

CHAPTER I

Early years, 1685–1703

The Obituary begins

Johann Sebastian Bach belongs to a family in all of whose members equally a love for and skill in music seem, as a common gift, to have been imparted by nature.

Emanuel Bach was familiar with the outlines of his family's musical history, since quite apart from any anecdotes about it that circulated amongst its members, his father spent time around the age of fifty compiling a selective genealogy. This is the 'Origin of the musical-Bach family', *Ursprung der musicalisch-Bachischen Familie* (Dok I, 255–61), a document known to Emanuel in whose household it was later copied. Though contributing little to published biographies of the day, Bach carefully compiled this genealogical list (sometimes referred to as a 'table') either from scratch after many enquiries or, more likely, revising and enlarging an older document begun by a previous member of this large family. Still an indispensable source of information, it numbers fifty-three Bachs in the course of two hundred years or more, many of them professional musicians well-known in Central Germany, though only a few became so in a larger Europe – Sebastian himself and, as perhaps he anticipated in part by then, one or two of his sons.

Emanuel added to the genealogy in which he and five brothers figured, and made use of it to begin the Obituary more tellingly, even proudly, than John Mainwaring was able to begin his biography of Handel ('George Frederic Handel was born in Hall[e] . . .'). Since the Obituary opens in the present tense, the question immediately arises whether it was prepared during the composer's lifetime, in the form perhaps of a CV or biography for one of the several lexicons being published in Leipzig. The two other obituaries printed in the journal in which it appeared begin by referring less ambiguously to their deceased subjects. And as Emanuel's narrative continues, a further point might strike the reader: now and then one has the impression that he was citing from press cuttings at his disposal, leading

one to wonder further whether such had been assembled by his father and kept with the genealogical table. Possible instances of press cuttings are identified below as they occur.

It is easy to imagine personal reasons why a composer would compile such a genealogy at or near his own half century, especially one who had lost so many close relations as Sebastian had from early childhood on: his parents (mother at her own half century, father two days short of it), gradually all seven of his siblings (one before he was born, two while he was a small infant), his first wife (she too had been an orphan), ten of his twenty children (an eleventh aged 24 died in 1739), plus a particularly beloved employer.¹ This catalogue of bereavements may have been larger than was usual with professional people (by his late fifties, for example, Telemann had lost only two of his surviving seven children), but the wider the extended Bach family, the more constantly news of deaths within it must have circulated amongst relatives or, just as bad, been taken for granted. For example, ten of eleven children of Johann Günther, great-great-grandson of Sebastian's great-grandfather, died before their mother. Sebastian's first conscious bereavement was when he was six years old (brother Balthasar), his last nine months before his own death (grandson Sebastian Altnickol), so that when his own entry in the genealogy says he is still living 'by God's will', this is no empty formula.

In working on his genealogy in about 1735, the composer might also have been as much open to the day's fashion for studying family tables as to any more profoundly personal urges of his own. For family tables were well known in the book-centre of Leipzig, where throughout the 1720s and 1730s Johann Hübner was publishing aristocratic and other tables for what was evidently a ready market. One such book had some 333 tables, doubtless meant to be an evocative number, and it could well be that Hübner's publications encouraged Bach to work on a list of 'musical Bachs', perhaps even to think of having it published. There are several implications in the careful collection of its materials, such as that he was a born collector and portfolio-organizer, as so much of his music also suggests, and in particular that he was more of a letter-writer than is now known or was said by Emanuel to have been (Dok III, 290). Both the various blanks he left in the table (e.g. when a date was unknown) and certain musical specifics (e.g. that Johann Günther was singer and schoolmaster at a certain church in

¹ Perhaps fifty was an important age in Thuringian/Saxon tradition. At fifty, Handel apparently planned a visit to his native Halle (HHB, 254), and later in Weimar, at about that age, Goethe drafted *Der Mann von fünfzig Jahren*, concerning a man and a much younger woman.

Erfurt) suggest he had a variety of sources: existing information, correspondence, conversation, visits to and from, hearsay.

