A Letter from the Consort

Dear Educator:

I am thrilled to hear that your school will be taking part in the Washington Bach Consort’s *Bach to School* program. As a teacher, I’m sure you realize the importance of the arts in providing a full, well-rounded education to every child.

Personally, I have loved the music of Bach since I was a child singing in the Washington National Cathedral Choir. Bach’s music has a lot to teach children—in fact, much of music theory as we know it today is based on the study of Bach’s music.

We hope that this educational guide will be helpful to you as you prepare your students for their visit. For best results, we suggest that you take two 30-minute periods before the program to get your students ready and another period after the program to solidify what they’ve learned. By the way, we love to receive letters, drawings, and reviews from students! Your response is also important to us, so please be sure to return an evaluation form to us at the end of the performance. Tell us what you like and don’t like about this guide, our performance, or our music. With your input, our program can only get better. Enjoy the show!

Sincerely,

Dr. Dana Marsh
Artistic Director
Washington Bach Consort
Did you know? In 1977, NASA launched The Voyager spacecraft into outer space, along with a 12-inch gold-plated record containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth. The musical selections feature works by J.S. Bach, as well as other prominent composers and popular musicians.

The Bach Family
In 1735, Bach began to document two centuries of his family history in, “Origins of the musical Bach family.” From his first marriage, Bach had seven children. After his first wife’s passing, Bach married Anna Magdalena, with whom he had thirteen children. Bach’s most musically successful sons were Carl Philipp Emanuel (C.P.E.) and Johann Christian (J.C.).

Born: March 21, 1685 in Eisenach, Germany

Early Life: He was the eighth child of a well-known organist, with whom he began his musical studies. He lost his parents at the age of 10. Bach moved in with his older brother Johann Christoph, also an organist in Ohrdruf. During his stay, Bach excelled at organ, clavier, singing, violin and composing, as well as in school. At fifteen, he became a choirboy. He would memorize scores from the church library.

Professional Career: Bach became the church organist at Arnstadt when he was nineteen, and moved on to the same position at Muhlhausen. However, his original music was not accepted there. In 1708, he started his first major job as church organist and chamber musician in Weimar while writing the most impressive organ repertoire ever created by one man. By 1717, Bach was regarded as one of the greatest organists of his day. However, his employer (the Duke of Weimar) thought of him as a simple musician. Insulted by his treatment, Bach accepted the position of Kapellmeister (choir master) at Cothen.

In 1723, Bach moved to Leipzig, where he remained until his death. Bach’s eyesight and health eventually began to fail and an unsuccessful eye operation resulted in total blindness. He continued to compose until his death on July 28, 1750.

Let’s Talk…

Johann Sebastian Bach

In 1705, Bach walked 200 miles to see the greatest organist of the time, Buxtehude.

J.S. Bach with his sons
Bach lived in a world where there were constant disputes between Catholics and Protestants. The churches were a BIG part of everyday life, and the main source of employment for artists and musicians. Bach spent the last twenty seven–years of his life in Leipzig, where his job was to compose music for the city and the churches, direct the church choir and instruments, occasionally play the church organ, and instruct at the St. Thomas school.

The only other employers in the arts were the people at the emperors, kings, princes, and grand dukes ruled by divine right*. Hereditary monarchies and aristocracies controlled everything not under the Church’s jurisdiction; the Church and State worked together to maintain the status quo. Artists were servants or, often, salaried employees, ranking only with secretaries, farm managers, butlers, and cooks.

Bach worked for one such prince until the prince’s wife, who didn’t like Bach or his music, had the prince cause his imminent departure.

*Divine Right: The right of a sovereign to rule as set forth by the theory of government that holds that a monarch receives the right to rule directly from God and not from the people.

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**March 21, 1685:**
Birth

1695: Parents pass away, moves in with brother

1704: Becomes church organist at Arnstadt

1708: First major job as church organist/chamber musician in Weimar

1717: Bach is regarded as one of the greatest organists of the time

1723: Bach moves to Leipzig, where he remains until death.

