3

Bach’s life

3.1 The Bach family

3.1.1 Ancestors

General

In 1735, his fiftieth year, J.S. Bach made a genealogy of the Bach family.

“Ursprung der musicalisch-Bachischen Familie.” Transcribed in Dok I/184, with additional notes in Dok III, p. 647; BR, 203–11.

This genealogy assigns numbers to various (male) members of the family, and this numbering system, augmented in New Grove, is still used to distinguish family members. On the family in general and on individual members, see

New Grove, “Bach family” and individual entries for family members.

The following two general works on the Bach family are outdated but still useful:


Special studies of older Bachs

Two older members of the family have been studied particularly for their musical connections to J.S. Bach.

Johann Christoph Bach (1671–1721) was J.S. Bach’s older brother, with whom he lived and studied as a child. The basic study is

3.1 The Bach family

He was also the copyist of two important sources of J.S. Bach’s early keyboard compositions; see


Johann Ludwig Bach (1677–1731) was a cousin of J.S. Bach, who copied and performed eighteen of Johann Ludwig's church cantatas. On J.S. Bach's contact with this repertory, see


The Altbachisches Archiv

J.S. Bach owned—and possibly assembled—a collection of old family music known as the Altbachisches Archiv. On the collection and its history see


Much of the music from the collection, together with related repertory, is published in


3.1.2 Wives

Bach’s first wife, Maria Barbara was a Bach by birth, the youngest daughter of Johann Michael Bach; see the literature on him (3.1.1 Ancestors) and on the town of Gehren in Thuringia (3.5.1 Thuringia in general).

His second wife was born Anna Magdalena Wilcke. On her role as copyist, see 5.1.3 Bach's copyists; as inheritor of some of J.S. Bach’s music, see 5.2.2 Bach’s heirs. On her family and youth, see

3. Bach's life

3.1.3 Children

Four of Bach's sons (Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christoph Friedrich, and Johann Christian) were prolific and important composers on whom there is extensive literature. We present basic tools and literature particularly relevant to J.S. Bach studies. See also the biographical articles, worklists, and bibliographies in New Grove. On the inheritance by Bach's children of their father's music and their role in its transmission, see 5.2.1 Bach's estate and its division and 5.2.2 Bach's heirs. On their role as copyists and musical assistants to their father, see 5.1.3 Bach's copyists.

Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784)

The fullest biography (with a catalogue of works), outdated but still influential, is


For a recent survey of the works and their sources and a revision of Falck's catalogue, see


There is no complete edition of W.F. Bach's compositions.

On Wilhelm Friedemann's performances of his father's cantatas, see


Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788)

A basic biography is


The old thematic catalogue by Wotquenne has been succeeded by the less than thoroughly systematic


A complete edition of C.P.E. Bach's compositions is under way:

The three catalogues of material from C.P.E. Bach’s estate are extremely important sources in Bach research; see 5.2.2 Bach’s heirs. C.P.E. Bach’s obituary of his father is printed as Dok III/666 and BR, 215–24, and several of his letters to Forkel, which were sources for the latter’s biography of J.S. Bach, also appear in Dok III and BR.


Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach (1732–95)

The standard biography and worklist are


There is no complete edition of J.C.F. Bach’s compositions.

Johann Christian Bach (1735–82)

The standard biography, with a worklist, is


J.C. Bach’s complete works are being published in


This edition will include a thematic catalogue.

3.2 Documentation

3.2.1 Documents

The primary documents of Bach’s life are transcribed and annotated in detail in


The first volume covers writings in Bach's hand, the second and third (divided at Bach's death) printed documents and those written by others. They are organized chronologically, with the first volume also divided by type of document (letters, receipts, etc.). The third volume contains an extensive index and corrigenda, as well as documents belonging in volumes I and II but discovered after the publication of the earlier volumes. (A fourth volume contains pictorial documents; see 3.2.2 Iconography.)

Many documents are available in English translations in


The versions here should be used with the same caution as with any other translations. Also included is an early nineteenth-century English translation of Johann Nicolaus Forkel's influential Bach biography (see 3.3.1 Primary and early biographies). A revision of the *The Bach reader* by Christoph Wolff is in progress.

