

# J S Bach, warrior of the Reformation

Johann Sebastian Bach, JSB, was the last great composer-musician to owe his living entirely to church work. Others in his time were writing secular music and popular items to supplement what they did for sacred music in the church. Many consider JSB to have been the greatest composer in the history of western music.

He was born in 1685 in the very same German city where Martin Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular language, German, thereby making it accessible to all. Luther also composed hymns in this city, which would later influence JSB.

Faith and music for JSB were linked in a close union. He became a superb organist and advised builders all over Germany eventually on ideal construction designs. In his lifetime JSB was better known as an organist than a composer. Fame when it did come, was long after his death.

At school he sang soprano, and played both violin and viola. He wrote chorales based on his meditations on the great hymns and scripture. These he wrote not just to evoke a certain range of moods but instead to proclaim the veracity of scripture.

In Weimar, he came under the influence of the Italian priest, Vivaldi, and started to fuse Italian and German styles. JSB didn't travel widely in his life. He married, but sadly, his wife died suddenly in 1720 leaving him with children to care for alone. JSB married later on to a soprano who helped raise the children. He had 20 in all but 10 died young. JSB wrote many cantatas for his wife and she assisted him in transcribing his compositions. After two operations his eyesight failed and he became blind. Bach died aged 68, and dictated his last composition on his deathbed. It is the chorale "Before Thy Throne I Now Appear".

The music of JSB is compelling to the casual listener who has no great interest in classical music. It also holds great depths for those who want to seek out its symbolic depths. His music carries the beauty of eternal truths.

JS Bach has long been recognized as one of the greatest evangelists in history. His works are the Reformation put to music. Through them, congregations have been led to worship and to celebrate the mysteries of the Gospel. Though non-Christian lovers of classical music are often uncomfortable with the intensity of Bach's vibrant faith and its spiritual demands on them, they admire his unchallenged genius.

Bach was a committed Christian, an orthodox Lutheran. His faith was his comfort and strength in the great adversities he suffered throughout his life. His library was filled with theological works, including two sets of the writing of Martin Luther. When Bach was 48, he acquired Luther's monumental three

-volume translation of the Bible, which he studied intensively. Bach was a Christian who lived by the Bible, for whom Luther's concept of salvation by "faith alone" was absolutely essential. He sought for direction in his ministry in the Holy Scriptures. He commented on I Chronicles 29 that "music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David." Commenting on 2 Chronicles 5: 13, he wrote:

"N.B. At a reverent performance of music, God is always at hand with His gracious presence." For Bach the great doctrines of the Reformation were not dry formulas, but living truths.

Although he lived in a time, which saw the beginning of the undermining of the foundations of the Christian faith and the watering down of the liturgy of the Church, he remained strong and unwavering in his orthodox Lutheran faith. He also followed Luther in his music. For example, his cantatas mirror Luther's teachings. Someone said that they "are not intended to be works of music or art on their own, but to carry on, by their own means, the work of Luther, the preaching of the word and nothing but the word."

Bach's music spoke a language of worship, not understood by his contemporaries. Fellow critics did not understand that according to Bach, music was a gift from God, which must be used in God's service and for His glory. Bach saw no insidious distinction between "sacred" and "secular" music. In all of Bach's work - music, theology, and worship are all intertwined. On many of his compositions he inscribed the letters I.N.J. or S.D.G. or J.J., which stand for "In the name of Jesus,"

The title page to his *Little Book for the Organ* declares that it was dedicated, "To the glory of God alone in the highest and to further the learning of everyone."

The height of Bach's work as a church musician was reached in the settings of the Passion according to St. Matthew and St. John, and the Mass in B minor, a Gospel narrative of Christ's suffering and death.

Johan D. Tangelder describes his experience in hearing a live performance of the passion:

We had an unforgettable spiritual treat. It drew me near to my Saviour in a very special way. In his Passions Bach reveals a depth of feeling and devotion, music coming as it were from another world. Contemporary evangelical sensibilities appear to dismiss Bach's emphasis on sin and the Crucifixion. Bach did not rush to Easter joy. The medieval hymn, O Sacred Head Now Wounded, adapted by Bach in St. Matthew's Passion is as an essential part of the performance as the resurrection hope. The darkness of the crucifixion comes before the light of the resurrection. The emphasis is on the suffering of Christ and the tragedy of the betrayal. For Bach, not only Easter, but Good Friday and Easter, is the celebration of victory

Bach used the Nicene Creed. John Calvin once commented that the Nicene Creed is "more a hymn suited for singing than a formula for confession." Bach showed in the Mass that the doctrine of the Trinity can indeed be expressed satisfactorily and clearly in music.

At the end of his life, Bach's eyesight began to fail. In early 1750, an English surgeon operated twice on his eyes, but both operations went badly and left him further weakened. He had a stroke followed by a raging fever and died on the evening of July 28, 1750. Bach considered himself a pilgrim, a citizen of the Eternal City, liberated from the finiteness which, so easily besets us. His last composition "And now I step before thy throne" expressed his belief that for the Christian death opens the door to the eternal throne room of God. Soli Deo Gloria!

***Suggested listening:***

The 6 Brandenburg Concertos  
Christmas Oratorio  
St Matthew Passion  
St John Passion  
Mass in B minor  
Cantata 80 A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Video excerpts:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTQsxs0mzc0&feature=fvst>

Concerto 6

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ9qWpa2rIq>

Concerto 3

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpf38dQpMzk>

Concerto 1

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_LLfFXaUA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_LLfFXaUA)

St Marks Passion

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jV--lwDBhTg>

Version of A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

1. Comment in no less than 10 sentences on this statement from a blog under the video of St Mark's Passion:

The Divine "works" through us, whether or not we "believe". Theists or atheists alike, it doesn't matter what fits or doesn't fit into our little head. Crediting the personal ego for transcendence is like taking credit for your own birth. Kind of silly...but no matter indeed, we can all enjoy Bach, whatever we believe. He touches the heart.

2. Write a rebuttal to the blog below, (regardless of your feeling for JSB, argue for alternatives):

I don't care what your taste in music is, if you appreciate perfection, genius and undeniable beauties, than Bach or Mozart are amongst those that embody such qualities. If I could only listen to one piece of music for the rest of my life it most likely would be this (St. Matthew Passion) or his Mass in B Minor. It is borderline impossible to find a popular 'musician' with the level of talent possessed by this man.

3. Why is the hymn, A Mighty Fortress Is Our God sometimes called the "battle hymn of the Reformation"?
4. Create a timeline for JSB from birth to death, noting key dates and events.
5. During the lifetime of JSB what other famous classical composers were alive and active?
6. What is the bestselling JSB CD? Why do you think this piece is #1 in world popularity?
7. Write a eulogy for Bach under the drawing in the next page.

**References:**

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Crossway Books 1978

*The Story of Christian Music.* Wilson-Dickson A Lion Publishing 1992

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<http://www.baroquemusic.org/bqxjsbach.html>

<http://www.jsbach.net/>

<http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/bachjs.php>  
includes CD references

<http://www.reformedreflections.ca/biography/sabastien-bach.pdf>  
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