

FATHER OF GERMAN MUSIC

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH.

THERE was a miller, by name Veit Bach, who lived at Wechmar, in Saxe-Gotha, about the year 1600. He had considerable taste for music, and his principal enjoyment consisted in playing the "cythringen" (probably a zither) to the clattering accompaniment of his turning mill-wheels. It was a happy union of business and pleasure. This taste for music was still more marked in his sons. Most of the family adopted music as a profession, and the best posts as organists in their native province came at last to be filled by Bachs. They furnish a remarkable example of hereditary genius—one of the most striking, indeed, on record. Through four consecutive generations the Bachs followed the same calling with enthusiasm, and no fewer than fifty musicians entitled to an honorable place in the history of the art are to be found among them. Their musical name and musical nature kept company for nearly two hundred years, at the end of which time the spell was broken, and the artistic pre-eminence of the Bachs came to an end. Union is strength, so they kept close together, ready to give each other not only good advice, but material assistance. Every year they held a family meeting at Erfurt, or Eisenach, or Arnstadt, and had musical performances together. These annual gatherings gave an idea of the strength of the clan; at one of them no fewer than a hundred and twenty Bachs, all musicians, were present. The greatest of them, the Bach of Bachs, was Johann Sebastian, to whom considerable attention is now being directed, the bicentenary of his birth having fallen this year. To speak of him is the object of the present article.

The leading events in the life of Johann Sebastian Bach are soon told. They are neither numerous nor striking. He was born at Eisenach on March 21, 1685, and was the youngest son of Ambrosius Bach. Unhappily, when he was ten years old, both his father and mother died. An elder brother, organist at Ohrdruff, then took charge of him and continued the musical instruction which had been begun by the father, adding to the practice of the violin that of the organ and clavichord. The young Sebastian showed himself in haste to make progress, and was ambitious to play much more advanced music than the brother thought proper. There is a tradition that the latter had a manuscript volume of pieces for the clavichord by the most celebrated composers of the day, and on mastering this collection Johann Sebastian had set his heart. The use of it was refused. Entreaty having failed, the boy tried cunning. He managed to withdraw it surreptitiously through the lattice-work door of a cupboard in which it was kept, and—having no means to buy candles—copied it by the light of the moon. These stealthy labors lasted during the moonlight nights of six months. When the brother found out the trick that had been played he, rather shabbily, one is inclined to think, took the boy's copy away, and Johann Sebastian only recovered it on his brother's death, which happened soon afterward. Thrown, when that event took place, on his own resources, he made a marketable commodity of a fine soprano voice with which he was gifted, and began his professional career in a choir at Lüneburg. While at Lüneburg he used frequently to go to Hamburg in order to hear the celebrated organist Reinken play. It is related that once when he had lingered at Hamburg longer than his means allowed, he had only two shillings in his pocket on his way back to Lüneburg. Before he reached home he felt very hungry, and stopped outside an inn, from the kitchen of which proceeded such tempting odors as made him painfully aware of the disproportion of his appetite to his purse. His hungry appearance seems to have struck with compassion some casual lookers-on, for he heard a window open, and saw two herring heads thrown out into the road. The sight of these remains of what are such a popular article of food in Thuringen, his old home, made his mouth water; he picked them up eagerly, and great was his surprise on pulling them to pieces to find a Danish ducat concealed in each of them. This discovery enabled him

not only to satisfy his wants at the moment, but to make his next journey to Hamburg in a more comfortable manner. The unknown benefactor, who no doubt peeped out of the window to watch the result of his good-nature, made no attempt to know more of the boy.

When eighteen years old Bach obtained a musical situation in connection with the Court of Weimar, and saw something there of aristocratic life. It was a homely court; it went to bed at eight o'clock in winter and nine in summer. His reputation grew; he soon became known as the greatest organist of his time, and his services were much sought after. From Weimar he went to be organist at Arnstadt, then to Mühlhausen, then to Weimar again—as court organist this time. Other changes followed, but we come to the last in 1723, when he was appointed cantor at the Thomas-Schule in Leipzig and organist and director of the music in the two principal churches. There he remained for the rest of his life. Ever since his boyhood Bach had been near-sighted, and at last his vision entirely failed. He died of apoplexy on July 28, 1750.

