but every week she copied all the voices for Bach's Sunday cantatas. Her musical notations are so similar to Bach's own that only experts can differentiate between them.

If Bach was happy, respected, and successful in Köthen, why did he move to Leipzig in 1723? We do not know all the answers, but there must have been several persuasive factors. Bach's sons were maturing, and their father was deeply concerned about their education. Leipzig had the famous Thomas School in which he enrolled the boys immediately after the family's arrival, and it also had a reputable university at which they would continue their education. We know how anxious Bach was for his sons to receive a good higher education.³⁰ But there were other reasons as well for favoring a move to the city. Most positions at the courts were rather insecure and impermanent. When the prince died or when financial problems arose,

the musicians were usually the first to lose their livelihoods and had to seek work elsewhere. In contrast, the church and the cities offered security. Bach also missed playing the organ and composing church music. Members of the court at Köthen belonged to the Reformed church, which frowned on music in the church. Finally, there were the usual attractions of the big city, among them the hope for a more democratic society, a higher salary, and better possibilities for advancement. These may have been among the factors that persuaded Bach and his wife to accept, in 1723, the position of cantor and director of music at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

As cantor and music director, Bach had many responsibilities, including teaching Latin and music at the school and overseeing the entire church music program in the city.³¹ In addition he was expected to compose music for church holidays and for Sunday services, a task he most admirably mastered. He was thirty-eight years old when he arrived with high expectations, and he stayed for twenty-seven years until his death in 1750. He soon discovered that his expectations had been too high and that his dreams were not fulfilled. The cost of living in the city was much higher than in the small provincial towns, his income was smaller than expected, and his work load was considerably more demanding. Also, dealing with the intransigent and ignorant bureaucracy and attempting to improve the discipline and the curriculum of the school proved terribly frustrating and time-consuming. Seven years after his arrival, Bach talks about his frustrations in a letter to his lifelong friend Georg Erdmann and asks him for a position in Danzig:

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 said Prince had become somewhat lukewarm, especially as the new Princess seemed to be unmusical; and it pleased God that I should be called hither to be *Director Musices* and Cantor at the Thomas-Schule. . . . This post was described to me in such favorable terms that finally (particularly since my sons seemed inclined toward [university] studies) I cast my lot, in the name of the Lord, and made the journey to Leipzig. . . . But since (1) I find that the post is by no means so lucrative as it had been 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 Honor 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.³²

Bach then adds some details that are informative and show his sense of humor. He tells that his fees depend on the number of funerals at which he performs the music. If few people die, his fee is small. One almost gets the impression that he hopes for a catastrophe:

My present post amounts to about 700 thaler, and when there are rather more funerals than usual, the fees rise in proportion; but when a healthy wind blows, they fall accordingly, as for example last year, when I lost fees that would ordinarily come in from funerals to an amount of more than 100 thaler. In Thuringia I could get along better on 400 thaler than here with twice that amount, because of the excessively high cost of living.³³

Bach also collected fees for playing the organ and having the Thomas choir sing at weddings, and it made him angry when couples had their marriage ceremony performed in nearby village churches in order to avoid the extra charge for music.

In contrast to Handel, Bach and his wife had to economize carefully in order to manage a household with ten children, a household which had to meet the standards and expectations of a respected middle-class family. They seem to have succeeded quite well; in fact, Bach was able to accumulate a modest library and several musical instruments.³⁴ It is a tribute to the genius of Bach and to the congenial companionship and able management of his wife that, despite all the frustrations and setbacks, he was able to devote so much time to his compositions and create such extraordinary beauty in his music.

Two events sweetened and highlighted Bach's work in Leipzig. In 1736 he was appointed "Composer to the Court Capelle" by "His Royal Majesty in Poland and Serene Electoral Highness of Saxony."³⁵ This title enhanced Bach's standing among his colleagues and superiors. The second honor came in 1747 from Frederic the Great, king of Prussia. Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel had become court musician in Potsdam, and through him the king sent an invitation to the father. He was received cordially and with great respect by the king, who was a fine flute player and fair composer himself. In gratitude for the king's graciousness, Bach composed his *Musical Offering* which is based in part on a theme the king himself had suggested but which Bach modified. "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."³⁶ Being invited to perform in front of royalty was a distinct honor in Bach's day and is somewhat comparable to a contemporary composer receiving an invitation from the president of the United States to play his compositions in the White House.

