

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH



Johann Sebastian Bach, widely regarded as the greatest of all composers of music for Christian worship, was born on March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany. Even as a young boy, Bach was enthralled by music. Born into a family of musicians, he learned to play several instruments at an early age, even though both his parents died before he was ten. Johann got his first organist job at age 17. The church leaders insisted that he direct the choir – which was notably lacking in musical ability. Already, Bach was writing innovative choral pieces, but his singers couldn't handle them and he lacked the patience to put up with them. One night, he even got into a fight with one choir member, whom he had called a *"nanny-goat bassoonist."*

At his next position, he faced problems of a different kind. Well-meaning Pietists were demanding "simple" music. Couldn't Bach write something less ornate, something that would draw attention to God and not to the music itself? Bach strongly protested that his aim was to create *"well-regulated church music to the glory of God."*

It's simple, really

Some time later, his wife died, leaving him with a house full of children. A year later, he married Anna Magdalena. She supported his musical work, sang his compositions in a bold soprano, and bore him many more children. She begged him to teach her music so that her life might be the more perfectly attuned to his. *"My dear,"* he replied, *"there's nothing to learn. You merely strike the right note at the right moment and the organ does the rest!"*

Those cryptic initials...

Bach set before himself (and accomplished) the seemingly impossible task of preparing a different cantata for every Sunday for a three-year period. This demanding task involved creating the music, copying it for the performers, and rehearsing with them. Many of his compositions were lost – no one knows how many. But on those that do survive there is often the interesting insertion in Bach's own hand of the letters *"J. J."* at the beginning of each and *"S. D. G."* at the end. They are abbreviations for the Latin, *Jesu Juva (Jesus Help Me!)* and *Soli Deo Gloria (To the Glory of God Alone!)*. Bach also frequently inscribed *"I. N. J."* standing for *In Nomine Jesu;* that is, *"In the Name of Jesus."*

Bach wrote his music for God. Most of his works are explicitly biblical. The famous missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer, who was also an expert on Bach, called him *"the Fifth Evangelist."* Bach's music is indisputably in a league by itself. Every note he wrote was dedicated to Christ. According to him, music's aim and purpose is to glorify God and provide recreation for the mind. He said, *"Where this is not observed there will be no real music but only devilish hubbub."* He poured emotion into his music which became the mother of Romanticism. His portrayals of Christ's passion made frequent use of dissonance. Combining expressive melodies with a rhythmic bass line, he conveyed, according to William H. Scheide, *"the union of the divine and human in the person of Christ."*

"Bach's use of counterpoint was brilliant and innovative, and the immense complexities of his compositional style—which often included religious and numerological symbols that seem to fit perfectly together in a profound puzzle of special codes—still amaze musicians today.

"Every form he touched, he improved. He perfected the 'well-tempered' scale which by dividing every octave into twelve equal distances allowed any key on the organ to start a scale. His keyboard technique used all five fingers where three had been the norm." *The Well-Tempered Clavier and Art of the Fugue* trained musicians such as Beethoven, who thought Bach's accomplishments so massive that he remarked: "*He should not be called Bach (brook) but Meer (sea).*"



Mediocre???

When Bach applied for a music director job in Leipzig in 1722, there were five other candidates. The city council seemed to be looking for a college education, which Bach lacked. They offered the job to two other candidates, who both declined. Finally, Bach got the call. As one councilman commented, "*Since we cannot get the best, we will have to be satisfied with a mediocre one.*"

Blue fish, Bass, and Bach – unbelievable!

