

The Great Composers. No. XVI. Sebastian Bach

Author(s): Johann Sebastian Bach and Joseph Bennett

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 26, No. 508 (Jun. 1, 1885), pp. 322-325

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3356807>

Accessed: 24-02-2016 03:53 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Musical Times Publications Ltd.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

condemned is afterwards spoken of as "a thoroughly good and musicianly piece of composition." Trinculo came upon a "most delicate monster" in Prospero's Island, and it had two voices: "His forward voice now is to speak well of his friend; his backward voice is to utter foul speeches and to detract." There is a monster, seemingly, in Manhattan Island. Which of its two voices are we to believe? Turning to the *Daily Tribune* I find that journal recommending itself for careful criticism in the subjoined passage:—"We confess, also, that we are unable to admire the conceit of presenting the first scene in Part three as a dream. Had the number been purely instrumental with the words as a motto, the incongruity would have been less apparent; but to hear the dialogue of the lovers, the march of the *Watchmen* and their rude words, and then to imagine that all that has taken place is the dream of the *Sulamite* is to ask one to set up a wall between his phantasy and his senses, which it is exceedingly difficult to maintain." Would the writer be surprised to hear that the "conceit" condemned by him has its origin in the author of the original poem?

"I sleep but my heart waketh. It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew and my locks with the drops of night.'"

The critic is good enough warmly to praise the music of the Dream; but, in his judgment, Mr. Mackenzie has no staying power on an even plane of excellence: "In parts his writing is as modern as Liszt's, in parts it is as old-fashioned as Handel's." We are not told whether the drop is from Liszt to Handel, or from Handel to Liszt; but the association of these names with the "Rose of Sharon," even for purposes of comparison, belongs to the marvels of criticism.

Enough of quotation. As for the mass of printed opinion, let an American writer (in *Music and Drama*) sum up:—"At the present moment, after one performance, the work of Mr. A. C. Mackenzie stands condemned in New York as a weakling—a poor melancholy conception that has neither spirit nor dramatic fire in it, that is tedious and commonplace."

I need not point the moral of the foregoing to English readers, who will be unfeignedly sorry that their cousins across the water have no better musical guides, at the same time giving all credit for courage and independence to the few writers who, like Mr. G. H. Wilson of the *Boston Evening Traveller*, "A. L." of *Music and Drama*, and the editor of the *Keynote*, have shown, not only a spirit of justice, but power of discrimination. "A. L.," let me add in conclusion, lifts up his voice, Jeremiah-wise, against the shortcomings of his *confrères*, and, after quoting some of their extraordinary utterances, remarks: "One cannot even laugh at such things; one can only mourn." He goes on: "Is it, then, impossible to gain a hearing in our day for a poetic musical work of such refined sentiment that it calls forth our tenderest feelings and our highest thoughts? Is it impossible to bring us down from heroic to gentle ideas? Is music alone to be free from the modern art-influence that tones down colour, moulds figures in softer outlines, and describes natural scenes in more delicate tracery than heretofore? Is music alone to be always loud when all other art demands the subdued tendency? And can the low tone not speak as earnestly as the clanging sound? Because a certain number of critics would not accommodate their minds to understand the peculiar tone of this composition, must the American public therefore condemn it? I hope not." Here speaks

the voice of the enlightened section of American society, and in its growing power lies the hope of American emancipation, in musical matters, from the domination of mischievous principles, having as their chief results noise, bombast, and vulgarity.

(To be continued.)

## THE GREAT COMPOSERS

By JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. XVI.—SEBASTIAN BACH.