1725: Bach begins documenting his family tree with, “Origins of the musical Bach family”

1750: Bach passes away, leaving behind a legacy of 20 children, including two musically successful sons
In the arts, particularly in architecture and music, ornate decoration is representative of the Baroque age.

One of Bach’s great talents was his ability to take a tune, either his or a great hymn, and decorate it so it was better than the original.

When Bach was Born in 1685...
- Charles II of England died, to be succeeded by William and Mary.
- Louis XIV of France had been king for almost 40 years. He went on to become the longest-ruling Monarch in European history.
- John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, was 35 years old. His career spanned the reigns of five monarchs.

When Bach turned 21...
- Benjamin Franklin was born.

When Bach died in 1750...
- The American Revolution would be fought over 20 years later.
- George Washington was 18 years old.
- Frederick the Great was King of Prussia.
- 21-year-old girl named Catherine had just married the Russian Czar; in 1762 she would seize power as Catherine the Great.

Bach was a great student. He learned French and Italian so he could study the works of the French and Italian composers.

He was very good at math: a great quality of Bach’s music is its adherence to mathematical discipline.

Mostly though, he studied music and music theory. He was so good that, at first, you don’t realize just how beautifully crafted his compositions are. He was the master of counterpoint - the skill of opposing theme against theme, and multiples of it, and weaving the most complex threads into tapestries of astounding complexity.
Glossary

**Baroque** This refers to the music art and architecture in Europe from 1600–1750. The music is characterized by the use of *counterpoint* (see below), expressive melodies and chromaticism. During this period musical forms such as the suite, sonata, rondo, concerto, opera, and cantata were developed and perfected.

**Canon** This is the name of a composition in which all of the parts have the same melody, but start at different times within the piece.

**Cantata** A musical composition for chorus, soloists, and instruments, based on a sacred text, poem, or play.

**Counterpoint** This is a compositional technique where there is more than one melody played at the same time. Each part becomes significant through its melodic and rhythmic independence.

**Fugue** The most advanced from of imitative counterpoint which was perfected by J.S. Bach. It is based on a short melody called the “subject” which is imitated, reversed, inverted, slowed down and sped up to make an entire piece.

**Ground Bass** This is a short phrase in the base which is repeated throughout a piece to give it stability and coherence. The part above the ground bass is free to expand the melody imaginatively.

**Improvisation** This is when a musician expands upon a melody spontaneously, using his/her own imagination. Improvisation (also called “improv”) was one of the skills J.S. Bach was most famous for.

**Aria** An aria is an elaborate solo song with instrumental accompaniment. In the operas of J.S. Bach’s time, the aria was the time for the soloist to dwell on a certain topic in the plot. Also, arias are the most melodic parts of operas.

**Recitative** Another part of Baroque operas, the recitative is where soloists sing with minimal accompaniment in order to move the plot of the opera along. Generally, the recitatives are not very melodic, but rather sound as if the soloist is talking.

*Did you know?* The Consort completed Bach’s entire 215-cantata cycle. In association with this monumental achievement, the Library of Congress welcomed the Washington Bach Consort performance recording and concert program archives into its permanent collection. In May 2019, the Council of the District of Columbia honored Washington Bach Consort in recognition of the 30th anniversary of the Consort’s free classical music performances.
The Music of J.S. Bach

Using every musical form available at the time except opera, Bach composed an enormous amount of music (over 1,200 compositions) having such qualities as clear form, strong rhythm, grand proportions, imaginative symbolism, and intense expression.

Bach’s first works were for organ, including preludes and fugues, trio sonatas, and chorale preludes. Bach also composed music for the harpsichord including preludes, fantasies, toccatas, fugues, dance suites, variations, sonatas, concertos and suites.

As for vocal music, Bach composed nearly 300 church cantatas, a few secular cantatas, motets, passions, short masses, and the Mass in B minor.

When Bach died, he and this monumental collection of music was forgotten because of a wide-spread change of musical taste. It is said that some of his hand-written music was used in the local market to wrap fish. It was half a century after Bach’s death when the genius of Johann Sebastian Bach was rediscovered (or perhaps even discovered for the first time!) and admired by all music-lovers.