In listing the musicians of the large, well-distributed clan to which he, an early orphan, belonged, Bach does several things: establishes the story of an exceptional family, omits mere family-lore anecdotes, and salutes an art practised to the greater glory of God. The story is not a fairy tale but sets out an (as it were) apostolic succession, one not entirely unlike the genealogical tables in two of the Gospels and parts of the Pentateuch, consciously or otherwise. So well-read in both Old Testament and New Testament were genealogists including J. S. Bach that there was little difference between conscious and unconscious allusion of this kind. The first name, Veit Bach, was of a man said there and in the Obituary to have fled Hungary for his Lutheran *Religion* (Dok I, 255), meaning perhaps not Lutheranism as such – Hungary (today's Southern Slovakia?) was predominantly Protestant early on – but Christianity: these lands were under threat from Turkish Muslims. From Veit a Tree of Jesse springs, branches of a Protestant tree active over generations. Chiefly as a result of this genealogy, the Bachs have become the best-known of all musical dynasties, though positions of higher prestige were occupied by some of the Couperins in Paris.

It seems that a few years later, the genealogy was joined by another family document of sorts, the Old-Bach Archive (*Alt-Bachisches Archiv*), a collection of choral works by older family members. Now constituting some two dozen pieces, perhaps more formerly, they include music by Johann Christoph (organist in Eisenach admired by Sebastian, cousin of his father), Georg Christoph (Sebastian's uncle) and many by Johann Michael (first father-in-law of Sebastian, also praised by him in the table). Some of the copying work was done by Johann Christoph and by his father, the text and parts of another by Sebastian's father, but the biggest contributor-copyist has been identified as not a Bach but Ernst Dietrich Heindorff, cantor in Arnstadt, who died in 1724. This suggests that the archive was first assembled as a 'repertory for use in Arnstadt, during Heindorff's cantorate' rather than a Bach family document as such (BJ 1998, 138, 147), and that much of it passed to J. S. Bach when the organist there, his first cousin Johann Ernst, died in 1739. In the following years he then added to the Archive himself, perhaps contributing such early autographs as the score or parts of cantata BWV 71 and other early works such as BWV 4, 106 and 131 now incompletely preserved. He also wrote much of the text underlay for Johann Christoph Bach's 22-part motet 'Es erhuh sich ein Streit' and parts for his 'Lieber Herr Gott, wecke uns auf'. This last, in which he was helped

by a student, dates from his final months and could have been for his own funeral (see p. 268). So it seems that the Archive continued to be made up piecemeal over the years, even after Emanuel – who spoke of Christoph's latter motet being performed in Leipzig (Dok III, 292) – took charge of it under the name *Alt-Bachisches Archiv* (Dok III, 502).

As well as how, quite why Bach should carefully preserve such an Archive, providing some titlepages, completing some texts, making corrections and even some performance materials from it, is an interesting question. Likely, of course, is 'family loyalty': preserving work by other Bachs, a natural furtherance of his work on the family tree. And just as his own name featured in the genealogy, so representative manuscripts of his own music could have been added to the Archive, or planned to be. Was this one of the reasons for making certain fair copies in his maturity, such as the late collection of organ chorales or even the Mass? Also likely is that the Archive was still supplying him with service-music from time to time despite its out-of-date idioms. For it is often forgotten that as well as modern cantatas, there was a good deal of much earlier music sung in the main Sunday services – motets, chorales, chant. Presumably by the time the Archive passed to Emanuel along with the main copy of the genealogy, its value was chiefly family-antiquarian. But this was something not insignificant for the wider Bach family, judging from a letter of 1728 written by another Bach, Johann Nicolaus, who too was aware of the family's tradition of coming originally from 'Hungary' (BJ 1989, 213), as was Walther in his *Lexicon* of 1732.

To imply in the 1730s that music was an honourable family-trade was a reflection of the growing respect for art and the artist, *Kunst und der Künstler*, words conspicuous in the Obituary itself and becoming deeply respected over the German Enlightenment and Romantic periods. This was not a dynasty of shoe-makers or bakers but, as the genealogy's title said, 'musical Bachs', which for the Obituary also included those who were active in devising new musical instruments. Walther (*Lexicon*, 64) suggested that it was perhaps because those called Bach were devoted to music that their very name was melodic (B A C H, qv). A surgeon and a shop-keeper who qualified for inclusion in the list of 'musical Bachs' were, one assumes, gifted amateurs, different from the early Bach who had been a court jester/fiddler but is not listed, despite Sebastian's likely knowledge of him, his very portrait having been engraved and published (see Geiringer 1954, plate iv).

