

1 | Early years, 1685–1703: background,  
 family, studies

The Obituary is headed ‘the Honourable Johann Sebastian Bach, world-famous in organ-playing, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer and Music Director in Leipzig’, and 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, presumably responsible for these words, was familiar with the outlines of his family’s musical history, since quite apart from any anecdotes about it that circulated in the family, his father had spent time around the age of fifty compiling on paper a selective genealogy. This is the ‘Origin of the musical-Bach family’, *Ursprung der musicalisch-Bachischen Familie* (Dok. I, pp. 255–61), a Genealogy known to Emanuel in whose household it was later copied: a unique source of information about the family tree and, in the sparseness of other evidence, used ever since in all kinds of connections. This is a document, often since referred to as a ‘table’, into which something can be read about the composer, his interests, his industry, even now and then his opinions.

Although for reasons that can only be guessed Bach contributed little to the published biographies and autobiographies of the day, he did compile a genealogical list either from scratch after many time-consuming enquiries or, more likely, by revising and enlarging an older document begun by a previous member of this large family. There remained some gaps waiting to be filled, signs of some haste (Dok. I, p. 263). Still an indispensable source, it numbers fifty-three Bachs in the course of two hundred years or more, many of them professional musicians well known in central Germany (qv), though only a few became so in a larger Europe – Sebastian himself and, as perhaps he was anticipating by the 1730s, several of his sons. Emanuel added to the Genealogy in which he and five brothers figured. It also enabled him to begin his ‘Memorial’ more tellingly, even proudly, than John Mainwaring was able to begin his biography of Handel (‘George Frederic Handel was born in Halle’).

Since the ‘Memorial’ or Obituary opens in the present tense, the question immediately arises whether it was prepared during the composer’s

lifetime, perhaps shaped like a curriculum vitae or a biography for one of the several lexicons being published in Leipzig which did not, however, include him. The two other obituaries printed along with it begin less ambiguously by referring to their subjects as deceased. 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 his father had collected and preserved them along with the genealogical table. Possible instances of such 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, when Scripture itself had ordained that one's fiftieth was a jubilee year, with family celebration (Leviticus 25:10). In Bach's copy of the Calov Lutheran Bible, various marginalia in the chapters to do with such observances and rules suggest that he had more than a casual interest in such things (e.g. Cox 1985, facs. 66). And there were also likely to be personal reasons for the Genealogy, including both a birth and some deaths: the recent birth of Johann Christian (the 'London Bach', in September 1735, his last son, as it happens) and the loss of so many close relatives, from early childhood on. Deceased close relatives were 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 died later, aged twenty-four in 1739) and a particularly beloved employer. His brother and former guardian Johann Christoph had died in his fiftieth year, as had his sister Marie Salome in her fifty-second.<sup>1</sup>

This catalogue of bereavements may have been larger than was usual among such classes. For example, by his late fifties Telemann had lost only two of his surviving seven children. But the wider the extended Bach family was, the more constantly news of deaths within it must have circulated among relatives or, just as bad, been taken for granted. For example, ten of the eleven children of Johann Günther, great-great-grandson of Sebastian's great-grandfather, died before their mother. Sebastian's first conscious family bereavement was when he was six years old (brother Balthasar),

<sup>1</sup> It seems that fifty was a significant age in Thuringia and Saxony. At fifty, Handel apparently planned a visit to his native Halle (HHB 4, p. 254); later in Weimar, at about that age, Goethe drafted *Der Mann von fünfzig Jahren* ('the man of fifty'). Also probably belonging to 1735 is the 'Bach goblet', on which are engraved the JSB monogram, several inscriptions including *Vivat*, and motifs including B A C H (qv) (Dok. II, p. 264; Dok. IV, p. 278): a jubilee gift?

his last within nine months of his own death (grandson Johann Sebastian Altnickol); and not only relations – during Bach's time at Leipzig, no fewer than seventeen students in the choir-school died. All this implies that when Bach's own entry in the Genealogy says he is still living 'by God's will', this is no empty formula.

