



BACH TO BASICS

Who was Johann Sebastian Bach?

Born: March 21, 1685 in Eisenach, Germany

Occupation: Composer, Organist, Chamber Musician

Bach was regarded as one of the greatest organists of his day. He was also a renowned composer of the Baroque Era, writing over 1,200 musical pieces throughout his lifetime.

Born into a family of musicians, Bach was the eighth child of a well-known organist, with whom he began his musical studies. After losing his parents at the age of 10, Bach moved in with his older brother Johann Christoph. Here, he excelled at organ, clavier, violin, singing, and composing, as well as in school.

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. Bach would utilize ornamentation, counterpoint, and other Baroque techniques to compose his complex works.

Timeline

March, 1685: J.S. Bach born

1695: Parents pass away, moves in with brother

1704: Becomes church organist at Arnstadt

1708: First major job as church organist

1717: Regarded as one of greatest organists of all time.

1723: Moves to Leipzig.

1750: Bach passes away.



What was the Baroque Era?

The Baroque Era, refers to the music, art, and architecture in Europe of 1600-1750. The music is characterized by fancy, expressive, and elaborate decoration. Emphasizing dramatic, exaggerated motion and clear, easily interpreted, detail Baroque music was specifically about being complex and ornate.

Baroque music expanded the size, range, and complexity of instrumental performance, along with musical forms. During this time, new musical forms were developed and/or popularized, such as the cantata, fugue, and theme and variation.

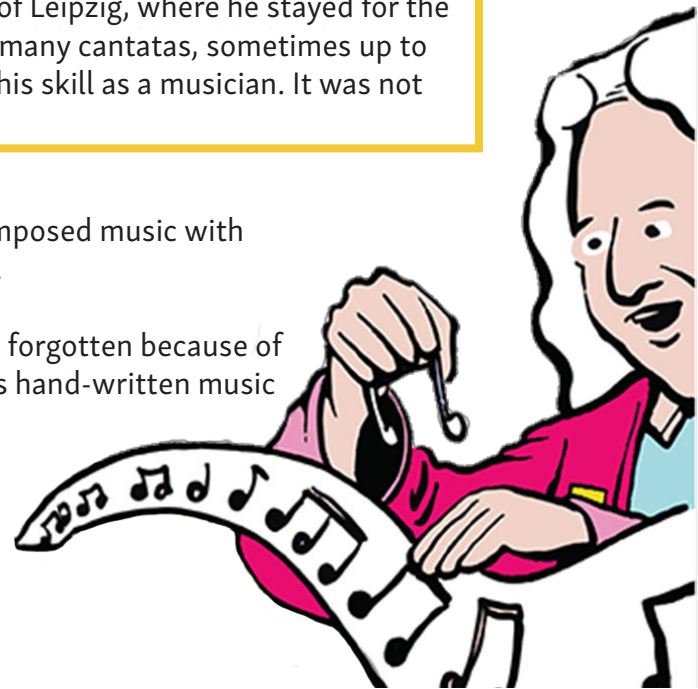
Bach's Professional Career

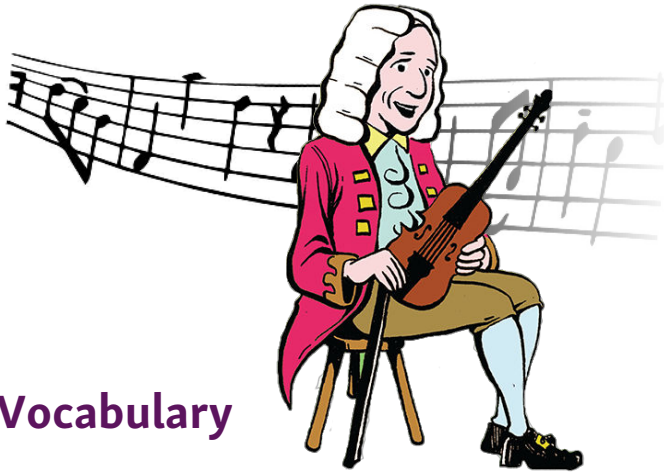
In 1723, Bach became the director of church music for the city of Leipzig, where he stayed for the majority of his professional career and life. Here he composed many cantatas, sometimes up to one per week. During his lifetime, Bach was mainly known for his skill as a musician. It was not until after his death, that his compositions were rediscovered.

The Music of J.S. Bach

Using almost every musical form available at the time, Bach composed music with qualities like clear form, strong rhythm, and intense expression.

When Bach died, he and this impressive collection of music was forgotten because of a wide-spread change in 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.





Vocabulary

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.

Baroque: Refers to the music, art, and architecture in Europe of 1600-1750. The music is characterized by extravagant and expressive melodies, the use of counterpoint, and its chromatic (See below) nature. Bach himself was a Baroque composer, completing many popular pieces during this time such as Cantatas.

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: 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: A piece of music based on a short melody called the "subject" which is imitated, reversed, inverted, slowed down and sped up to make an entire piece.

Harmony: The combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords and chord progressions.

Meter: Where beats are combined in groups of two, three, or more to a measure.

Opera: A musical performance involving singers and an orchestra, typically held in a theatre.

Orchestra: A group of musicians that play instruments together to make music.

Ornamentation: Elements added to provide decoration and make something, such as the melody, more elaborate.

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.

Secular: Relating to attitudes, activities, or other things that do not have any connection to the church or religion.

Theme and Variation: A form of music that begins with a main melody (the theme) that is then altered or changed in some way throughout the piece (the variation).

FUN FACTS:

- In 1977, NASA launched The Voyager spacecraft into outer space, along with a 12-inch gold-plated record featuring works by J.S. Bach, as well as other important composers and popular musicians.
- Bach had 20 children, 7 with his first wife and 13 with his second.
- Much of Bach's music was written to teach people how to play an instrument, especially harpsichord or organ.
- Bach was thrown into prison by his boss (the Duke in Wiemer) for accepting another job with better pay!
- After his death, much of Bach's compositions were lost due to a change in musical tastes. It was half a century later that his music was rediscovered.