As regards the personal appearance of this great musician, his countenance is described as one of singular dignity and refinement. Thick eyebrows stood out from beneath his great forehead, and he had that long firm nose which they say fortune gives to her favorites that she may use it as a handle when she draws them to the front. His knitted brows might be taken to indicate severity of character; but, remarks one writer, "the impression is softened by the sweet sensitive lines of the mouth." He was quick-tempered, and fired up sometimes at very trifling opposition. But excuses must be made for the irritation of an artist when he finds himself opposed and unappreciated by the Philistines. The worshipful corporation of Arnstadt once rebuked Bach for his "perplexing variations and strange harmonies whereby the congregation was confounded," and on such an occasion no doubt he needed a stock of good temper. He also had occasional disputes at Leipzig with his employers, the town councillors, who were sometimes shocked by the "unclerical" style of his compositions and by the independent way in which he conducted himself. But there was a genial side to Bach's character, and in his relations as husband, father, and friend he secured the admiration of all who knew him. He was of a deeply religious spirit, and this is evident in everything he undertook during his busy life. Modesty has never been a characteristic of musicians, but Bach was modest. The question was once put to him how he had acquired his great talent. "By working hard," he replied, "and all who like to work as hard will succeed just as I have done."

He was twice married. The death of his first wife, Maria Barbara, forms one of the few melancholy events of his career. He was returning from a pleasant visit to Carlsbad, and when on the road and no news could reach him his wife suddenly fell sick and died. When he arrived at his own door, full of happiness at the thought of seeing her again, he found that she was already buried. His second wife, Anna Magdalena, was fifteen years his junior, but—thanks to similarity of taste—she proved an admirable companion; helping in his work and sharing in his pleasures. By his first wife he had seven children, by his second thirteen—there were twenty in all, eleven boys and nine girls. Bach's inventive capacity was shown not only in his adoption of equal temperament, and his innovations in the art of fingering—for in that too he introduced great improvements—but in the construction of a new instrument, the lute-harpsichord (lautclavicybel). This instrument had surprising brilliancy of tone. The difficulty of tuning, however, led to its abandonment, and no wonder, if in that respect at all it resembled the first of the instruments from which it derived its name.

Let us speak now of Bach in his higher character as a composer. A great creative genius he certainly was: one of the most remarkable, indeed, of the monarchs of the world of music. His inexhaustible fertility, the novel and independent character of his work, its profound science and deep earnestness, all entitle him to lasting fame. Com-

parisons have often been drawn between Bach and Handel. They were contemporary musical giants, both born in the same year. Their styles are as different as their lives: the difference between the two, it has been well said, "is the same as that which lies between a great philosopher and a great epic poet—between Plato and Homer." They are equally great in their ways, but the poet will be understood with less effort than the philosopher, and listened to with more pleasure.

The fame of Bach excited the curiosity of Frederick the Great, and this resulted in an invitation in 1747 to the Court at Potsdam. It was the last journey undertaken by the composer. His arrival was announced just as the king was beginning a flute solo at a State concert. The monarch laid down his instrument, and turning to the musicians who were waiting to accompany him, "Gentlemen," he exclaimed, "old Bach has come!" There was no flute-playing that evening. Bach was taken from room to room of the palace, and had to play on all the Silbermann pianofortes, instruments which the king particularly admired, and of which he had a considerable number. Gratified by the respect and kindness of his reception, the composer did his best, and excited the greatest wonder by his improvisations. A theme which the king gave him was worked up on his return to Leipzig, and it was dedicated to Frederick the Great under the title of "Musikalisches Opfer." But if Bach was famous during life, little regard seems for some time after his death to have been shown to his memory. His widow had a struggle to exist, and died a pauper at last, ten years after her husband. Then Leipzig, of which he was such a distinguished ornament, rooted up St. John's churchyard, where he had been laid to rest and threw it into a road, and the composer's bones were scattered, no one apparently caring what became of them.

JAMES MASON.

JOHN SEBASTIAN BACH.

The great musician, John Sebastian Bach, called his beloved organ "the glorious pure voice of God."

Down through the aisles the swelling tones
In wave-like glory roll;
The pipes with breath from heaven fill,
The "voice of God" sends thrill on thrill,
Through every listening soul.

Tones of compassion infinite,
With sweet forgiveness blend;
And full assurance in the word:
"A mighty fortress is our God,
A Savior He will send."

Then rose the voices of the throng
Uncertain—vaguely stirred;
Till, like the sun from dull eclipse,
Out burst the hymn, from hearts and lips,
In grand and sweet accord.

On the rapt face of Bach a smile
Divinely radiant shone;
The wondrous voice rose high and higher,
It seemed that angels—heaven's choir—
To him came floating down.

O miracle of love and joy!
Angels with men are singing!
Filling the church as with a flood:
"A mighty fortress is our God;"
Their allelujahs ringing.

'Tis ended. And the organ's tones
Like incense float away;
But on the master's heart there fell
"The peace of God"—with him to dwell
"Unto the perfect day."

FANNY BARROW.