Sadly, Bach's contemporaries had no idea that his music would grace the ages. Besieged by diabetes, he died on July 28, 1750, and was virtually forgotten at his death. The bulk of his work lay neglected for almost a century. Fish vendors in the market wrapped their wares in Bach manuscripts. Bach's revival was largely owing to another Christian composer, Felix Mendelssohn, who was in awe of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. He arranged to have Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* played on March 11, 1829, almost exactly a century from the date of its first, long-forgotten performance. Mendelssohn himself conducted. "*Never,*" wrote one participant, "*have I known any performance so consecrated by one united sympathy.*" More than 1,000 people were unable to get tickets. Two further concerts had to be scheduled at once. Today many consider Bach the greatest composer who ever lived. There are more recordings of Bach's music than that of any other composer. One count found over 1000 different albums.

There is only one Bach!

F. W. Boreham wrote: *Wherever he came, he conquered. Frederick the Great commanded him to visit him at Potsdam. Bach, who was 62, regarded the invitation as the climax of his renown. "Here comes old Bach," exclaimed the King, under his breath, as the gallant figure was ushered into his presence. But a day or two later, having cultivated his guest's acquaintance and been held spellbound by his artistry, he shouted amidst the applause: "There is only one Bach! There is only one Bach!"*

Esther Meynell, in her "Little Chronicle of Magdalena Bach," credits Magdalena with saying, "*Deep down in his great heart he always carried his crucified Redeemer, and his noblest music is his secret cry for a clearer vision of his risen Lord.*"

*"The aim and final reason for all music should be nothing else but
the glory of God and the refreshment of the spirit"
(J. S. Bach).*

Bach wanted to compose music for the glory of God. He was not alone in this. Here are comments of some of the greatest composers the world has known, masters whose contributions have enriched and ennobled mankind. See for yourself what inspired, motivated, and enthralled them.

- **Franz Joseph Hayden** began most of his scores with the words, In Nomini Jesu, and ended them with Laus Deo Gloria.
- **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** said, *“God is ever before my eyes. I realize His omnipotence and I fear His anger; but I also recognize His love, His compassion, and His tenderness towards His creatures.”*
- **Ludwig van Beethoven** wrote *“Therefore, calmly will I submit myself to all inconsistency and will place all my confidence in Your eternal goodness, Oh God! My soul shall rejoice in Thee, immutable Being. Be my rock, my light, forever my trust!”*
- **Franz Liszt** insisted that music’s purpose was, *“to ennoble, to comfort, to purify man, to bless and praise God.”*
- **Anton Bruckner**, when composing his ninth and final symphony, jokingly told Gustav Mahler, *“I must at least finish, or I’ll cut a poor figure when I appear soon before the good Lord and He says, ‘Well, My boy, why did I give you so much talent if not to sing to My honor and glory? You have not done nearly enough with it!’”*
- **Edward Elgar** chose to set to music virtually the whole of the New Testament.
- **Igor Stravinsky** wrote: *“I regard my talents as God-given, and I have always prayed to Him for strength to use them ... I pledged myself to God to be worthy of their development.”*
- **Johannes Brahms** once remarked, *“People do not even know that we North Germans long for the Bible every day and do not let a day go by without it. In my study I can lay my hand on my Bible even in the dark.”*
- **Felix Mendelssohn** considered Bach’s work *“the greatest **Christian** music in the world.”* His own work as a composer blended his belief in divine inspiration with his Protestant work ethic. He said, *“I know perfectly well that no musician can make his thoughts or his talents different to what Heaven has made them; but I also know that if Heaven had given him good ones, he must also be able to develop them properly.”*
- **Antonin Dvorak**, writing about his colossal *Mass in D Major*, characteristically proclaimed, *“Faith, hope and love to God Almighty and thanks for the great gift of being enabled to bring this work in the praise of the Highest and in the honor of art to a happy conclusion ... Do not wonder that I am so religious. An artist who is not – could not produce anything like this. Have we not examples enough in Beethoven, Bach, Raphael and many others?”* Dvorak loved reading the Bible and owned copies in English as well as in modern and ancient Czech. His letters are full of spiritual observations, and his manuscripts regularly began with the marking *“With God”* and ended with the benediction, *“God be thanked.”*