Introduction

The biggest problem in writing about J. S. Bach is that so little is known about either his inner or his outer life, less than for any great composer since his time. So his admirers (as seems also to be the case with Shakespeare) find it hard to avoid inferring what they can from context and from a large number of extant and incomparable works. The second problem is that the few known facts, and even the relevant illustrations, are constantly regurgitated, leaving readers with the same few details over and over again. Or they are reinterpreted in the light of an author’s own preoccupations, which might well not be the composer’s. The third problem is that he was a largely untravelled eighteenth-century German Lutheran, thus remote on several counts from today’s English readers, who can do no more than press their faces to the window and look in.

There is a further difficulty: the exquisite world of imagination opened up by any powerful music is itself problematic, for it tempts listeners to put into words the feelings it arouses in them and so to visualise a composer’s priorities and even personality. There must be few people who have played, sung, listened to or written about Bach’s music who do not feel they have a special understanding of him, a private connection, unique to themselves, but ultimately coming from their idea of what music is and does. This might be quite different from the composer’s. And yet, if only because of the sparse biographical
2 The life of Bach
details, a life of Bach must pay especially close attention to his music,
and I have therefore referred to the works themselves more often than
authors of some other books in this series have done. This is partly to
fill in the chronology, partly to imply what his interests were at parti-
cular moments.

Because of the sparse documentation, authors of Bach biographies
have often chosen to earmark their book with a subtitle, ‘Bach the
musician-poet’ or ‘Bach the culmination of an era’ or ‘Bach the learned
musician’, interpreting the life and works accordingly. But any such
subtitle is likely to be both unremittingly reverential and inclined to
anachronism. Perhaps a realistic approach to his occasional weak-
nesses can be quite as instructive, particularly when one points to music
in which art seems to take second place to artifice. Bach biographers
could usefully probe these weaknesses more than they usually do, not
least because their subject may have had his own ideas on what consti-
tutes ‘weakness’.

One thread leading through the maze of masterworks is supplied by
the so-called Bach Obituary, written probably within six months of his
death but published only in 1754, a delay not uncommon in Germany
at the time and not necessarily implying faint public interest. Like any
biography, the Obituary had an agenda of its own, relaying what its
period and its university-educated authors, C. P. E. Bach and J. F. Agri-
cola, found important to say about a period and a man they understood
only in part. In doing this they laid a path which admirers have trodden
ever since. Consequently, what they say and do not say can be taken as
a starting point, something to relate to other evidence and to use for
shaping a short biography such as this one.

Much as John Mainwaring was soon to do for Handel, the Bach
Obituary makes some attempt to list not only biographical details but
some of the composer’s personal characteristics, and since the Obituary
authors can have known him intimately only during the Leipzig years,
I have listed what they say of this sort in the last chapter. Though brief,
their remarks about the composer imply more than might appear. For
example, by referring more than once to his sense of obligation ‘to God and to his neighbour’ they reaffirm Lutheran orthodoxy’s two-fold duty, unfamiliar now that the idea of piety has deteriorated, but once fundamental. Compared to such ideas, today’s searches in Bach’s music for number symbolism, rhetoric, Golden Sections, biblical hermeneutics, cosmological allusion, even political agendas and psychological states may be satisfying only the ephemeral interests of our own time.
Map of northern Germany in the time of J. S. Bach.

- SILESIA: Copenhagen, Rostock, Stralsund, Stettin, Berlin, Potsdam, Celle, Hamburg, Bremen, Hanover
- BRANDENBURG: Leipzig, Halle, Weimar, Brunswick
- MECKLENBURG: Groningen, Kassel, Halberstadt, Erfurt, Eisenach, Thuringia
- THURINGIA: Nuremberg, Carlsbad, Breslau, Danzig
- AUSTRIA: Vienna, Augsburg, Ulm
- LIPPE: Antwerp, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Haarlem
- R. Rhine: Lübeck, Hanseatic cities

100 miles 100 km
Johann Sebastian Bach belongs [sic] 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.

The Obituary’s chief author, C. P. E. Bach (Emanuel), was well aware of the musical part of his family’s history as it had been handed down, for although his father seems to have contributed little if anything to the day’s published biographies, he spent time compiling a genealogical table, the ‘Origin of the musical-Bach family’ (‘Ursprung der musicalisch-Bachischen Familie’, Dok I, pp. 255–67). He did this at or around the age of fifty, and Emanuel added to it. It numbers fifty-three Bachs over some two hundred years, many of them professional musicians well known in central Germany, though only one or two became so in a larger Europe – himself and, as perhaps he could anticipate by 1735, some of his sons.

One can imagine the personal reasons why a composer would compile such a table at or near his half century, especially after suffering so many bereavements from early childhood on: his parents (mother at fifty, father two days short of fifty), gradually all seven of his siblings (he was the youngest), a wife, no fewer than ten children and a beloved employer. The wider the extended Bach family in Thuringia, the more constantly news of deaths circulated. In addition, J. S. Bach might have
been open as much to the day's fashions as to any atavistic compulsions of his own. For genealogies were well known in the book centre of Leipzig, where, throughout the 1720s and 1730s, Johann Hübner was publishing aristocratic and other family tables for what was evidently a ready market. One such book had some 333 tables.

In its pride at the size and musical achievements of the large clan to which he, a child-orphan, belonged, Bach's table is doing two things: establishing the story of an exceptional family and saluting 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, not entirely unlike the genealogical tables in two Gospels and parts of the Pentateuch, consciously or otherwise. Chiefly as a result of it, the Bachs have become the best-known musical family, though positions of higher prestige were occupied by some of the Couperin family in Paris. The first name in the table, Veit Bach, was that of a man said to have fled Hungary for his Lutheran faith, and although this is doubtful – Hungary (meaning modern Slovakia?) had early on become predominantly Protestant – from Veit a Tree of Jesse springs, a genealogy of Protestant church musicians active over generations.