READERS of THE MUSICAL TIMES do not need to be informed that the enterprise of Messrs. Novello and Co.—enterprise not unattended, it is to be feared, by some sacrifice—has given to the English public an edition of Spitta's "Life of Bach." The biography in question is one of those monumental works for which the world owes so much to the patient research of German authors. It takes in, and exhausts, not only the personal character and achievements of the master, but the men and the circumstances which seem to have had any influence upon his life. It says, indeed, all there is to say on the subject, and subsequent biographies of like scope, should any be superfluous enough to appear, must in effect present themselves as nothing more than reproductions. We should richly deserve ridicule, if, in adding "Bach" to the series of our "Primers of Musical Biography," we made pretensions to independent research. Our duty is to go as far as possible in the opposite direction, and say that we are about to offer a sketch of the master's life, condensed from the materials found in Spitta's bulky volumes. In doing so, we hope that many readers may be so far interested as to pass from the mere outline, which is all we can attempt, to the finished portrait as drawn and painted by the exhaustive German writer.

John Sebastian Bach came of a race of musicians whose glory culminated in him, and then rapidly declined. Spitta traces the generations of his family for two hundred years, and as musician follows musician, we are reminded of the line of Scottish Kings which Macbeth feared would stretch on till "crack of doom." They had their seat in a secluded part of the Fatherland, and went through narrow lives with, no doubt, limited views of a world concerning which they knew next to nothing. The leafy solitudes of Thuringia, then almost a forest-land, must have influenced them, restricting their outlook, but deepening the resources of inward life. We know, at any rate, that they laboured in comparatively a humble sphere. They were organists, cantors, town musicians, and so on—making no great noise at a time when little beside cannon could be heard over distracted Germany, and employing their talents with an eye to a final reckoning with the Giver. Sebastian's father, Ambrosius, was one of twin sons born to Christophe Bach in 1645. Growing up, Ambrosius took almost, of course, to the family art. He and his brother, Johann Christophe, travelled for some time as "town-musicians' assistants," having, no doubt, somewhat vagabond experiences in that humble capacity. At length Ambrosius settled down in Erfurt (1667), there succeeding a cousin as town musician, and, a year later—the Bachs married early and (lawfully) often—taking to wife Elizabeth Lämmerhirt, the daughter of a furrier. Ambrosius stayed but a little while at Erfurt. In October of his marriage year he removed to Eisenach, leaving his place to another cousin. At Eisenach he remained till death, and there all but two of his children—six sons and two daughters—came into a world whence four of them soon departed. The survivors were Johann Christophe, second son;

Johann Jakob, fifth son; Maria Salome, first daughter; and Johann Sebastian, the Benjamin of the family and the most favoured of heaven.

Johann Sebastian was born on or about March 21, 1685, his baptismal register being dated March 23. Concerning what he was as a boy, not even Spitta can make history tell. All we know is that his childhood proved unfortunate. He lost his mother at the age of nine, and when Ambrosius Bach presented him, seven months later, with a stepmother in the person of Dame Barbara Bartholomäi, the family did not remain intact longer than eight weeks. Pallida Mors knocked at the door one day for the head of the house, and his place knew Ambrosius no more. This disaster scattered the survivors, Sebastian, then ten years old, passing into the charge of his brother Johann Christophe, who had been for some time organist of the principal church at Ohrdruf. Christophe married in 1694, although his application for an advance on his salary of forty-five guilder had met with refusal. Young Sebastian's new home could hardly have been luxurious, but it improved as time went on, his guardian's emoluments in 1690 being ninety-seven guilder, six measures and a half of corn, six cords of wood, and four loads of brushwood. Christophe does not appear to have been a very brilliant member of the family. But he taught his young brother what he knew, after a slow fashion by no means agreeable to Sebastian's quicker and more ardent nature. Here the first anecdote of the lad's life comes in.

Christophe had made a collection of the best organ music of the period, and kept it locked up in a book-case as being meat altogether too strong for the immature digestion of Sebastian. The boy often cast longing eyes at the coveted volume, and wished with all his heart he could get at it. Temptation at last grew too strong for self-restraint. "He stole down at night and succeeded in extracting the roll of music through an opening in the wires. He had no light, and the moon had to serve him while he made a copy of the precious treasure. By the end of six months the work was finished—a work which none but the most ardent votary of his art could ever have undertaken. But his brother soon discovered him with the dearly-won copy, and was so hard-hearted as to take it away from him."