The *Musical Offering* was Bach's last great composition. Increasingly his eyesight failed him, and, after an unsuccessful operation, Bach

became completely blind. During the last months of his life he dictated his scores to his wife and other relatives. Until the end he worked on his *Art of the Fugue*. A few days before his death he dictated the following text for the organ chorale “Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein” (no. 668, “When We Are in Deepest Need”) to his son-in-law:

Vor Deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit,
O Gott, und Dich demütig bitt':
Wend' Dein gnädig Angesicht
Von mir betrübtem Sünder nicht.

(I come before thy throne
O God, and humbly plead:
Do not turn away thy gracious face
From me, a troubled sinner.)

These words express his final desire, to be graciously received by a loving Lord. On the evening of 28 July 1750 he died after having suffered a heart attack. Three days later he was buried in St. John's cemetery.

When I was a boy my mother told me a story which I have not been able to verify and which may well be anecdotal but which nevertheless demonstrates the respect Bach enjoyed among some of his more sensitive contemporaries. Frederic the Great was assembled with his court musicians in concert performance when the news of Bach's death reached him. He interrupted the performance, rose to his feet, and said, “Der alte Bach ist tot” (Friend Bach is dead). The performance was continued another day. Not too many people, however, took note of Bach's death; in fact, the city council of Leipzig was relieved to be finally rid of a troublesome old man and quickly appointed a successor, a quiet man of mediocre talent who promised to be less troublesome than Bach.³⁷

Bach's widow lived in poverty for ten more years. When she died, only three boys from the Thomas choir, which her husband had directed for so many years, sang at her funeral. She was buried in a pauper's grave.³⁸

Bach's music, which had not been widely popular during his lifetime, was soon forgotten. It was revived by the Romantics during the first third of the nineteenth century, some seventy-five years after Bach's death. It can be argued that Bach's music is romantic in the sense that it contains beautifully melodious parts and many sections of deep emotional impact, anguish, sorrow, and ecstasy. While this is certainly true, Bach's music also has a very formal, rational side. There is a mathematical exactness in the great attention that Bach pays to the underlying, inflexible rhythm usually carried by the bass, which

appears to negate the romantic exuberance. This obvious contrast between heart and mind provides a unique tension and satisfaction appealing to modern man, and it is in part due to this dual quality that Bach today is almost universally acclaimed as one of the greatest composers of all time.

Bach's work is so massive that it surpasses the layman's comprehension; his output is unparalleled and embraces practically every musical genre except opera. In Leipzig he composed a church cantata for every one of the approximately sixty Sundays and holidays of the church calendar for five consecutive years, sometimes completing the work barely in time for the performance.³⁹ The standard Bach cantata opens with a brief instrumental introduction and a chorus followed by several vocal solos in recitative and aria form, and closes with a chorale. Only about two hundred of Bach's cantatas have been preserved, and they provide a variety of spiritual and secular examples, yet they are both generally of high musical quality and of great spiritual profundity.

I have already mentioned that Bach wrote all his compositions for the glory of God and the recreation of the human mind. In fact, he did not separate these two aspects. To him a piece of music composed for a wedding, the inauguration of a prince, or some other worldly celebration was not essentially different from one composed for a Sunday church service. In the Lutheran tradition, the craftsman who makes a useful article or the peasant who tills his field honors God as much as the worshipper who prays in church or the pastor who delivers the Sunday sermon. All aspects of life were spiritual, an attitude we Latter-day Saints certainly understand and embrace. Thus, when listening to Bach's music, it is practically impossible for the layman to distinguish between the secular and spiritual cantatas. An excellent example of this is the "Hunting Cantata" (no. 208, "Was mir behagt ist nur die muntre Jagd") which glorifies not so much the hunt as the beauty of God's creation in nature and which appeals to the prince to be just and kind to his subjects. This cantata contains one of the master's finest and most gentle arias, the famous "Sheep May Safely Graze." The unforgettable melody sung by the soprano is gently counterpointed by a second melody performed by the flutes.

It is, of course, somewhat presumptuous to recommend one of Bach's cantatas to the reader; nevertheless, since it is quite unreasonable to expect the novice to listen to all of them, I shall briefly comment on some favorites and hope that the reader will feel inspired to hear the sections discussed.