Probably a few years later, the table was joined by another family document, the Old-Bach Archive, a collection of choral works by older family members, including Sebastian's father and first father-in-law. The collection seems to have passed to J. S. Bach on the death (and perhaps by particular request) of his first cousin Johann Ernst in 1739, an organist who like Sebastian had studied in Hamburg, and who succeeded him at Arnstadt in 1708. Both the Archive and the main copy of the table passed later to Emanuel Bach.

By the 1730s, music as an honourable family trade reflected the growing respect for art and the artist, 'Kunst, der Künstler': this was not a dynasty of shoemakers. A surgeon and a shopkeeper who qualified for listing among the table's 'musical Bachs' were, one can assume, gifted amateurs, unlike the Bach who had been a court jester but is not included, despite Sebastian's certain knowledge of him (Geiringer 1954, p. 9). Of course, the list also excludes the mothers, wives and
daughters. In a letter of 1748, Bach informs a cousin of Emanuel's 'two male heirs' without mentioning their sister, for it was the boys through whom the family tree grew further. Yet his own mother, a Lämmerhirt, was undoubtedly musical, being a member of a family closely connected with music in Erfurt, the region's largest city. She was related to other significant musicians, composers to whose music J. S. Bach was to respond in one way or another: J. G. Walther (as stepsister to his great-aunt) and J. H. Buttstedt (as second cousin to his wife). (See below for remarks on Bach's engagement with the music of 'minor composers'.) Something surely came to Sebastian from his mother, as it came to his sons from their mothers, both of whose original families were also musical.

It would be something to wonder at that such fine men should be so little known outside their fatherland, if one did not consider that these honourable Thuringians were so content with their fatherland and their status that they would not venture far from it, even to go after their fortune.

Sons of Bach would assume that normally success could only be measured by going away to study or by occupying a position of prestige away from home, in a royal court of renown, such as Emanuel's in Potsdam at the time of the Obituary. For some decades the garrulous Hamburg critic Johann Mattheson had been lionising Handel and reporting on his successes in England, and news of Handel's great if fluctuating wealth had reached his native city of Halle nearby. Bach's successor at Leipzig, Gottlob Harrer, had 'spent some time in Italy' (Dok II, p. 480), as Emanuel, who also applied for the job, admitted he had not (Dok III, p. 255). Telemann, Emanuel's godfather, had travelled, come into contact with Polish music, written operas for the free city of Hamburg, visited Paris and actually declined the Leipzig cantorate: a varied and productive musical life of fame and patent success. At about the time the Obituary was published, Emanuel's younger brother Johann Christian was leaving to study in Italy, perhaps with the renowned Padre
2 Map of Thuringia and Saxony in the time of J. S. Bach.
Martini, and soon found success in Milan and London, freelancing in the modern way.

How far the Obituary is reporting Bach’s own views can only be guessed: the various grumbles he expressed over pay and conditions, particularly in Leipzig in his forties and fifties, and no doubt aloud en famille, may have led to a search for some form of self-justification. The Obituary authors, too, though better travelled, needed to claim the self-sufficiency of provincial learning. One hopes that for Bach there was genuine ‘contentment with his fatherland’: 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 ‘for God and his neighbour’.

Contentment of this kind had already been implied in biographies of German heroes familiar to Bach and his sons, such as 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 his directives on preaching and scriptural exegesis were especially influential. (Melanchthon was 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 knowledgeable listeners for whom a cantata was ‘musical rhetoric’ equivalent to the verbal rhetoric of a sermon as laid out by Melanchthon, parallels between the reformer and J. S. Bach would have appeared close.

To see Thuringia as a geographical crossroads where ‘the manifold European trends met and merged’ (Wolff 2000, p. 16) is rather wishful thinking. Travel overland being as difficult as it was, really lively contact between distant cities on major water routes such as Amsterdam–London or Dresden–Hamburg would have been no harder than between
Dresden and Eisenach. But a narrow province with lively traditions does have advantages: self-contained Thuringia was a province with a strong culture, concentrated on itself, competitive and vigorous in its artistic endeavours. (Compare Shakespeare’s London.) Here, an exceptionally gifted and voracious boy would be stimulated 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 shown by the Obituary’s sarcastic references to Louis Marchand later. Nevertheless, it is – to this day – more typical of Protestant than of Roman Catholic cultures to be receptive to foreign achievement or to seek personal development abroad, and provincial Thuringia was no exception.

The Obituary’s word ‘fortune’ denotes both financial and artistic success. Certainly Bach did progress financially over his career, doing so without the kind of risks Handel took. Reckoned in terms of annual income in guilders, as a young court musician Bach earned 28, as a minor parish organist 50 then 85, as court organist 150 then 200, as concertmeister 250 to 300, as court capellmeister 450 and as cantor about 800, in addition to not insignificant payment in kind at each stage (fuel, cereals, lodging, etc.). But clearly, his fame and fortune did not match Handel’s.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685, on 21 March, in Eisenach. His parents were Johann Ambrosius Bach, court and town musician there, and Elisabeth (née Lämmerhirt), daughter of a town official in Erfurt.

Only after describing the composer’s context in general terms does the Obituary turn to its main subject, but from those two brief sentences readers would learn much about his background. Some idea of the significance of Eisenach – a city associated with Tannhäuser, a medieval minstrels’ combat, a saint (Elizabeth of Thuringia), Martin Luther (a native, translating the New Testament imprisoned in its castle) and J. S. Bach (who latinised its name in some of his signatures) – may be