Sebastian received a lop-sided education at the Lyceum of Ohrdruf. That is to say, he was taught Theology, Latin, Greek, a smattering of rhetoric and arithmetic, and nothing else. There was a chorus of boy-singers connected with the school, and regarded as one of the musical institutions of the town, since its services were always available, for a consideration, at funerals, weddings, and in processions of various kinds. A good deal of money was earned in this way and distributed amongst the lads, in whose ranks Sebastian quickly took a leading place. So time went on till young Bach reached the age of fifteen. Then came a change. Christophe's family grew apace, after the fashion of all the clan, and as his salary did not increase in proportion, it became necessary for young Sebastian to make a start on his own account. What should he do? The question was answered by Elias Herda, Cantor of the school, who successfully recommended him to the school of the Convent of St. Michael, Lüneburg, as a boy with a fine soprano voice, and great musical zeal. Spitta argues, reasonably enough, that something more must have been required than a good soprano voice, or a lad at the age of fifteen would scarcely have been accepted. Probably general musical attainments of a high character were insisted on. Sebastian quickly lost his treble, but this was a small matter. He could play the

violin, clavichord, and organ, and so impressed his superiors, that they made him prefect of the choir. In this position he had free board at the convent, and a salary which varied according to the demand upon the services of the choir at funerals and festivities. In 1700, we are told, the choir earned 372 marks, of which Sebastian's share was fifty-six. This was not embarrassing wealth, but it served, especially as young Bach found more genuine riches in the large musical library of the convent, and in numerous opportunities of hearing important works. Meanwhile he studied hard. Spitta says: "The restless industry of genius—which is rather one of the forces of nature than an outcome of the prompting of our moral consciousness—irresistibly urged him forward, and gave him no rest, even at night, from the solution of the problems he set himself." At this time, also, he passed under the influence of Böhm, organist of St. John's Church in Lüneburg, and a musician singularly gifted. It is contended by the master's biographer that the force of Böhm's example can be traced in many of Bach's works. The argument has, undoubtedly, great interest, but lies outside our scope, and we must refer the curious to Spitta, who treats it with characteristic copiousness.

Sebastian remained three years in Lüneburg, during which time he extended somewhat the range of his general studies. On leaving, he did not follow the usual course and enter a university. The youth was poor, and when invited to join a court band at Weimar, he gladly accepted. This was not the Grand Ducal band, but one supported by the reigning luminary's brother, who, presumably, had a special love for music. In taking this appointment Sebastian went a little out of his way, which was that of the Church, but the experience did him no harm. He had made some acquaintance with French music during his residence at Lüneburg. At Weimar he was brought into contact with the music of Italy, then and there greatly favoured; and also gained the friendship of the celebrated organist, Eßler. But the young man was not destined long to enjoy these advantages. Events were ripening elsewhere, which, in their fruition, took him away from Weimar, and placed him again in contact with sacred art.

The Municipality of Arnstadt had a large organ in one of their churches, and, though it was not a very good one, were sufficiently proud of it to be dissatisfied with their organist, Andreas Börner, who was not very good either. Arnstadt is not far from Weimar, and had close associations with the Bach family, so what more natural than that Sebastian should take an opportunity of going over and seeing the place? He went and touched the organ to such purpose that the Consistory made up its mind on the spot to get rid of Börner and put Bach in his stead. The post, as things went, was worth having, its salary of seventy-three thalers, eighteen groschen, being considered large. In return for all this wealth, the incumbent was expected to be industrious, faithful, and "an honourable servant and organist before God, the worshipful authorities, and his superiors." The Consistory seems to have had no difficulty in making the change desired. Börner accepted a subordinate post on full salary, and young Sebastian gladly stepped into his place. There he was, so to speak, "in clover." He had little to do of a compulsory nature, attendance at church being limited to thrice a week, while the organ, compared with those he had previously known, was an ever-new delight. He was, perhaps, required to play the violin in the Count's band, and there were some easy duties of an educational character. But all put together were not