The text for "Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir" (no. 131, "From the Depth I Call on Thee, O Lord") is based on Psalm 130. The opening instrumental and choral section lifts the worshipper from the

bottom of the abyss to the heavenly abode of the Lord with a profoundly nostalgic melody which quickly turns into a more lively and joyous rhythm in the second verse. The expressive last chorus ends in a fugue. "When the text announces the Grace of Our Lord, a tender oboe melody suddenly blossoms and glides above the chords sustained by the voices, seeming to bring a message of consolation and a promise of salvation."⁴⁰

"Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit" (no. 106, "God's Time Is the Best Time of All") was composed for a funeral, and the opening sonatina is exceptionally beautiful with its serene lullaby symbolizing the calm slumber of those who have died in Christ and in the knowledge that they will be resurrected and reunited with their loved ones. It expresses Bach's conviction that death is sweet and desirable because it means union with Christ.

The second chorus in "Preise, Jerusalem, den Herrn" (no. 119, "Praise, Jerusalem, Thy Lord") is very beautiful and is accompanied by four trumpets, two recorders, three oboes, drums, strings, and continuo. The powerful melody aptly underscores the message that mankind may rejoice because the Lord is gracious and merciful.

The music of "Christ lag in Todesbanden" (no. 4, "Christ Lay in Death's Chains"), the "Easter Cantata," reflects the dramatic aspects of the text and expresses the contrasting themes of death and the resurrection. "The cantata burns with that inner flame which glows in the soul of every member of the congregation whose religion is alive."⁴¹

"Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben" (no. 147, "Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life") is a masterpiece which contains one of Bach's most popular compositions, the chorale "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." The chorale occurs after an introductory sinfonia and three arias by alto, bass, and tenor voice. It closes both the first and second section of the cantata, the first with the verse "Wohl mir, da ich Jesum habe, o wie feste halt ich ihn" ("Blessed Am I that I Have Jesus Whom I Will Never Let Go") and the second with the more famous verse "Jesus bleibet meine Freude" ("Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"). The serene melody of the chorus is embellished by an equally serene and melodious counterpoint played by the orchestra consisting of strings, oboes, and a trumpet which supports the choral line. The mood is one of serene joy and quiet assurance. There are few comparable compositions in all of Western music.

"Gott, der Herr, ist Sonn' und Schild" (no. 79, "God, the Lord, Is Sun and Shield") commemorates the Lutheran Reformation. The libretto is based in part on Psalm 84. The second aria, sung by the alto, has a lovely oboe counterpoint, and the famous chorale "Nun danket alle Gott" ("Now Thank We All Our God") has become a

staple of congregational singing. "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" (no. 80, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God") also commemorates the Reformation and certainly is one of Bach's grandest cantatas because of the richness of voices and instruments and because of the majesty of the subject. The text is based on Luther's famous hymn, the "Battle Hymn," so called because Luther and his followers sang it upon entering the city of Worms in 1530 where Luther would face the Imperial Diet. The chorale tune appears in four of the eight movements and expresses the triumph of the Reformation, the victory of light over the forces of evil. The powerful first chorus is a brilliant variation on Luther's theme with the participation of the full orchestra and the intermittent intonation of the theme by the trumpets and the oboes. The second verse of Luther's hymn is sung by a soprano and bass duo accompanied by strings and oboes. The third and fourth verses again are sung by the chorus.

Perhaps the most frequently performed cantata is "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" (no. 140, "Sleepers Awake, a Voice Is Calling"). The text is based on the parable of the ten virgins. The three vocal soloists represent the watchman (tenor), Christ (bass), and the believing soul (soprano). The melody of the first chorus is sung by soprano voices and depicts the virgins as they are waiting for the bridegroom. The other choral voices and the instruments provide the counterpoint. The most famous part of the cantata and one of the most famous chorales of Bach is "Zion Hears the Watchman Calling," sung by the tenors and brilliantly counterpointed by the violins and violas playing in unison. Christ arrives and then passes as the faithful joyously join him, while those who were unprepared are left behind in despair. The final chorale once more repeats the familiar theme, this time with the entire orchestra supporting the chorus. Here indeed Bach allows us to preview the exaltation awaiting the Lord's faithful followers.

Bach composed three oratorios—the *Christmas Oratorio* being the best-known—and five passions of which only two survive: the *St. Matthew* and the *St. John*. The *St. Matthew* passion is a staple of the concert season in Europe and is usually performed at Christmas or Easter. It is a massive work with double chorus. The text, based on the Gospel narrative, is set to beautiful music with passages of distinct lyrical quality. In the great closing chorus, "In Deepest Grief," the two choirs, split in two as if to symbolize man's broken heart, lament the Savior's death with a throbbing melody. The listener finds some consolation in the final lines, "Rest ye softly, rest in peace." In this magnificent work Bach approaches an ideal which opera composers to the time of Richard Wagner were seeking to reestablish and which was believed to have been achieved by the Greeks: classic tragedy based on a profound religious foundation.