There is another relevant point: in working on the Genealogy when he did, with whatever personal or religious urges he may have had, the composer was knowingly or otherwise following the day's taste for family tables. In the book-centre of Leipzig such tables were well known throughout the 1720s and 1730s. Johann Hübner was publishing aristocratic and other tables for a ready market, one of them with some 333 tables (meant to be an evocative number, no doubt), and these could have encouraged Bach to work on a list of the 'musical Bachs', perhaps even to think of publishing it. His careful assemblage of materials confirms that he was a born collector and portfolio-organizer, even implying that he was more of a letter-writer than is now known or than he was said by Emanuel to have been (Dok. III, p. 290). Both the various blanks he left in his table (e.g. when a date of birth was unknown) and the musical specifics he included (e.g. that Johann Günther Bach was singer and schoolmaster at a church in Erfurt) suggest that he had a lively variety of sources: existing information, correspondence, conversation, visits to and from, hearsay.

In listing the musicians of the large and well-distributed clan to which he, an early orphan, belonged, Bach accomplishes several things: he 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 New Testament Gospels and parts of the Old Testament Pentateuch – another biblical allusion, in other words, whether or not a conscious one. So well read in both Old and New Testaments were genealogists, including J. S. Bach, that there cannot have been much difference between conscious and unconscious similarities in all such compilations.

The first name, Veit Bach, was that of a man said in both Genealogy and Obituary to have fled Hungary in the sixteenth century on account of his *Religion* (Obituary: Dok. II, p. 80), specifically his *Lutheran Religion* (Genealogy: Dok. I, p. 255). Although the latter phrase, like its antithesis *Roman-Catholic Religion*, was used commonly enough in mid-century Dresden and elsewhere, since 'Hungary' (meaning present-day southern Slovakia) was already predominantly Protestant at the time, Bach's Genealogy might have been making an assumption. Perhaps *its* source was

referring to Christianity itself, which at that period was under serious threat from Islam and Turkish Muslims. (Also threatened in the early sixteenth century were Jews in that region, when it was finally divided into Hapsburg, Ottoman and Transylvanian sections. The Jews' *Religion* was another one to be shunned?) The Turks were still being fought centuries later by the Swedish army to which Sebastian's brother Johann Jacob belonged (Dok. I, p. 259). Elsewhere in German literature 'Hungary' featured as a haven for anti-Papist musicians, as in Daniel Speer's *Ungarischer oder Dacianischer Simplicissimus*, 1683.

The entry on Veit Bach, a *Weißbecker* ('fancy baker'), is fuller than for some others, for from him a Tree of Jesse springs, branches of a Protestant tree flourishing over generations. Partly as a result of this Genealogy, the Bachs have become the best known of all musical dynasties, though positions of higher prestige were occupied in Paris by some of the Couperins.

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 surviving collection of choral works by older family members, and today deposited in the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin. Now constituting some two dozen pieces, but once perhaps many more, the collection includes music by Johann Christoph, the organist in Eisenach admired by Sebastian (his father's cousin); Georg Christoph (Sebastian's uncle); and Johann Michael (Sebastian's first father-in-law, also praised in the Genealogy). Some of the copying of scores was done by this Johann Christoph, some performing parts and a text 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 as a Bach family document, and that it passed complete or incomplete to J. S. Bach when the organist there, his first cousin Johann Ernst, died in 1739 (BJ 1998, pp. 138, 147).

In the following years Bach then added to the Archive himself, *perhaps* contributing or intending to contribute such autographs as the score or parts of various early cantatas (qv) (Nos. 71, 4, 106 and 131), fit representatives of his early successes. He also wrote much of the text underlay for Johann Christoph Bach's twenty-two-part motet 'Es erhub sich ein Streit' and parts for another, 'Lieber Herr Gott, wecke uns auf'. This last, in which Bach was helped by a student, dates from his final months and could have been prepared for his own funeral. So it seems that the Archive continued to be made up piecemeal over the years and was meant to be enlarged further, even after Emanuel appears to have taken charge of it under the

name *Alt-Bachisches Archiv* (Dok. III, p. 502). It was also Emanuel, presumably being reliably informed, who spoke of his father performing Johann Christoph's motet in Leipzig (Dok. III, p. 292).

