

JOHN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750).

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THE year 1685 saw the birth of three of the greatest composers which the world had up to that time produced, John Sebastian Bach, Frederick Handel and Domenico Scarlatti. Each stands in striking contrast to the other two, but all three exhibit to an appreciable degree the essential characteristics of the XVIII. century. Scarlatti virtually laid the foundations of modern pianoforte technique and in many ways anticipated the harmonic innovations of much later composers. Handel, who was studied last term, improved upon the work of his contemporaries and predecessors, without exhibiting any marked progressive tendency. Bach on the other hand, for all the limitations and conventions of the century in which he lived, was the father of modern music and Schumann rightly said of him that music owes almost as great a debt to him as a religion owes to its founder. It is, however, not until quite recent times that the full weight of his influence has made itself felt.

The life of Bach calls for little comment. He lived the life of any little provincial court conductor or organist of his day, and never attained an international fame during his lifetime as a composer, though as an organist he was well enough known. He was the culminating point in a family which for generations had been reputed musical. Bach was born at Eisenach—a place so intimately connected with Martin Luther—but was left an orphan when he was ten years old, and went to live with his elder brother at Ohrdruff. He very soon gave evidence of those striking gifts which were afterwards to make him famous. His first official post was as a chorister at Luneburg, and while there he had many opportunities of hearing the recitals of the famous organists of the day. His first appointment as organist was at Arnstadt, near Weimar, and here he began writing, for the use of his choir, the first of the long series of church cantatas. In

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1705 he is known to have gone on a journey to Lübeck and to have heard Buxtehude, the great Danish organist and composer. The influence of Buxtehude on Bach's work at this time is noteworthy.

In 1707, after his first marriage, he was for a short time at Mulhausen, but soon moved to Weimar, where he remained for nine years, which passed without incident, except for a visit to Dresden in 1717, where the famous contest with Marchand, the French harpsichord player, took place. From Weimar he passed on to Cöthen, to become "Capellmeister," or conductor to the reigning prince, and here the majority of his instrumental compositions were written. While at Cöthen he married for a second time, his second wife being the Anna Magdalena of the Notebooks.

In 1723 Bach went to Leipzig to become Cantor of the school of St. Thomas, and here he again turned his attention to church music. Those four monumental works, the Passions according to St. Matthew and St. John, the Christmas Oratorio and the Mass in B minor, were written at this time. In 1747 Bach went to Potsdam to visit Frederick the Great, and played there on the Silbermann pianofortes. Frederick was an enthusiastic amateur and a flute player of some ability. He tested the capabilities of Bach much as the Queen of Sheba did those of Solomon. In his later days Bach again produced instrumental music, and added a second volume of Preludes and Fugues to the previous collection, published while he was at Cöthen,

thus completing the so-called "Forty-Eight." He became totally blind before his death, which took place on the 28th July, 1750.

The B minor Mass is probably the culmination of Bach's genius, and for religious fervour and sincerity it is one of the most remarkable works in existence. In it one feels all that intense protestantism, which is so characteristic of one who was all his life a great Lutheran. It is superhumanly difficult to perform, and therefore cannot often be produced. Those living in or near London are recommended to go and hear this work on Monday, April 4th, 1921, at Queen's Hall.

Much of Bach's work seems to present day audiences too introspective, and his apparent morbidity on the subject of death appears strange, in view of his otherwise buoyant temperament. The prevalent pietism of the age must, however, be taken into account. He was born into a Germany exhausted by the wars of the XVIIth century, and particularly by the Thirty Years War, which killed all the flourishing artistic life of the XVIth century. When we contemplate the aridity of the literature of his time and the pre-occupation with French culture then so

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prevalent, we marvel all the more that this great man could so retain his national feeling and express the sentiments of his own people and his own age.

The above short outline of Bach's life should be supplemented by the excellent study of him in Parry's "Studies of the Great Composers" (Routledge) or in the same author's excellent book, "John Sebastian Bach" (Putnam).

The works selected for study can only show the slighter side of Bach's genius. It is an inevitable handicap that he composed no works for the modern pianoforte. He is known indeed to have played on a Silbermann pianoforte during his visit to Potsdam, but these instruments were full of imperfections and found but little favour in his eyes. The vast majority of his "Klavier," or key-board music, apart from the organ works, was intended for performance on the clavichord. The clavichord was a soft-toned, sensitive instrument, inaudible at any distance, but capable of the "vibrato" effects, which in modern days are monopolized by the string family. He also wrote for the harpsichord or spinet. This instrument possessed a harsh and strident tone, not unlike that of a guitar. The tone could not be sustained or varied, as was the case with the clavichord, and the string once struck could not be vibrated at will. The harpsichord normally had two or even more manuals or key-boards, and often some quite ineffective stops, similar in appearance to organ stops. The gramophone records of Mrs. Gordon Woodhouse which are recommended give a most faithful reproduction of the tone of this instrument. It is important then to realize that a performance of Bach's key-board music on a pianoforte is a mere makeshift. These works were written for instruments with a completely different technique, and much is lost in the process of transcription.

