Bach the Unknowable


Think of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and you might picture an abused little prodigy being ferried to performances across Europe by his greedy father. And many people can't conjure up Ludwig von Beethoven without seeing the irascible genius, completely deaf, having to be turned around to see the tumultuous standing ovation at the premiere of his Ninth Symphony. Compared with the fame of these two masters, the name Johann Sebastian Bach produces no popular image at all.

Yet Bach (1685–1750) is the "father of Western music," writes critic Harold Fromm. He's in the "very chemistry of Western musical blood, like red cells, white cells, and platelets in our material plasma." Bach fails to cut much of a human figure simply because, apart from enough music to fill 160 CDs, he left so little behind. It doesn't help that he lived in Leipzig, far from the great centers of European culture.

Because his only surviving correspondence lies primarily in church and...
municipal ledgers, the
great composer comes off
as an “aggressive busi-
nessman whining about
maltreatment and under-
payment,” though in fact
he lived a rich profes-
sional, social, and family
life and earned consider-
able recognition. Ten of
his 20 children died
before adulthood, but four
lived to become famous
musicians in their own
right.

Bach was born in
Thuringia in present-day
Germany, lost both parents by the
time he was 10, and by 18 was
employed as a professional organist.
In 1723 he was named cantor and
music director at a school and four
churches in Leipzig, where he strug-
gled to stage his compositions using
mostly student singers and
musicians.

In more than a thousand com-
positions, Bach perfected the contra-
puntal (or counterpoint) style, in
which two or more independent but
harmonically related melodic parts
are played at the same time—a chal-
lenging proposition that music
teachers sometimes describe to
beginning students as akin to
patting their heads and rubbing
their stomachs at the same time. He
changed the way music was played.
Before Bach, the thumb had been
only rarely used in keyboard
playing, but he pioneered its far
greater use (along with that of the
little finger) to hold down a key
while the other fingers
played around it. This
made it possible to
produce both dominant
melodies and elaborate
flourishes at the same
time. It also made the
music harder to play.

During his 27 years in
Leipzig, Bach volunteered
to compose a new church
cantata of his own almost
every Sunday for a period
of five years. He continu-
ally recycled material,
changing instrumentation, adding and deleting.

Two of his greatest works, the Mass
in B minor (1748–49) and the
Christmas Oratorio (1734–35), were
“tweaked from mostly secular existing gems,” Fromm writes.

In Bach’s day, words mattered
more in the Lutheran Church than
music. This was liturgical music,
after all. Today the words seem
pietistic—even “deadly,” Fromm
says, while the music is almost uni-
versally regarded as inspiring and
astonishingly inventive.