As well as how, quite why Bach should carefully preserve such an archive, provide some title-pages for its music, complete some texts, insert corrections and even make some performance materials from it, is an interesting question. Likely, of course, is 'family loyalty': preserving work by other Bachs, a further and natural step in 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 were planned to be. Was this one of the reasons that in his maturity he made certain fair copies, such as the late collection of organ-chorales, and even that it was for this that he completed the Mass, an archive in more senses than one? Also likely is that the Archive was still supplying him with service-music from time to time in his final years, despite its out-of-date styles. For it is often forgotten that as well as modern cantatas, a good deal of much earlier music was sung in the main Sunday services in the larger churches – motets, chorales, chant. Presumably by the time the Archive passed to Emanuel along with the main copy of the Genealogy, its value for the family was mostly (but not entirely) antiquarian. But this was something not at all insignificant for the wider Bach family, judging from a letter of 1728 written by another Bach, Johann Nicolaus, who was aware of the family's tradition that it had come originally from 'Hungary' (BJ 1989, p. 213). So was J. G. Walther when he included a biographical entry on J. S. Bach in his *Lexicon* in 1732.

To imply in the 1730s that music was an honourable family trade was a reflection of the growing national respect for 'art and the artist', *Kunst und der Künstler*. These very words appear often in the Obituary itself, indeed conspicuously so, and became deeply respected over the German Enlightenment and Romantic periods. After all, this was not a dynasty of shoemakers or bakers but, as the Genealogy's title said, 'musical Bachs', which included not only composers and performers but also those who were active in devising new musical instruments. Walther (1732, p. 64) suggested that those called Bach were devoted to music since their very name was melodic (B A C H, qv). A surgeon and a shopkeeper who qualified for inclusion in the list of 'musical Bachs' were, one assumes, gifted amateurs – and therefore in principle very different from one early Bach who had been a different kind of musician (a court jester/fiddler) and is not listed, despite Sebastian's probable knowledge of him. (His portrait had even been engraved and published: see Geiringer 1954, plate iv.)

Unlike true family trees, the genealogical table lists few mothers, wives or daughters, mostly in earlier generations, although the best surviving source of it is a copy made by Sebastian's granddaughter. The table does mention the 'four unprovided-for daughters' of Johann Michael Bach of Gehren, one of whom was Maria Barbara Bach, Sebastian's first wife; but, curiously, she is not named. Nor are his wives mentioned under his own entry, any more than his second wife is in the communicant lists at Leipzig when they name Bach and with him, fairly regularly, one or more of his sons. Such a formal church document is unlikely to name women even though the formative table in Matthew 1 includes Mary (an actual personal name?), and baptism-records list godmothers, usually by defining their status ('wife of ...'). In a letter of 1730 discussed further below, Bach makes a point of mentioning the current professional position of three sons, noting also that his wife sings well and that his first child, Catharina Dorothea, is unmarried and plays 'not badly' (*nicht schlimm*: Dok. I, p. 68). In a further letter of 1748, he informs a cousin about Emanuel's 'two male heirs' but does not mention their sister, for it was through boys that the list of 'musical Bachs' contained in the Genealogy might gradually grow longer.

Yet Bach's own mother was undoubtedly musical, being a member of the family Lämmerhirt, closely involved with music in Erfurt and even mentioned in the Genealogy (Dok. I, p. 256). Erfurt was the area's largest town and a Hanseatic (qv) city with allegiances far afield, and it happens that Elisabeth Lämmerhirt was also related to two other prominent musicians in Thuringia: J. G. Walther (she was Walther's grandfather's half-sister) and J. H. Buttstedt (she was his wife's second cousin). These were composers to whose music her gifted son was to respond later in one way or another and, clearly, a mother's connections could be important to a musician. Telemann in his autobiographies claimed that his musical gifts came from his mother, as something surely had come to Johann Sebastian Bach from his. Both of Bach's wives had belonged to professional musical families and must have contributed to the musical gifts of the children, as also no doubt to their daily musical studies.

### 'Honourable Thuringians'

After listing various musical members of Veit Bach's 'race' (*Geschlecht*), the Obituary continues

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 [there] that they would not venture at all far from it, even to go after their fortune.