In Bach's time, Latin polyphonic music, such as the mass, was still performed on important feast days, and Bach inherited the tradition and mastered it in his *Mass in B minor*. He is, however, a transitional figure and a master also of the new style of music in which a single melody dominates amidst harmonic accompaniment. Like Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Bach's monumental composition is a magnificent expression of man's search for eternal truth. The work is carefully and masterfully crafted and rich in complicated artful structures such as the fugue. The music is of sublime majesty and expresses man's fervent hope for eternal life, his profound faith in Christ, his love for the Eternal Father who sent the Savior, and his deep longing to return to God's presence.

Besides his vocal and chamber music, Bach's organ compositions are prodigious. Since all of his life he was preoccupied with the canon as the most perfect form of counterpoint, this musical form occurs again and again in his organ chorales and fugues. The masterful use of counterpoint is also apparent in his keyboard music among which *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is particularly well known. This composition consists of two sets of twenty-four preludes⁴² and fugues⁴³ each. In the preludes Bach reveals and explores the special tonal qualities of the piano⁴⁴ and in the fugues the musical texture and the harmonious combination of diverse themes. Each of the two sets covers the twenty-four major and minor keys. Since much of the keyboard music was originally written for family use and practice, it reflects a unique spirit of intimacy and warmth.

Among his orchestral works—many of which are lost—his six *Brandenburg Concertos*, dedicated in 1721 to the margrave of Brandenburg, are exceptionally beautiful and have become deservedly well known. They were performed by a much smaller orchestra than we are used to today, and each concerto was written for a different group of instruments. Thus the first is for strings, three oboes, two horns, and a bassoon; the second is for strings, solo violin, flute, oboe, and trumpet. Particularly striking is the third movement of the first concerto, the instrumentation of the second concerto, the sterling string sections in the third, and the piano section in the fifth. Bach's expertise as a violinist helped him greatly in the composition of his violin concertos in A minor, E major, and D minor. These three concertos demonstrate his special talent for exact and varied phrasing. His violin concertos; his triple concerto for flute, violin, and piano; and his *Brandenburg Concertos* represent the climax of the baroque orchestral style.

The compositions discussed here are all worthy of the reader's attention. To become better acquainted with Bach, the music lover must listen often and attentively and choose his own favorites. The

greatness of Bach's music becomes apparent in its sublimity and in its unique combination of mathematical precision and profound spiritual fervor and passion.

Bach was a superb craftsman who knew the capabilities and limitations of the human voice and the instruments for which he composed—especially the organ, harpsichord, clavichord, viola, and violin—and he knew what a virtuoso could do with them. Consequently his music makes great technical demands on both performers and audiences. Yet technical excellence, although it underlies every one of his musical compositions, never dominates to the point that melody, intense emotion, and religious fervor are overwhelmed. As with every excellent piece of art, Bach achieves an admirable balance between the two. Bach's music, indeed, is great and will for all time uplift and inspire audiences and bring them closer to God.

NOTES

¹Heinrich Schütz worked for the elector of Saxony in Dresden and composed the first German opera, *Dafne*. He is noted for his sacred music, oratorios, and passions. He died in 1672.

²Domenico Scarlatti was an important Italian master who composed sacred music, operas, and numerous pieces for piano and organ. Handel met him in Italy and was inspired by his music.

³Johann Christian Bach was the youngest son of Johann Sebastian and his second wife, Anna Magdalena. He became the organist at the cathedral of Milan and converted to Catholicism. Eventually he settled in England.

⁴Alban Berg was the gifted student of Arnold Schönberg, who is best known for his operas *Wozzek* and *Lulu*. He died in 1935.

⁵Handel and his family spelled his name several different ways. When he became an English citizen in 1726, he consistently wrote it George Frideric Handel.

⁶Opera is a drama set to music and performed on a stage. The oratorio is related to opera but is not dramatized. It is performed in a concert hall, and the text is sung by soloists and a choir, both accompanied by an orchestra. The subject may be religious or secular. The passion is an oratorio with the text based on the Gospels. The subject matter is the suffering and agony of Christ. The cantata is a mini-oratorio based on either a secular or a sacred text.

