

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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Johann Christoph Bach... Wait, which one?

By Lorin Wilkerson—Bass

It is common knowledge that Johann Sebastian Bach came from a family whose business it had been to make music in central Germany for quite some time, and his sons inherited from Sebastian the propensity and craftsmanship to continue that work.

But what of those who came before him? Sebastian's great-great-grandfather Veit Bach was the first known musical Bach, and perhaps the last for quite some time who would not make his living primarily or exclusively through music. Veit Bach was a miller who, according to Sebastian, was known for playing a lute or zither to the rhythm of the churning millstone. Veit was a Lutheran in staunchly Roman Catholic Hapsburg Hungary during a time in which it was very dangerous to be so, and in the late 16th or early 17th century he fled persecution to settle in Wechmar, Thuringia, the region of Germany that would become associated with the Bach family for centuries to come. In this close-knit family, names were something of a tradition, and none was more common than the name Johann Christoph Bach.

The Many Joh. Christoph Bachs of Thuringia

When looking at the compositions of Johann Christoph Bach, one of the most daunting challenges is simply making sure that one is talking about the correct person. Keep in mind that all of the male Bachs at this point were musicians and composers: Sebastian's

grandfather was named Christoph, as was his uncle (and his father's twin brother) Johann Christoph. Sebastian's oldest brother (and guardian after their parents' death) was named Joh. Christoph, as was his great uncle Heinrich's oldest son. Then there was Bach's son Joh. Christoph Friedrich, and Bach's son-in-law Joh. Christoph Altnickol, Sebastian's copyist, who would go on to become a well-regarded composer in his own right. It is small wonder that even specialist scholars have sometimes gotten these men confused.



Joh. Christoph Bach

Part of the confusion lies in the fact that the Joh. Christoph that is usually referred to scholastically, the one who was the most important composer in the family before Sebastian, was sometimes called his uncle, even though strictly speaking this was not the case. Sebastian's father's brother, his 'actual' uncle Joh. Christoph, was a town musician in Arnstadt during Sebastian's youngest years in Eisenach. Sebastian's first cousin once removed (the son of his great-uncle Heinrich Bach) was organist at the church in Eisenach while the prodigy lived there, and as such was undoubtedly known to young Sebastian as 'uncle' Joh. Christoph, and may have even given the young lad his very first instruction in composition and more.

"Indeed the latter [Sebastian] who would later describe Joh. Christoph as a "profound" composer and perform his works in Leipzig, no doubt received his earliest impressions of the organ with his "uncle" (really his first cousin once removed) at the instrument."¹ So the Johann Christoph referred to in this article is actually his first cousin once removed, but was probably called 'Uncle Christoph' by young Sebastian.

Johann Christoph Bach

Sebastian's great-uncle Heinrich Bach was coming of age at an extremely difficult time in the history of Central Europe. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was initially fought over religious differences but over time it morphed into a struggle over dynastic successions and wider geopolitical conflicts. It made Germany (at that time a collection of nations, principalities and micro-states) the most dangerous place to live anywhere in Europe.

Indeed, about Heinrich Bach's marriage in 1642 the great Bach biographer Philipp Spitta could state: "It required some courage to marry in those times, not only because often enough the husband could defend neither himself, his wife, nor his child against the insolent violence of an ungoverned soldiery, but also because it was only too often impossible to foresee where the means of subsistence were to come from."² At that time a large number of the soldiers of the many armies roaming the land were mercenaries, *de facto* if not *de jure*, and the helpless populace could be expected to support them or face outrageous violence. Heinrich's young family survived, Spitta speculates, because of a hidden plot of land somewhere used for gardening. While Heinrich *was* gainfully employed, at certain points in time he had not been paid for years and had to petition the Count of Schwarzburg-Armstadt to pay his salary (which petition was fortunately granted.) Another factor that may have helped was that by this time, certain regions of Germany had been depopulated so severely (by up to 2/3rds) that 'in-kind' payments were more readily available as there were simply not enough people to consume the goods. It was this background with which the young Joh. Christoph had to contend.

Still, his father Heinrich was no slouch of a composer himself, and educated Joh. Christoph such that in time he was able to secure the not-insignificant post of organist in Eisenach, and may have even been the keyboardist at the court of the Duke of Saxony-Eisenach, though the records on this are not entirely clear. His most famous composition,

the cantata *Es erhub sich ein Streif* (which is treated at length by Spitta in Sebastian's biography) was performed by Sebastian during his tenure as Kantor at Leipzig, and also influenced Telemann during his brief tenure as Kappellmeister at Eisenach from 1708-1711. Sebastian wrote a cantata (BWV 19) of the same title, and Telemann wrote compositions based on Joh. Christoph's work as well, though they are regarded as of quite inferior quality compared to the older Bach's work. [See Spitta below.] ♪

¹ Raymond Erickson, Ed. *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach*. (Aston Magna Foundation, 2009) p 14.

² Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach: His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685-1750* (Dover Publications Inc., 1951. Eng. Trans. Clara Bell & J.A. Fuller Maitland.) Vol. 1 p 29.

³ To be sung by the BCC on February 5th.

Linger after the March 18th Concert

The Bach Cantata Choir invites you to stay after the March 18 concert for some conversation. You may have questions about our operations that you have not had a chance to ask, or some programming suggestions you would like heard. We definitely would like to hear from you so that we can make your musical experience even better.

Ralph Nelson, Artistic Director and Artist in Residence will be on hand, as will members of the choir and the Board of Directors in what we hope will be the first of many exchanges. The chat will be open for an hour or so, and light refreshment will be available. We look forward to seeing you there!



BACH CANTATA CHOIR
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Join Us For SuperBach Sunday!

Sunday, February 5, 2012 at 2:00 p.m.
Rose City Park Presbyterian Church

Featuring works by Jan Sweelinck (1562-1621), Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703), Georg Phillip Telemann (1681-1767), and of course J.S. Bach.