There is something approaching an apology here. Emanuel is speaking of earlier Bachs, ‘worthy men’ the memory of whom deserves to be kept fresh, musicians he had learnt about from the Genealogy and the Old-Bach Archive. Whether he is fairly representing his father’s views as they had been expressed at various times, perhaps at some moment of particular discontent in Leipzig, cannot be shown. Emanuel would certainly have known how much travel and such experiences had featured in recent biographies of contemporary composers (in Mattheson 1740) and for his readers, the relevance of what he says to the biography that follows would not have been missed. Especially the musicians among them would assume that normally a musician’s highest status could be measured only by two kinds of success which Bach, unlike Handel, never achieved: leaving home to study abroad, especially Italy; then occupying a position of prestige in a court or capital city such as Hanoverian London or Prussian Berlin. (It was in Berlin that Emanuel and Agricola were working by the time the Obituary was published.)

A general and keen interest in a musician’s early studies and later career is clear from Johann Mattheson’s collection of biographies published a few years earlier, the *Ehren-Pforte* of 1740, which generally addressed the question of where and what a composer had studied. This is a most important book to bear in mind when reading the Obituary. Emanuel knew that Mattheson had not published a biography of Bach to compare with those of Handel or Telemann, whose travels, meetings with the elite, engagement with opera, concert-going in important cities and so on, were described there. An upper-middle-class boy, Telemann had been a university student in Leipzig, had good and continuing contact with Handel, had travelled, had enthusiastic contact with Polish music, became opera- and church-director for the free city of Hamburg, visited Paris and actually declined the job of cantor in Leipzig. Altogether, such a varied and productive musical life of fame and obvious success as Telemann’s was surely in the mind of Emanuel Bach, his own godson, as he drafted the Obituary.

There were many German musicians of the time with wider experience than Bach. Two very respected musicians trained in Leipzig and whose biographies were published, Fasch and Graupner, had branched out either in or beyond Germany, although Fasch was said to have been unable to afford to study in Italy. (Handel funded his first Italian visit himself from earnings he made in Hamburg, as reported by Mainwaring (1760, p. 42), probably wrongly.) Bach’s successor at St Thomas’s, Gottlob Harrer, had ‘spent some time in Italy’ and learnt composition there as well as the job of cantor (Dok. II, p. 480). These were the kind of travels that Emanuel, who had by then applied to succeed his father, later admitted he had never



made himself (Dok. III, p. 255). The ‘Jena Bach’, Johann Nicolaus, had spent some time in Italy, as Walther’s *Lexicon* of 1732 informed its readers. 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 *éminence 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. Furthermore, Handel was not a native Thuringian, the focus of Emanuel’s remarks (Halle was within the march of Brandenburg).

To what extent Emanuel is reporting his father’s views on ‘not venturing far’ can only be guessed: his various grumbles over pay and conditions, particularly in Leipzig – grumbles presumably made aloud in the family – may have led all of them to feel a need to justify the fact that he remained there until he died. ‘Not venturing far’ is an aspect of the biography more important than it is often taken to be. For there is a big contrast here with G. H. Stölzel’s obituary that accompanied Bach’s, where pages are devoted to Stölzel’s travels and experiences, surely affecting Emanuel had he seen it before publication, which is possible. Yet Sebastian himself, at a point in his Genealogy, refers to a certain family member as one who

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

– an expression of disapproval, even sarcasm? The offender was none other than the son of the Eisenach organist Christoph admired by Sebastian, another Johann Christoph (b. 1676), who became active as a keyboard-player in London, as did other Germans such as J. C. Pepusch. This Bach was probably employed as a theatre musician – another source of disapproval?

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 have removed himself more permanently from his native province in his teens or early twenties than he ever did. Handel and Christoph Graupner had done so, one from Halle and one from Leipzig. Or, to match them, he would have had to treat the Leipzig cantorate as a stepping-stone to Dresden or elsewhere, and if he had tried to do this, without success, the Obituary authors would surely know about it. To put it no more strongly: there is little evidence that Bach wanted to stay in Leipzig or was happy as long-term cantor of St Thomas, certainly not in his later years when Emanuel was occasionally with him.