Unlike true family-trees, the genealogical table lists no mothers, wives or daughters any more than the Leipzig Communicant Lists do when they

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name Bach and with him, fairly regularly, one or more of his sons. The current professional position of three sons is described in a letter of 1730, when Bach notes that his wife sings well, and also says of his first child, Catharina Dorothea, that she is unmarried and plays 'not badly' (*nicht schlimm*: Dok I, 68). It was through the boys that the list of 'musical Bachs' would grow – hence, in a letter of 1748, Sebastian informs a cousin about Emanuel's 'two male heirs' without mentioning their sister. Yet his own mother, a Lämmerhirt, was undoubtedly musical, being a member of a family closely involved with music in Erfurt, the area's largest town and a Hanseatic city with allegiances far afield. Elisabeth Lämmerhirt was also related to two other significant musicians, composers to whose music her gifted son was to respond one way or another: J. G. Walther (she was Walther's great-aunt's step-sister) and J. H. Buttstedt (she was his wife's second cousin). Something surely came to Johann Sebastian Bach from his mother, as it came to his sons from their gifted mothers, both of whom likewise belonged to professional musical families.

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It would be something to wonder at that such fine men should be so little known outside their fatherland if one did not bear in mind that these honourable Thuringians were so content with their fatherland and their standing that they would not venture far from it at all, even to go after their fortune. (*Obituary*)

Emanuel is speaking here of earlier Bachs, 'worthy men' the memory of whom deserves to be kept fresh, musicians he had learnt about from the genealogy. Whether he is fairly representing his father's views at any but particular moments of discontent in Leipzig, can not be established. But for readers, the relevance of what he says to the biography that follows can not have been missed. Especially the musicians amongst them would assume that normally the highest status could only be measured by success abroad, first by leaving home to study and then by occupying a position of prestige in an important city or a royal court of renown such as Prussian Berlin, where Emanuel and Agricola were both working by the time the *Obituary* was published.

One sees this same interest in a student's studies or a master's successes in Johann Mattheson's collection of biographies published in Hamburg a few years previously, the *Ehrenpforte* 1740, which generally made a point of reporting a composer's broad learning-experiences. Telemann, an upper middle-class boy, had travelled, come into contact with Polish music, written operas for the free city of Hamburg, visited Paris, and actually

declined the Leipzig cantorate: altogether, a varied and productive musical life of fame and obvious success. Sebastian's successor in Leipzig, Gottlob Harrer, had 'spent some time in Italy' and learnt composition and the job of a cantor there (Dok II, 480), something which Emanuel, who had also applied for the job on his father's death, later admitted he had not (Dok III, 255). The 'Jena Bach', Johann Nicolaus, had spent some time in Italy, as Emanuel would know from Walther's *Lexicon*. At about the time the Obituary was published, Emanuel's younger brother Johann Christian was leaving to study in Italy, and was soon to find success in Milan and London, freelancing in the modern way. But the biggest *eminence grise* behind this and other statements in the Obituary, more than is often now recognized, is surely Handel. For some decades the garrulous Mattheson had been lionizing Handel and reporting on his successes, and no doubt news of his great if fluctuating wealth in England had reached his native city of Halle and nearby Leipzig. Handel, moreover, was not a Thuringian.

To what extent Emanuel is reporting his father's views on 'not venturing far' can only be guessed: the various grumbles he expressed over pay and conditions, particularly in Leipzig in his forties and fifties and presumably aloud *en famille*, may have led him or the Obituary authors to feel a need to justify his remaining there until he died. When in his genealogy Sebastian refers to a certain other Johann Christoph Bach as one who

never took a job [*function*] but sought most of his pleasure [*Plaisir*] in travelling (Dok I, 260)

he is surely expressing disapproval, even sarcasm. In any case, for it to be true that J. S. Bach had the chance to achieve fame abroad but chose not to, he would have had to remove himself more permanently from his native province in his late teens or early twenties than he did. Handel and Christoph Graupner had done so, one from Halle, one from Leipzig, both of them going to Hamburg and then beyond. Or he would have had to treat the Leipzig cantorate as a stepping-stone to Dresden or elsewhere, and perhaps had tried to do this but without success. It would be dreadful to imagine him towards the end of his life regretting how he had spent it, wondering what he had missed in the musical centres of Europe, and having to find consolation by willing himself to be content with what he had done in his home country 'for God and his neighbour'. To put it no more strongly: there is little evidence that Bach wanted to stay in Leipzig or was happy as cantor of St Thomas.