Many of the most important documents have been reprinted in


A few Bach documents have generated their own interpretive literature. On the "Short but most necessary draft for a well-appointed church music," see the literature in 9.1 Vocal forces. On the documents concerning Bach's students and his teaching, see 4.1 Bach's teaching and students. On the famous polemic between Scheibe and Birnbaum, see 11.4 Reception. On Bach's estate, see 5.2.1 Bach's estate and its division and 4.2 Bach's library. On C.P.E. Bach's obituary of his father, see 3.3.1 Primary and early biographies.

Inevitably, documents have been discovered since the publication of the three volumes of documents. Here is a list of the most important belonging to volumes I and II, together with citations of literature describing and discussing them.
3.2 Documentation

Volume I

1713/14: Record of Bach’s expenses in connection with his application for the organist’s post at the Marienkirche in Halle


28 July 1726: Letter to Georg Erdmann


5 April 1734: Testimonial for Paul Christian Stoll(e)


1746–49: Receipts for the “Nathanisches Legat”


18 December 1747: Receipt for the rental of a keyboard


12 January 1748: Testimonial for Heinrich Andreas Cuntzius, organ maker


Various: Baptismal records for Bach’s children (two documents are in Bach’s handwriting)


Volume II

12 April 1717: Room receipt for “ConcertMeister Bach” in Gotha


7 February 1739: Reference to Bach and his music

3. Bach’s life

20 May 1747: Newspaper report on Bach’s Potsdam visit

3 October 1749: Letter from Johann Jacob Donati to the Leipzig Oberpostsekretär Georg Gottfried Günther on the use of Bach as organ examiner

Various: Baptismal records for Bach’s children

3.2.2 Iconography

Many portraits have been put forward as representing Bach. The only authentic image of Bach is the portrait by Elias Gottlob Haussmann, known in a version from 1746 (now in Leipzig) and one from 1748 (Princeton, New Jersey).

A possibly authentic painting of Bach and his sons is discussed in an editor’s note:

For literature on Bach iconography, including discussions of the provenence and authenticity of known portraits and information on lost portraits, see the picture books cited below and

Images of Bach’s world have been assembled in several collections. Particularly strong Bach picture collections—portraits, depictions of buildings and cities, reproductions of documents, etc.—are found in


3.3 Biographies of J.S. Bach

An overwhelming number of Bach biographies, few of them adding much to the archival researches of earlier studies, has appeared in the twentieth century. One of the more readable and probably the best of these is Malcolm Boyd. *Bach*. 2d. ed. Oxford, 1995.


For a recent study of Bach’s early career, see Konrad Küster. *Der junge Bach*. Stuttgart, 1996.


3.3.1 Primary and early biographies

In this and the next section we mention the most important biographies based on original research into Bach’s life and personality.

**Obituary**

Bach’s obituary notice (Nekrolog), written by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his students Johann Friedrich Agricola and Lorenz Mizler, is an interesting account of selected aspects of his life. All biographical research on Bach is heavily indebted to it. The notice was first printed in...
3. Bach's life


**Forkel**


This is the first extended study on Bach, partly based on information garnered from correspondence with Bach’s sons Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann. It is more a critical appreciation of Bach’s art and works than a “life” in the biographical sense. Some editions of the German version modernize Forkel’s expressions, not always accurately; it is best to consult a facsimile of the original publication.

An anonymous translation appeared as


For a better translation (with notes and appendices by the translator), see


3.3.2 Later biographies

**Spitta**


A monumental study of Bach’s life and works. It set formidable standards for thoroughness in documentary research, and all subsequent Bach scholarship has been in its shadow. Nothing approaching its scope has since been attempted.

Readers should be sure to notice Spitta’s various appendices, supplementary materials, and lists of corrections, not all of which appear in the English version.
Because the English translation’s accuracy often leaves a great deal to be desired, those doing advanced work should always check it against the original. The English version has its own scholarly value, though, as it contains some author’s revisions that were not incorporated into subsequent printings of the German version.

**Other biographies**

Here we list the most important biographies after Forkel and Spitta that were based on original documentary research or that, though not offering much in the way of new archival material, have had an especially extensive readership and influence.

Forkel’s information is essentially repeated in


A summary in English of Forkel and Hilgenfeldt with negligible additions appeared as

Edward Francis Rimbault, ed. *Johann Sebastian Bach: his life and writings; adapted from the German of Hilgenfeldt and Forkel, with additions from original sources*. London, 1869.