exacting enough to prevent the full carrying on of Sebastian's self-education and the practice of composition. At this time of comparative leisure, Bach began writing concerted church music for performance by his own choir, taking as his model the older church cantatas. Sebastian was now about twenty years old, and Spitta says that, in organ playing, "no one could teach him anything much less compete with him." In other matters, however, the young musician found opportunities of gaining knowledge and experience. His course in art, theretofore, had been limited, and we might say here, that it never became, like Handel's, broad enough for the full development of his great faculties. There was a theatre at Arnstadt, sustained jointly by the Count and the burghers, but not possessing a regular professional company; whatever was done being the work of local amateurs. We may suppose Bach entered with the zeal of youth into an amusement so congenial, and somewhat distracted his mind from the incessant contemplation of graver artistic forms. That he had the will to turn now and again from church cantatas and abstract instrumental music appears from an interesting circumstance which marked his early time at Arnstadt. His brother, Johann Jakob, having closed his apprenticeship to music and wandered off into Poland, picking up a living as best he could, became smitten with a martial fever. He would be a soldier, and fight in the ranks of the Swedish King, then the adored hero of Protestantism. But before doing so he returned home, like an affectionate Bach as he was, to take leave of those whom he might never see again. His brother Sebastian thereupon wrote the well-known "Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother"—a work which Spitta describes as "unique in the whole mass of Bach's compositions." It is not, however, the earliest example of what we now call "programme music," Kuhnau's remarkable sonatas on Biblical subjects having preceded it, and indeed formed Bach's model. Many such things were written at the period under notice, and signalled a premature application of imagination to music—premature, because the resources of the art were not then adequate as means of expression. Kuhnau seems to have been a bit of a wag in his way, and sometimes it is hard to tell whether he is joking or in earnest. The scheme of one of his Biblical sonatas may here be set forth, to show the parallelism between it and Bach's piece. In "Saul cured by David by means of music," we have three movements respectively entitled, "Saul's melancholy and madness," "David's refreshing harp-playing," "The King's mind restored to peace." Bach's work has five movements, thus superscribed: I. "Persuasion addressed to friends that they withhold him (the brother) from his journey"; II. "Representation of the various casualties which may happen to him in a foreign country"; III. "A general lamentation by friends"; IV. "The friends, seeing it cannot be otherwise, come to take leave"; V. "Aria di Postiglione" (one is reminded here of Handel's "Allegro Postillions," in "Belshazzar"). It appears from this that Bach ventured as far from the region within which musical language is intelligible as do our modern composers when they attempt to reveal an "inner consciousness." Into the musical characteristics of this "unique" work it does not become us to enter. We may, however, advise readers unacquainted with it to procure a copy, and note, with amused interest, the curious and truly German mixture of gravity and childlikeness. On the general question of "programme music," as thus presented, we cannot resist quoting the sensible remarks of Spitta:—