(1) *The Air in D*: This forms the second movement of the Overture in D, one of a set of four for various instruments, this particular work being scored for strings, three trumpets, two oboes and drum. The term "overture" is odd, as the work is on a big scale and consists of several dance movements, prefaced by a prelude. The Air is played by the strings alone, and the melody by the violins. A transposed arrangement of this piece has been made for violin solo, and in this form it is a favourite salon piece for violinists, who term it the "Air on the G string."

Note particularly the octave leaps in the bass, which may be compared with the Sanctus in the Mass in B Minor, likewise in the key of D. A tune of more serene and utter loveliness than this it would be hard to imagine. It is

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noteworthy that these ouvertures were first brought to light after Bach's death by Mendelssohn, who did so much to popularise Bach's work.

(2) *Anna Magdalena's Notebooks*: Bach's second wife helped the composer in the arduous task of making fair copies of his works, and several manuscripts have come down to us in her clean, neat writing, among which is a volume of notebooks compiled over a number of years and containing a collection of short pieces and songs evidently intended for her personal use. The edition recommended is confined to key-board pieces, but the complete volume contains, besides, several songs, one of which, "Art thou near me," written by Bach for his wife, is one of the most intimate and touching things we possess. It is suggested that children, who are technically capable, should be allowed to play some of these pieces themselves after they have been used by the teacher for appreciation purposes. Attention is directed particularly to number 15, "Musette," which affords sufficient evidence that Bach possessed a vein of humour (witness too his song about his tobacco pipe). In structure this musette has something in common with so-called rag-time, e.g., bars 3 and 4. The bulk of the pieces are small dances, slight in texture, but yet bearing the stamp of a great and original mind.

(3) *Prelude and Fugue in D*: From the first volume of the Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues, published in 1722. This collection is epoch-making in so far that thereby Bach took his stand among those pioneers, who were bent on introducing the system of "equal temperament" into European music. Without this system there could have been no Beethoven, no Wagner, and in this detail alone, modern music owes a great debt to Bach. It is unnecessary to explain to children the effects of this innovation in tuning, and it will suffice to say that up to that time modulation into extreme keys was impracticable. The prelude here in question is quite straightforward, and needs no special comment. The fugue is in four parts and must not be taken as slowly as the direction "lent et majestueux" would indicate. The exposition consists of a subject, in the bass voice, enunciated in bar one, the tenor entering with the "answer" in the dominant (A) in bar two, and the subject and answer recurring again in the alto and treble respectively in bars 4 and 5. The fugues in this collection are in no way academic and Bach has shown how a genuine art form can be made out of a skeleton of the most rigid and formal type.

(4) *Suite in F* (Fourth English Suite), prelude: A busy little piece—note that the little tune consists of two bars, and is heard first in the treble and then in the bass. In bar 12,

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second half, however, the first bar of this tune is played on top of the second bar, and in the following bar the position is reversed. Note also the suspensions in bars 16 and 17, and compare with those in bars 25 and 26 and elsewhere. These impart an old world flavour to the piece. Page 6 is merely a recapitulation of page 2, rounding off the composition. The origin of the term "English suite" has never been satisfactorily determined; many theories are advanced, but none receive universal acceptance.

(5) *Chorales*: A selection of the Bach chorales in the English Hymnal is given below, which children can be taught to sing. Stress must be laid on the fact that Bach in most cases was merely adapting the work of his predecessors. The tunes were the compositions of various

writers of the XVI. and XVII. centuries, most famous among whom is Martin Luther. They became a national heritage of the German people, and the composers of the day were accustomed to use them largely in their own compositions, one of the favourite methods being a free improvisation woven about each line of the tune and commonly styled "Choral prelude." Bach, besides writing a large number of choral preludes, arranged a great many chorales and composed some original ones. He also introduced them into the church cantatas, which he wrote for the Sunday services, and into the settings of the Passion.

No. 102 (both settings): The great chorale of the St. Matthew Passion. It occurs several times and two versions of the tune are given here, which should be closely compared. Notice the beautiful part writing, the richness of the harmonies, and the yearning sorrowful effect of the cadence ending on the dominant in the second version. After the tune has been learnt, it would be well to teach children to hum each subsidiary part in turn (in their own proper register of course), so that they may realise that each part—alto, tenor and bass—is as much a tune as the treble, and that the music, unlike a hymn tune, is conceived horizontally not vertically.

Nos. 138 (first tune) and 187: Two perfect specimens: notice the flowing melodious part writing, which in each case enhances the original beauty of the tunes.