⁷Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1945), 270. This volume is a valuable research tool. It presents in English translation many documents and letters pertaining to Bach's life and work. Another even more valuable source for the researcher is Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, eds., *Bach-Dokumente: Supplement zu Johann Sebastian Bach: Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*, 4 vols. (Kassel, West Germany: Bärenreiter, 1963), 79.

⁸There is an excellent article on the castrati in the German weekly, *Die Zeit*: "Magere Riesen mit hoher Stimme," in *Die Zeit*, no. 32, 9 August 1985, 9–10.

⁹Archibald T. Davison, *Bach and Handel: The Consummation of the Baroque in Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 25.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 15.

¹²Germany did not become a unified nation until 1871. Before that time she consisted of dozens of kingdoms, grand duchies, duchies, small principalities, and independent cities. Weissenfels, where Handel's father worked and Handel received music lessons, is practically next door to Halle but belonged to the Duchy of Saxe-Weissenfels.

¹³It is difficult for us to assess the value of money in those days. One way is to judge by the amount of gold or silver contained in the coins. A ducat contained approximately three and a half grams of fine gold, which would have a current market value of approximately forty dollars. Will Durant estimates that a guilder in Luther's time was equivalent to twenty-five 1955 dollars (see Will Durant, *The Reformation* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957], 295), but all such estimates are inaccurate. A look at Bach's estate [*Bach-Dokumente*, 2:490–512] shows us the cost of books, household goods, and musical instruments and might be a more accurate indication of the buying power of money in the seventeenth century.

¹⁴Paul Nettl, *Georg Friedrich Händel* (Berlin: Verlag Merseburger, 1958), 53–54.

¹⁵Romain Rolland, *Handel*, trans. A. Eaglefield Hull (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1929), 63.

¹⁶John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1760), 89–92.

¹⁷Rolland, *Handel*, 81–82. See also Newman Flower, *George Frideric Handel* (London: Cassel and Company, 1923), 173–74.

¹⁸Since the Second World War, Handel's operas are being staged again but are enjoyed mainly for their historical significance. It is highly unlikely that they will ever reach the popularity of Mozart's or Verdi's operas.

¹⁹H. C. Robbins Landon, *Handel and His World* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1984), 188.

²⁰Flower, *George Frideric Handel*, 271. The libretto had been compiled by Charles Jennens, who had taken most of the text from the English Prayer Book and from the Christmas and Easter services of the Church of England (see Landon, *Handel and His World*, 174).

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Christopher Hogwood, *Handel* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 169.

²³Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*, 135–37.

²⁴James Beattie to the Rev. Dr. Laing, 25 May 1780, cited in Landon, *Handel and His World*, 202–3.

²⁵David and Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader*, 20.

²⁶In the Middle Ages, musicians had been vagabonds who had no civil rights and were usually treated with contempt and disrespect. By the seventeenth century, however, most musicians had become professionals and were hired by the courts, the church, or the cities on a permanent basis. The town musician belonged to a respected guild, his activities were regulated by laws and statutes, and his place in society was secure. As in other professions, the aspiring musician had to work for six or more years as an apprentice and thereafter as a journeyman before he could apply to become a master craftsman and train other musicians. He was employed by the city council and played at weddings, funerals, socials, holidays, and other official functions of the city.

²⁷See note thirteen on the value of money.

²⁸Johann Mattheson, *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte* (Hamburg: N.p., 1740; reprint Berlin: Kommissionsverlag von Leo Liepmannsohn, 1910), xxxii, 46. This edition is a reprint of the 1740 original printed in Hamburg.

²⁹David and Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader*, 83.

³⁰Karl Geiringer, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1966), 82.

³¹Mattheson, *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte*, xxxiii, 47.

³²David and Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader*, 125.

³³*Ibid.*, 125–26.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 193.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 151.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 179.

³⁷Neumann and Schulze, eds., *Bach-Dokumente*, 2:479.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 3:5, 17, 153.

³⁹Geiringer, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 135. The cantata is performed as part of the Lutheran church service, part before and part after the sermon. It usually lasts about fifteen minutes and consists of instrumental, vocal solo, and choral parts.

⁴⁰Andre Pirro, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, trans. Mervin Savill (New York: Orion Press, 1957), 77.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 103.

⁴²In his preludes Bach explores the special tonal qualities of the instrument before he begins to concentrate on melody.

⁴³In the fugue the listener's main interest is directed to musical texture, in other words to the harmony achieved through the combination of different themes.

⁴⁴Bach used the clavichord, the forerunner of the piano.