The first biography employing modern methods of archival research—soon after, however, eclipsed by Spitta’s—is


Widely read critical assessments of Bach that draw only on Spitta for their biographical materials are


An elegantly written study of Bach’s artistic personality, but not featuring any new documentary material, is

3. Bach's life


3.3.3 The Bach image


and put forth forcefully by Philipp Spitta (see 3.3.2 Later biographies). It was also the concentrated subject of the widely read monograph Hans Preuß. *Johann Sebastian Bach, der Lutheraner*. Erlangen. 1935.

and of many studies by the theologian and Bach scholar Friedrich Smend.


For more detailed responses, taking into account, among other things, the discovery of Bach’s personal Bible with extensive hand-penned annotations, and now providing a more nuanced version of the older image, see
3.3 Biographies of J.S. Bach


A related but somewhat different issue concerns Bach’s socially progressive versus reactionary outlooks. For an exceedingly clever and influential essay arguing for the former, see


Adorno’s view—that Bach’s life and music appear to be trapped in what he called the Middle Ages while they in essence look ahead to the Enlightenment—was developed by


This view of Bach as Enlightenment-oriented has been questioned biographically and musically in


See also


The St. Thomas School rector Johann August Ernesti, who was to become a famous Enlightenment biblical scholar, had an extremely strained relationship with Bach; for a study taking this to involve a clash of pro- and anti-Enlightenment sentiments, see
3. Bach’s life


Pointing back to the sort of Bach image projected by Spitta and followers, the following authors study Bach’s newly discovered personal Bible with his handwritten annotations for their biographical implications:


The notion that Bach held “Pietist” (anti-Orthodox Lutheran) views is often put forward; there is, however, considerable misunderstanding of what Pietism is and what Bach’s relationship to it was. The problems are carefully sorted out in


For further consideration of whether Bach as artist should be considered progressive or backward-looking, see


Marshall argues that to the extent Bach allowed himself in the 1730s and ’40s to be influenced by the latest developments in musical fashion (particularly the so-called galant styles), he can be characterized as progressive. Neumann argues that Bach actually made limited and aesthetically unsuccessful forays into the galant and that a conservative view of Bach is more fitting.

For a moderate, Eastern-bloc socialist reading of Bach’s biography, see

3.5 Places and their biographical issues


For an image of Bach as inexplicable and unknowable, see Wolfgang Hildesheimer. *Der ferne Bach: eine Rede*. Frankfurt am Main, 1985.

3.4 Chronology of Bach’s life

The following pamphlet, based largely on the volumes of the *Bach-Dokumente* and on studies of the chronology of Bach’s vocal music, presents a chronology of the documented events of Bach’s life and his known performances.


For studies of the chronology of Bach’s music and its sources, see 7.2.2 *Chronologies of Bach’s vocal music* and 8.1.1 *General topics in Bach’s instrumental music*.

3.5 Places and their biographical issues

In this section we present literature about the places in which Bach lived and worked or to which he made significant visits. We also include some references to general works on the musical history of these places. Note that there are brief but useful articles on most of these places, with bibliographies, in *New Grove*.

3. Bach's life

3.5.1 Thuringia in general


3.5.2 Eisenach 1685–95

The most detailed studies of the Bach family in Eisenach and its musical life are


3.5.3 Ohrdruf 1695–1700

The most significant literature on Ohrdruf and Bach’s time there focuses on his older brother Johann Christoph, with whom he lived and studied, particularly


On the musical manuscript Bach compiled while living with his brother (the so-called moonlight manuscript), see

3.5 Places and their biographical issues

3.5.4 Lüneburg 1700–03

The most detailed writings on Bach in Lüneburg are


Of particular interest is the extensive music collection of the St. Michael School, where Bach was a student; the extent of his acquaintance with this collection is unknown. The inventory of manuscript music is transcribed in


The printed music is listed in


On the collection in general, see


3.5.5 Weimar 1703

See 3.5.8 Weimar 1708–17.

3.5.6 Arnstadt 1703–07

For essays on Bach’s time in Arnstadt, as well as on other members of the family in that town, see


For more recent details on Bach’s time there, see

3. Bach’s life

3.5.7 Mühlhausen 1707–08

On Bach’s time in Mühlhausen, see

3.5.8 Weimar 1708–17

The court of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar had a fine musical establishment that had a great interest in modern Italian poetry and music. Bach held a minor position there for a few months in 1703; he returned in 1708 as a chamber musician and court organist and was promoted to Konzertmeister (leader of the orchestra) in 1714.