"The association of a musical composition with the conception of a definite scene, in order to arouse or to represent its emotional aspect, tends too often to mere platitude and weariness. It serves to stimulate the composer's inventiveness when the natural energy of his purely musical ideas is exhausted, and the theoretical composers of Bach's time who, following the example of the rhetoricians of antiquity, set themselves a suitable 'topic' or subject for invention—since free invention yielded them little or nothing—found in this process a means of inflaming their imagination by the images called up, a *locus adjumentorum* as it was called. The imaginative powers of the hearer, however, far from finding a comprehension of the piece facilitated, is dragged away by secondary ideas from the main musical conception. The whole question, of course, turns on the nature of the ideas which it is the function of music to deal with. The French, whose genius for instrumental music is, on the whole, inconsiderable, were fond of adopting for their small clavier pieces—almost the only line in which they showed any creative talent—such titles as 'L'Auguste,' 'La Majesteuse,' 'Les Abeilles,' &c., thus stamping them as portraits or as *genre* pictures, and betraying their theatrical tendency. With regard to Kuhnau, a German, it has already been stated that he usually succeeded in expressing situations which were replete with emotion, although, indeed, he sometimes adopts very trivial means, as, for instance, when he assigns recitatives to the clavier; and in the succession of various tone-pictures, of which the dramatic requirements are too obviously beyond the conditions of musical art, he really fails as an artist. But when the poetic element is worked out and subordinated to a purely musical conception, so as merely to suggest the limitation to one single and definite scheme of feeling, within which the music can evolve its being, this no doubt serves to concentrate the sentiment but also to turn the balance between the objective and subjective elements in the work essentially in favour of the latter. For that which is universally paramount in a work of art is Form, in which, in a piece of music, the idea or the image is not included. All such artistic ideas are visions for the solitary soul, and in that aspect are not less justifiable than the lyric form in the poetic art, since Goethe declares that this should properly always be a poem on a given occasion, but to the multitude they are intelligible only in their narrowest development, and even then but rarely sympathetic. If the artist desire to give utterance to such a conception he must necessarily make use of the human voice, since in that nature has combined articulate speech with musical tone into a unit among the materials at his command."

This is a long extract, but we do not apologise to the reader. It springs naturally from the subject of Bach's "programme" piece, and its acute distinctions are valuable at a time when orchestral composers do not seem able to get along without the crutch of a story, and when the public are taught to hear music not for itself but for its artificial connections.

Another interesting composition of Bach's Arnstadt period is a Prelude and Fugue in C minor. Here the master's independent use of the pedals is shown at an early stage of development; the pedals having the subject at the close of the fugue only, and being then attended, not by counterpoint, but harmony. At the same time, also, he made progress towards the perfection which his treatment of organ chorals afterwards obtained. This was, indeed, a busy and a happy period in Bach's life. His youthful ardour remained unchecked by hostile circumstances, and pressed forward unto the prize of a high calling. At



the end of two years came a change. Bach had lived upon himself at Arnstadt, and began to feel a necessity for further experience beyond the narrow field in which he moved. To this end he begged a four weeks' holiday from his superiors, and having got it and found a substitute, departed for Lubeck, where lived and flourished the famous Danish organist and composer, Buxtehude. Bach's stay in the northern town, and his happy association with Buxtehude, lasted four times four weeks. The young master seems, in this, to have acted quite regardless of his obligations at Arnstadt. Indeed, he might have remained at Lubeck altogether but for an accidental circumstance. It was the custom there, and elsewhere in Germany, to keep the organist's post "in the family" as far as that could be done by requiring each succeeding organist to marry a daughter of his predecessor. Buxtehude had a daughter, but she was too old for Bach, who, therefore, had to give up all hope of taking the place which his venerable contemporary could not much longer fill. On returning to Arnstadt, Sebastian found himself in trouble. The Consistory was not a hard master. On the contrary, it permitted Bach to do pretty much as he liked. Still, a holiday extended without leave from four weeks to sixteen could not be passed over without rebuke, and on January 21, 1706, Bach stood before his irate masters to offer such defence as he could. The interrogatories made and answers given are happily preserved in the records of the Sondershausen Principality; the document containing them being labelled "Joh. S. Bach, Organist of the New Church, summoned respecting his prolonged absence and the discontinuance of the part-singing." Query the first ran thus:—"The Organist of the New Church, Bach, is required to say where he has been for so long of late, and from whom he received leave of absence." Bach answered that "he had been to Lubeck to learn thoroughly one or two things connected with his art, and that he previously asked permission from the *Herr Superintendent*." On this the Dominus Superintendens observed "that he had only asked such permission for four weeks, but had remained abroad quite four times as long as that." Come, Master Bach, explain your French leave, if you can. Sebastian "hoped that the organ meantime would have been played by the substitute he had put in, in such a manner that no complaint could be made on that score." Well, the Consistory, good, easy body, would not further insist on the Organist's disregard of duty, but, since it had Bach in the dock, other high crimes and misdemeanours might as well be inquired into. "He had hitherto been in the habit of introducing surprising *variations* into the chorals, and intermixing divers strange sounds, so that thereby the congregation were confounded." Then he had held no rehearsals, "by reason of his not being able to agree with the scholars," and—here the Consistory pursed up its lips and looked as stern as good old German burghers could—"he is to declare whether he will play both part-music and chorals with the scholars, since another Capellmeister cannot be kept, and if he will not do this, let him say so categorically of his own accord, that a change may be made, and someone who will undertake it may be appointed to the post." Bach answered that "if a proper Director be appointed" he would meet the Consistory's wishes. On this the interview ended, the organist being told that he must explain his conduct fully within eight days. Sebastian did nothing of the kind, nor did his long-suffering superiors press him. Eight months passed without an understanding, and then the Consistory thought further action consistent with its dignity. In November, 1706, Bach received the

