

Unappreciated Bach

Today, the world admires – and treasures – the works of classical composer Johann Sebastian Bach. But it was not always so. Not even in his lifetime.

Born in Eisenach, Germany, in 1685, he came from a long line of professional musicians, including church organists and composers. Although his father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, was well known for his music, J.S. (Johann Sebastian) would learn and surpass him in this art of classical music composing. Bach's childhood wasn't so great; his father passed away when he was 9, and his mother also died when he was a young boy. Although he spent much time with his musically inclined uncles, he also studied and learned from his older brother, Johann Christoph Bach.

Growing up, Bach learned much about organ building. In those days, the church organ was a highly complex instrument with many mechanical and moving parts, pedals and pipes. His early experience with repairing and talking with organ builders and performers would prove valuable as he mastered the musical craft.

After various moves and prominent jobs, Bach finally settled down in Leipzig in 1723, where he remained for the rest of his life. Bach's stay in Leipzig, as musical director and choirmaster of Saint Thomas Church and school, wasn't always happy. He squabbled continually with the town council, and neither the council nor the populace appreciated his musical genius. They saw him as a stuffy old man who clung stubbornly to obsolete forms of music. Consequently, they paid him a miserable salary, and when he died, even contrived to defraud his widow of her meager inheritance.

Ironically, in this setting, Bach created his most enduring music. For a time, he wrote a cantata each week (today, a composer who produces a cantata a year is highly praised), 202 of which survive. Most conclude with a chorale based on a simple Lutheran hymn, and the music is at all times closely bound to biblical texts. Among these works are the *Ascension Cantata* and the *Christmas Oratorio*.

In Leipzig, he also composed his epic *Mass in B Minor*, *The Passion of St. John* and *The Passion of St. Matthew* – all for use as worship services. The latter piece has sometimes been called “the supreme cultural achievement of all Western civilization.” Even the radical skeptic Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) admitted upon hearing it, “One who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as gospel.”

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After Bach's death at age 65 in 1750, people seemed glad to wipe their ears of his music. He was remembered less as a composer than as an organist and harpsichordist. Some of his music was sold, and some was reportedly used to wrap garbage. For the next 80 years, his music was neglected by the public, although a few musicians (Mozart and Beethoven, for examples) admired it. Not until 1829, when German composer Felix Mendelssohn arranged a performance of *The Passion of St. Matthew*, did a larger audience appreciate Bach the composer.

Do you sometimes think your life is not successful or worthwhile? Bach was faithful in following his dream and what he believed to be his calling. He never knew the impact he would have on the world.

People who work in Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home, bringing love and light to those they serve, are laying up "treasures in Heaven," as the Bible proclaims in Matthew 6:20. You may not get much public notice for what you do on this earth, but there are rewards for eternity.

--Beecher Hunter