Many characters in this part of Bach’s story have “Ernst” or “Johann” (or both) in their names; we offer here a brief summary of their identities. Duke Johann Ernst II (died 1683) had two sons who co-reigned as dukes of Saxe-Weimar. In 1703 Bach worked for the younger duke, Johann Ernst (died 1707). In 1708 he was hired by the elder, Wilhelm Ernst, who got on badly with his brother and with this brother’s successor, Ernst August, who came of age in 1709. Ernst August’s half-brother, Johann Ernst (the Ernst formerly known as “Prince”), named after their father, was not a reigning duke, but he plays an important role in Bach’s biography because he was a composer and because around 1713 he probably commissioned Bach to arrange for keyboard a series of modish Italian string concertos. Except during the last few months of his time in Weimar, Bach appears to have managed himself reasonably well with both sides of the family.

For an overview of Weimar’s musical life during Bach’s tenure there, see

Detailed reporting on the Weimar court archives is provided by

For further interpretive discussion of the known documentation on Bach in Weimar, see
3.5 Places and their biographical issues


3.5.9 Köthen 1717–23

Anhalt-Köthen, where Bach’s employer Prince Leopold ruled, was a rather insignificant principality among the German states. Owing to Leopold’s extraordinary interest in music, its court had a first-rate orchestra. Bach was hired as Kapellmeister (director of the entire musical establishment).

The most extensive study of the city, though hard to come by, is Oskar Hartung. Geschichte der Stadt Cothen bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts. Cothen, 1900.


Smend actually had very little to say about Bach’s position at the court or about the mostly instrumental works performed there. The book centers on Bach’s vocal compositions, many of them later arranged by Bach with new librettos as church cantatas for the Leipzig liturgy. Smend was especially concerned to show that in Bach’s Lutheranism, contrary to statements in traditional Bach scholarship, there was no “conflict” between secular and liturgical music.

To make up for the lack of information that readers might reasonably have expected to find in Smend’s book, the English version provides an extra chapter summarizing previous research on the court, the musicians employed there, the palace itself, and the instrumental and vocal music Bach is known to have composed or arranged there; see Stephen Daw. “Supplementary Material (Editorial).” In Friedrich Smend. Bach in Köthen, translated by John Page and edited and revised by Stephen Daw, 163–82. St. Louis, 1985.
3. Bach's Life

For more recent work on Bach's time in Köthen, with important new information, see the extremely detailed study


For an extensive bibliography on Bach and Köthen, see


Bach's reasons for leaving Köthen for Leipzig are discussed in


3.5.10 Leipzig 1723–50

Because there has been considerable confusion over Bach's duties in Leipzig and his relationships with his employers, we thought some brief comments would be useful here.

Bach held a position as Cantor of the St. Thomas School (not Cantor of the St. Thomas Church, as writers in English often put it) and Musical Director of the city.

As director musices Bach provided music for civic occasions and for the city's churches, principally the St. Thomas and St. Nicholas Churches but several others as well. Bach's ensembles were made up of municipal musicians (Stadtpfeifer and Kunstgeiger), freelancers, and students from the St. Thomas School.

Traditionally, the cantor's job was to teach music and other subjects (for example, Latin) to students at the St. Thomas School. With reluctant permission from his employers in advance of his hiring, Bach was able to pay a student to take on these nonmusical duties soon after assuming his post.

In 1729 Bach took up the directorship of Leipzig's first Collegium musicum (the one founded by Georg Philipp Telemann), which was not a municipally supported institution. During his Leipzig tenure, Bach was also careful to keep or secure appointments as Kapellmeister (court composer) for nobility at Köthen, Weißenfels, and Dresden. His musical activities were thus extensive and wide-ranging.

Bach's various conflicts with authorities in Leipzig were not with the churches, as is often stated, or even, strictly speaking, with the Town Council as a whole, as has until recently been assumed.
3.5 Places and their biographical issues

The extremely illuminating essay


shows that the Town Council consisted of two parties politically and culturally at odds: city-minded and court-minded councillors. This situation came about as part of the fundamental conflict of that time in Saxony, namely between the electoral ruler, who strove for absolute unlimited power, and the Estates, who strove to curb it. In Saxony, the Estates consisted primarily of two bodies, the nobility and the cities; with its established trade fairs, Leipzig was the leading city, and its deputies oversaw administrative duties for the Estates (that is, it was an especially important city within the state even though it had no court).