No. 362: This magnificent tune is by Martin Luther, but the setting here given is by Bach (though it is not so stated). This was the battle hymn of the Reformation, and the tune has been often used by subsequent composers, e.g., by Mendelssohn in his Reformation Symphony, and by Wagner in the Kaisermarsch. The tenor and bass parts are particularly beautiful and brilliant. [p 28]

No. 545: One of Bach's favourite tunes and constantly used by him in various forms. It might be well to contrast this beautiful setting of the tune from the St. John Passion with the one commonly used in Hymns Ancient and Modern for the hymn, "All glory, laud and honour." The beauty of Bach's setting becomes instantly apparent.

No. 527: This chorale is by J. C. Bach, another member of the gifted family, and is interesting merely because of the relationship of the composer to J. S. Bach.

(6) *Aria: "My heart that believest,"* (often styled "My heart ever faithful"): This is a solo out of one of Bach's latest church cantatas: "So God loved the world." Curiously enough the accompaniment had already been used by him in an early secular cantata with an entirely different tune. This accompaniment is scored for violoncello, and the whole movement is intended to be sung very fast, like a rollicking hornpipe. The direction "Presto" is one of the few which have the composer's direct authority, and in actual performance it is probably the most often transgressed of any. It should be pointed out that this work is in two sections, the first section in a modified form being repeated again after the second in accordance with the traditional form of the operatic aria.

(7) *Schemelli Hymns*: These form part of a collection of sacred songs published in 1736 by one Schemelli. Bach arranged a number of old tunes and composed some new ones himself for the collection. These hymns are not hymns in the ordinary sense of the word and were never intended for congregational use. They consist in the original form of a tune with a figured bass, from which the accompaniment has to be worked out. It is interesting to compare them with the chorales, which are of course composed in four real parts. The Schemelli hymns are for one solo voice with an accompaniment, and are more intimate in character and therefore

unsuited for collective performance.

(8) *Inventions for violin and pianoforte* (originally figured bass): Nothing is known about these four little suites, and their authenticity is even doubted. It seems however that they bear the mark of Bach's genius. In particular number 2 should be studied. The first movement is of great beauty and the other three of exceptional charm. Note the unusual names of the movements in these Inventions, and also the slow scherzo in common time in number 1. The scherzo later developed into a quick movement in triple time, and formed as such the middle movement of the classical sonata. This is one of the first instances of the term being used.
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(9) *Double concerto for two violins*: Bach wrote a number of so-called concertos for solo instruments with accompaniment of a small orchestra, the most famous being the set of six styled the "Brandenburg" concertos. His use of the word must not be confused with the modern use. The solo parts were not designed for the display of virtuosity, the idea being to afford a contrast between a small group of solo instruments and the bulk of the orchestra. This concerto, which Bach also arranged for two claviers and orchestra, transposed into C minor, is scored for strings and continuo, i.e., harpsichord playing from a figured bass. It is one of the most famous of Bach's instrumental works. If a choice of records has to be made, the second movement should be obtained, as it contains one of the most lovely tunes ever written. It is virtually a duet for the two solo violins, the accompaniment being quite in the background. The music is throughout simple and easily comprehended, the various subjects being soon picked out. The first movement contains an archaism in the shape of the D major chord on which the movement ends, a later composer would have infallibly written a D minor chord. This F sharp is called a "Tierce de Picardie"; its origin is uncertain, but it may perhaps have been due to a reluctance to end a composition in a minor key.

The music to be studied can be obtained as follows:—

(1) Air in D for pianoforte, Edition Nationale, No. 1001, 1s.

(2) Anna Magdalena's Notebooks. Edition Nationale No. 5033, 1s. 6d.

(3) Prelude and Fugue in D major. Edition Nationale No. 125, 1s.

(4) English Suite No 4. first movement. Edition Nationale No. 614, 1s.

The above can be obtained from Messrs. J. & W. Chester, Ltd, 11, Great Marlborough Street, London, W 1.

(5) The English Hymnal is published by the Oxford University Press, the cheapest edition with tunes costing 7s. 6d.

(6) Bach's Songs and Arias for Soprano, (edited by Prout): No. 24, "My heart that believest." 1s.

(7) Bach's Songs and Arias for Soprano (edited by Prout):
No. 31, "In faith I quiet wait." 6d.

No. 32, "Beloved soul, thy thoughts withdraw now." 6d.

No. 33, "Come sweetest death, come blessed rest." 6d.

(8) Four Inventions for Violin and Pianoforte, by J. S. Bach. Peter's Edition, No. 2957, 3s. 4d.

Numbers 6, 7, and 8, can be obtained from Messrs. Augener, Ltd., 18, Great Marlborough Street, London, W.1.

GRAMOPHONE RECORDS.

(9) Double concerto in D minor for two violins, played by Kreisler and Zimbalist: Nos. 2-07920, 2-07918, 2-07922: price 7s. 6d. each record.

The following is also strongly recommended:—

Fugues in D minor and E minor: played on a harpsichord by Mrs. Gordon Woodhouse, No. D 491: price 8s. 6d. (double-sided record).

The above Gramophone records can be obtained from the Gramophone Company, Ltd., 94, Regent's Street, London, W.