The theme of contentment with one's home country was not unknown in biographies of German heroes familiar to Bach and his sons, such as

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Camerarius's life of Melanchthon, the early reformer and revered colleague of Luther. Melanchthon too was orphaned (aged eleven), expressed fidelity to his fatherland and place of origin, was headstrong, and educated himself by assiduously studying what others had written: all motifs to occur in the Bach Obituary. By 1700, several editions of Melanchthon's *Life* had been published in Leipzig, and in a general way at least, he was still widely influential through his directives on preaching and the scriptures. (Melanchthon's portrait had been drawn by Albrecht Dürer, who, though well travelled, similarly let it be known that he preferred remaining in Nuremberg to seeking fame and riches elsewhere. His family was also said to have originated in Hungary.) To listeners for whom a cantata's musical rhetoric was equivalent to a sermon's verbal rhetoric as outlined by Melanchthon, parallels between Luther's colleague and J. S. Bach would have appeared close. They both strove 'for God and their neighbour'.

Though it could be true that Thuringia was culturally less confined than either Hamburg in the North or Munich in the South, it may be rather wishful thinking to see it as an important cultural crossroads. Travel overland being as difficult as it was, really lively contact between cities on major water-routes such as Amsterdam-London or Dresden-Hamburg would have been a easier than, say, Dresden-Eisenach. Yet a province's very narrowness is not a disadvantage when its traditions are healthy and lively. Self-contained Thuringia was a province of marked character and traditions, culturally lively, competitive from city to city, and vigorous in a range of artistic endeavours. Here, in such a province, an exceptionally gifted and voracious boy could well be stimulated both to learn what he could from elsewhere and to rely on his own achievements. Of course, local or national pride can mean underrating the foreign, as is clear later in Emanuel's sarcastic reference to the celebrated French organist Louis Marchand. Nevertheless, for a Protestant boy in 1700 to be receptive to foreign achievement or to seek personal development abroad, taking in what other musical cultures have to offer and making use of it in his profession, was far more common than for a young musician from Roman Catholic countries.

The Obituary's word 'fortune' indicates both financial and artistic success. Certainly the various Bachs including Sebastian did progress financially over their career, doing so without the kind of risks Handel, never a family man, took. In terms of annual income in guilders, J. S. Bach earned 28 as a young court musician, as a minor parish organist 50 then 85, as court organist 150 then 200, as concertmaster 250 to 300, as court capellmeister to 450, as cantor about 800, plus not insignificant payment in kind at each stage, as was customary with organist positions in Protestant Germany

(lodging, fuel, cereals etc.). Whether, like some organists in northern cities, Bach was able himself to hire out seats in the organ-galleries of the churches he served is not recorded; nor is his income from teaching known in detail, although it is not unlikely to have been larger at each stage than his successive salaries (see also p. 110). But clearly, his fame and fortune did not match Handel's. How well situated financially the family was in *c.* 1730, with six children at home including one at university, is a question the composer himself may not have known quite how to answer: as is clear with Telemann in Hamburg, there was nothing unusual in a composer-cantor supporting a large household and at the same time devoting vast energies to composing and directing musical events, all without either the large reward or the occasional disaster known to many an opera-composer.

When it praises those 'honourable Thuringians' staying at home and aiming to please loyal countrymen instead of a few and 'perhaps even envious foreigners', a provincial-nationalistic element creeps in to the Obituary. (Something similar but much more insidious is still there when Richard Wagner, another Leipziger, complained bitterly of those fond of fame and wealth abroad while having no fatherland themselves. II, 35.) But it is not at all certain whether the young J. S. Bach would have agreed with the Obituary authors when, for all anyone knows, he too had the broadest of horizons.

BIRTH, FAMILY

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685, on March 21, in Eisenach. His parents were Johann Ambrosius Bach, Court and Town Musician there, and Elisabeth *née* Lemmerhirt, daughter of a town official in Erfurt. (*Obituary*)

Only after setting the composer's context in general terms does the Obituary turn to its main subject, but from those two brief sentences (composed from records in a family bible?) its readers would have learnt much about his background. Although some idea of the cultural significance of Eisenach, a city of about 7,000 inhabitants, may be gained now by recalling its associations – with Tannhäuser, with a medieval 'combat' between minstrels, a saint (Elizabeth of Thuringia), Martin Luther (a native, translating the New Testament imprisoned in its castle) and J. S. Bach – only the last two would have been in the forefront of Obituary readers' minds. Probably more familiar to them was a well-known book, Walther's *Lexicon*, where they could also learn that 21 March was barely four weeks after the birth of *Georg Friedrich Hendel* in Halle, a bigger town and by the time of the *Lexicon* also the seat of a university.