August the Strong, who ruled Saxony from 1694 to 1733, went to great lengths to consolidate and extend his power; in Leipzig, this included forcibly imposing mayoral appointments and packing the Town Council with men loyal to him. Thus when Bach applied for the job at Leipzig, he faced within the Council an absolutist faction who essentially wanted a Kapellmeister (a star composer and performer) and a city faction who wanted a traditional cantor (a schoolteacher). This meant not only that the search committee’s proceedings would become protracted but also that inevitably there would be continual trouble ahead for the Council’s unanimously agreed-upon compromise candidate, Bach.

For an excellent general introduction to the Leipzig of Bach’s day, see


The classic study of the city’s musical life and Bach’s time there is


For more on the issues surrounding Bach’s hiring by the Leipzig Town Council, see


For a summary of those articles and for valuable new information on Leipzig’s municipal and Saxony’s electoral governments, see
3. Bach’s life


For details on Bach’s musical test for his application, see


Concerning Bach’s Schaffensrhythmus (artistic productivity) at Leipzig, see


For a history of the choirs at the St. Thomas School, see


On the old music collection of the St. Thomas School, see


Bach studiously cited the regulations of the St. Thomas School in his disputes with the Leipzig Town Council. These ordinances have been reprinted in facsimile as


One of these conflicts has generated much discussion in the secondary literature: the so-called Präfekten-Streit, over who had the right to appoint prefects (assistant directors of music students at the St. Thomas School); see

Paul S. Minear. “J.S. Bach and J.A. Ernesti: a case study in exegetical and theological conflict.” In Our common history as Christians: essays in
3.5 Places and their biographical issues


The main documents of the Präfekten-Streit are printed conveniently next to each other in

and in
BR, 137–49.

On Bach’s direction of the Leipzig Collegium musicum, see


On the life of the churches in Leipzig and Bach’s relationship to them, see

The architecture of the St. Thomas Church is described in

During some years, Bach was responsible for performing church cantatas in the University church; see

For extensive discussion of the New Church and its relationship to the churches whose music Bach directed, see

Concerning the Town Council’s search for Bach’s successor, see
3. Bach’s life


3.5.11 Other places with Bach connections

Dresden

Dresden was the court seat of the Saxon electorate. It had one of the finest musical establishments in the German states. For both of these reasons, Bach continually sought contact there. Bach made several visits, wrote secular cantatas for the royal family (BWV 193a, 205a, 206, 207a, 208a, 213–215, Anh. I 9, 11–13), dedicated the Missa BWV 232 to the elector in 1733, and secured a court title in 1736.

For a general introduction to the Dresden of Bach’s day and its musical culture, see


The classic study of the history of the musical life there is


For more recent information, see


More recent information on church music at the court is provided in


For more recent research on the court’s musical scene, particularly in Bach’s day, see also


On Bach’s musical indebtedness to Dresden repertory, see

3.5 Places and their biographical issues


Berlin

Berlin was the court seat of Prussia, one of the two most powerful German states in the eighteenth century. Bach dedicated the Brandenburg Concertos to the Margrave of Brandenburg, Christian Ludwig of Berlin. Bach’s connections to the city intensified again in the 1740s, when several of his students and his son Carl Philipp Emanuel joined the royal musical establishment there. In 1747 he dedicated the Musical Offering BWV 1079 to King Frederick the Great, after having performed at court in Potsdam.

For an introduction to musical culture of the Berlin of Bach’s day, see Curt Sachs. Musik und Oper am kurbrandenburgischen Hof. Berlin, 1910.

On musical life under Frederick the Great, see Ernest Eugene Helm. Music at the court of Frederick the Great. Norman, 1960.


Weißenfels

Weißenfels was the seat of a dukedom where Bach’s second wife, Anna Magdalena, had been a singer (her father was a court trumpeter). Bach wrote the cantatas BWV 208 and 249a for Duke Christian of Weißenfels, and he secured a court title in the late 1720s.


For more recent information on Weißenfels in Bach’s time, see also Eva-Maria Ranft. “Zum Personalbestand der Weißenfelser Hofkapelle.” Beiträge zur Bachforschung 6 (1987): 5–36.
On Bach’s musical and titular connections there, see

On Bach’s familial connections there, see


Lübeck
For information on Bach’s extended trip to Lübeck, see


Halle
Concerning Bach’s application for a position at Halle, see


Hamburg
Concerning Bach’s application for a position at Hamburg, see