following: "It is hereby represented to the organist, Bach, that he should declare whether, as he has been enjoined to do, he will make music with the scholars or will not; as, if he feels no shame in keeping his post in the church and receiving the salary, he must also not be ashamed to make music with the scholars thereto appointed, for the time arranged elsewhere. It is intended that these should rehearse, so that for the future the music may be better looked after." Sebastian replied that he would give an answer in writing. Very good, Master Bach, but there is another little matter on which the Consistory wants explanation. It "furthermore remonstrates with him on his having allowed the stranger maiden to show herself, and to make music in the choir." The stranger maiden! Ah, Master Bach, there had been previous talk of this young lady, and although you had informed the clergyman, Master Uthe, of her presence with you in the organ gallery, the matter requires looking into. She had not, of course, taken part in the service, and probably accompanied Bach to the Church only for private music. Yet the Consistory was scandalised. How Bach got out of it, and what reply he made on the question of rehearsals we do not know. But the "stranger maiden," who was she? Probably Sebastian's cousin, Maria Barbara Bach, whom he married next year, and who had come to live with an aunt in Arnstadt. They did some of their courtship in church, it seems, under the influence of music—not the first nor the last occasion in which Cupid has folded his wings in an organ gallery.

(To be continued.)

#### THE REVISED VERSION OF THE BIBLE IN RELATION TO MUSIC.

WHILE many persons will eagerly scan the Revised Version of the Bible to see whether the alterations are likely to have a favourable or an unfavourable bearing on scientific questions or religious beliefs, or on matters relating to ethnology or history, some musicians will examine the changes with regard to names of musical instruments and musical terms, to see whether any fresh light has been thrown upon the subject of ancient music in general, or that of Jewish music in particular. They must not expect to find extraordinary changes, for the revisers were bound "to introduce as few alterations as possible into the text of the Authorised Version consistently with faithfulness." With regard, therefore, to the names of Jewish instruments and terms relating to Jewish music, about which so much doubt and difficulty exist, it is evident that they could only venture on a new reading when convinced that the text was positively misleading; in some cases they possibly could have suggested an improvement, but were fettered by the principles laid down for their guidance. We propose to glance at some of the passages which have been altered, so as to give our readers a general idea of the changes which have been introduced, and shall add a word or two of comment on these variations, leaving to those specially interested in the matter the task of criticising them more minutely.

The first change occurs in Gen. iv. 21: here in the Authorised Version Jubal is spoken of as "the father of all such as handle the harp and organ." "Organ," taken from the Vulgate *organum*, has been changed to "pipe." It has long been known that the word "organ," associated as it is with the most ingenious and complex instrument of modern times, by no means represented the *'uggab*, the shepherd's pipe, in use among the early Hebrews. Kitto, in his Pictorial Bible, published nearly half-a-century ago,