Birth, family

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Johann Sebastian was the youngest of eight children in the family and the last known infant born to his mother, then aged forty-one. While Johann was a common family name, 'Sebastian' came from the main god-parent, as was customary: Sebastian Nagel was *Stadtppfeifer* or municipal musician in Gotha and a colleague of Ambrosius, both members of musical ensembles active in a local court, its town and the churches. By the time of Sebastian's birth, his father had been director of the municipal music in Eisenach for fourteen years, a violinist who had earlier served the city of Erfurt. There in Erfurt, on 8 April 1668, he had married Maria Elisabeth Lämmerhirt, a young step-sister of Ambrosius's uncle's wife, daughter of a town councillor and thus bourgeois by class. Had Ambrosius succeeded a few months before March 1685 in obtaining the release he sought from the duke and council at Eisenach in order to return to Erfurt, Sebastian would have been born there, as his brother Christoph had been, the brother who was to take him in at the age of nine. It was also to Erfurt relatives that his sister Marie Salome was to return when their mother died.

At least indirectly, Erfurt played a big part in Johann Sebastian's musical background, and it is rather surprising that he is not known ever to have sought a job there. Its musicians over the years included Pachelbel (who taught the elder brother Christoph in Erfurt, from 1686), Nicolaus Vetter and Buttstedt (Pachelbel pupils), Effler (Sebastian's predecessor in Weimar), Walther (a Buttstedt pupil) and Adlung (organist and influential writer on organs) – all well-known names in the world of German organ music for the best part of a hundred years. For Johann Michael Bach, who posthumously became Sebastian's first father-in-law, Erfurt would have been the local capital city, and there too various Bachs remained prominent town musicians right until Napoleonic times. In 1716 Sebastian returned to the city to test a new organ in the Augustinerkirche (Augustinian Church, Erfurt's 'Austin Friars'), where Luther himself was ordained priest in 1507. This organ was the work of the privileged Erfurt builder J. G. Schröter, with whose family Sebastian remained in contact, and whose pupils included Franciscus Volckland, builder of several instruments in and around Erfurt still today in recognizably historical condition. It is quite possible that an abiding sense of pride in Erfurt's and Eisenach's associations with Martin Luther was still with the composer in 1739, when for the first time he published some organ music, *Clavierübung III*, which drew on Luther's hymns.

His municipal position in Eisenach suggests that Bach's father was a gifted musician, officially praised as a versatile and effective music director (BJ 1927, 141), better paid than his predecessor, himself an employer of four musical assistants (two journeymen, two apprentices) and presumably

a good violinist. His musical handwriting as well suggests an accomplished musician. His duties in the town included playing in the wind band twice a day from a balcony or tower of the town hall, participating on Sundays and Feast Days (main service and vespers) in the music in the Georgenkirche (St George's Church, where Sebastian was baptised), and in various ceremonial events civic or private, for which he had the *privilegium*. Whether such musicians as Ambrosius considered themselves primarily wind or string players is not clear or very significant, but judging from the support shown to his eventual widow by the cantor of the Georgenkirche, his senior colleague, he was much respected (Dok II, 4). So, consequently, was his family.

Although Cantor A. C. Dedekind would have been known to the boy, both as a composer of music for various occasions and as his class-teacher in 1694–95, a more certain influence on him was the church's organist at the time, Ambrosius's cousin and colleague, Johann Christoph Bach. This is the Bach uniquely and conspicuously called in the genealogy 'a profound composer' (*ein profunder Componist*), one of whose fine, expansive motets Sebastian probably planned for his own funeral. If so, one might see in it a further sign of Bach's sense of family and tradition, wishing to acknowledge in death his having belonged to a dynasty of church musicians.

It is often now conjectured that as an active organist and composer – neither of which Ambrosius is known for certain to have been – Johann Christoph, described a few years after his death as 'a real wonder of an organist' (BJ 2004, p. 158), allowed the boy Sebastian to learn as many basics of organ-playing and organ-construction as he could, although had he been a formal teacher, the genealogy would probably have said so. Johann Christoph laboured many years to improve the large organ in the town's major church, and perhaps the boy was as much interested in this as he was in accompanying his father to *his* various duties. Also, because Christoph lived eight years longer than Ambrosius he is likely to have been a bigger musical influence on the boy than his father was, especially over the early teenage years: see also below, p. 14. Such influence on his childhood would be a further reason for Sebastian drawing on Johann Christoph's work for his own funeral.

Presumably, Ambrosius's sons sang in the *Schülerchor*, the choir of school-boys providing music in the three churches of the town, including the Georgenkirche, whose recorded repertory of choral music included some by Josquin, a composer known to have been admired by Luther himself and thus especially appropriate to Eisenach. The choir also sang twice a week in the streets of the town, at music for special events, and even perhaps in some