

Grace Smalley

Dr. Mr. Kinzer

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Johann Sebastian Bach and his Influence on Vocal Music

One of the most influential of all Baroque composers was Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). He contributed a multitude of style features to Baroque classical music and is known by many as the greatest composer of all time. Although today he is mostly associated with organ music, he contributed to vocal music as well. Written for the Lutheran Church, most of his vocal music incorporated a figured bass or basso continuo, four-part harmonies, frequent changes of keys, and specific ornamentation in solo parts. Bach also used contrapuntal phrases in a majority of his music along with word-painting. A piece of music that represents many of the style attributes that Bach developed or contributed to is *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, a cantata based on a hymn by Martin Luther.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born into a musical family on March 21, 1685 in Eisenach, Germany. When he was young, Bach's father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, taught him how to play the violin and the harpsicord ("Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach"). Several years after that, however, Bach's parents died, and Johann Christoph Bach took care of him and his other brother until they were able to take care of themselves. During this time, J. S. Bach went to school in Ohrdruf (1695-1700) while learning from Johann Christoph Bach how organs were built ("Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach"). At the "Gymnasium" in Ohrdruf, J. S. Bach gained experience as a soprano voice. Then, he continued

his education in Lüneburg from 1700-1702 (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”). Here, he studied “orthodox Lutheranism, logic, rhetoric, Latin and Greek, arithmetic, history, geography, and German poetry” (Wolff and Emery, pp. 11). Furthermore, Bach was able to study music with compensation for performing at special events (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”). In addition to his voice, he utilized his skills in strings and organ as well (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”).

His first professional position was in Arnstadt as an organist for a church. At this position, he worked with boys from the school who were “semi-competent” (Wolff and Emery) and often got into severe arguments with them. Bach was disappointed with this position, and it caused him to ask for leave for “4 weeks,” (Wolff and Emery) but he stayed on leave for much longer than was discussed, and this caused him to be dismissed from his position at Arnstadt. Then, he accepted another organist position in Mühlhausen in 1707, which is where he married his first wife, Maria Barbara. (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”).

In 1708, Johann Sebastian Bach accepted a more rewarding position at Weimar, where he started as an organist and later became “konzertmeister.” In this position, according to a source, “He wrote profusely for the organ, and he was rapidly becoming known throughout the country as one of the greatest German organists. Organ pupils came to him from far and wide, and he was asked to test or dedicate many organs in various towns.” He also assisted with building harpsicords and requested that a better organ be built for Weimar. However, soon he was offered another job in Cöthen, and when Bach asked for resignation, he was arrested but then reluctantly let go (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”).

Bach was probably the most happy with his job at Cöthen (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”). He was Capellmeister for Prince Leopold, and later his friend as well. Prince Leopold provided Bach with “an orchestra of eighteen players, all chosen for their high musical standards from all over the country, some from as far afield as Berlin” (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”). Here, Bach wrote most of his chamber music and accompanied Prince Leopold on several outings. After one of these trips, he returned home and found that his first wife, Maria Barbara, had died and his four living children were left without support (Wolff and Emery, Cöthen par. 7). Because of this, he decided to look for a more lucrative job to help care for them, and this led him to Leipzig.

Bach and his family moved to Leipzig in 1723 where he accepted a position as “Kantor at Thomasschule” (Wolff and Emery, Leipzig, 1723–9 par. 1). This position required him to perform many tasks, which included being “responsible for the music of the four principal Leipzig churches – the Thomaskirche, the Nikolaikirche, the Matthäeikirche (or Neukirche) and the Petrikirche – as well as for any other aspects of the town’s musical life controlled by the town council” (Wolff and Emery, Leipzig, 1723-9, par. 2). He would also perform at the occasional wedding or funeral, in “which he would receive a special fee” (Wolff and Emery, Leipzig, 1723-9, par. 4). Bach also trained all of the vocal and instrumental students, and—due to his position as a choir director—he wrote most of his vocal music here. He was very passionate about church music at first. The church choirs that Bach instructed had around sixteen male students for each of the four churches (Glöckner) with the best singers in the choir directed by Bach himself and the least skilled singers singing “monodic chants” at the Petrikirche (Wolff and Emery). The moderately skilled singers were in the other two churches of Leipzig. During this time, he wrote around five full cycles of cantatas, each containing at least 60 cantatas for the church year, which totaled around 300 cantatas. A cantata in the Lutheran Church was a song

performed by the choir, “with a text that related . . . to the Gospel for the day” (Wolff and Emery, Leipzig, 1723-9, par. 5). This song usually lasted “about 20 minutes” (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach,” Leipzig 1: 1723-1729 par. 12) before the sermon. However, that was not the only music of the day; there were also hymns and motets, according to “Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach” (Leipzig 1: 1723-1729, par. 12) that Bach contributed to. In addition to this, each cantata was performed according to the church calendar. For example, if it was around Christmastime, the cantata would be about the birth of Jesus.

In 1729, he started working at the collegium musicum, whose instrumentalists performed weekly concerts in a coffeeshop. Little information is known about these concerts, but what has been confirmed is that some of Bach’s Cöthen works were performed, as well as pieces by other composers and some newly written pieces by Bach himself. According to Wolff, Bach even performed “large-scale secular cantatas” on special occasions, and despite all of his responsibilities, he still continued with “performances of his cantatas . . . every Sunday at the two main Leipzig churches” (Leipzig, 1729-39, par. 2, 3). Also in this time period, he was known for composing *Passions*, namely the *St. Mark Passion*, the *St. Matthew Passion*, and the *St. John Passion*. However, in 1737, he “temporarily resigned,” and in this time, he taught private lessons and worked on his organ pieces like *Das wohltemperirte Clavier*, meaning “The Well-Tempered Clavier” (Wolff and Emery).

Bach returned to his position in 1739 but stayed only until 1741. The owner of the coffeeshop, Gottfried Zimmerman died, and this was the main cause of his final resignation (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach,” Leipzig 2: 1729-1740 par. 15). In his newly found free time, Bach visited his son, Carl Phillip Emanuel in Berlin due to his new position as a harpsichordist. When Bach returned, he still contributed to music performances and

even some writing (Wolff and Emery, Leipzig, 1739-50 par. 3). In fact, his last pieces were his best works (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”). These pieces include “the Mass in B minor, the Canonic Variations, the Goldberg Variations, . . . the Musical Offering displaying the art of canon, [and] ‘*Die Kunst der Fuge*’ (‘The Art of the Fugue’)” (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach,” Leipzig 3: 1744-1750 par. 6). His health slowly deteriorated, and, in the last years of his life, he became blind due to an eye disease that was caused by diabetes. The “untreated (and untreatable) diabetes . . . may also have caused neuropathy and degenerative brain disease, evidence of which is found in the dramatic change in his handwriting in manuscripts of 1748–9” (Wolff and Emery, Leipzig, 1739-50, par. 12), and on June 28, 1750, he died from a stroke (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”). He is now buried at St John's Cemetery in Leipzig (“Baroque Composers and Musicians: Johann Sebastian Bach”).

Considering Bach’s musical background and excellence, it is no surprise that he had many influences. At first, his influences were mostly keyboard composers like Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Froberger, and Frescobaldi. However, his influences slowly changed to other composers such as Handel, Telemann, and Hasse, who were composers for other styles of music, like orchestral music and vocal music. Perhaps the most influential composer was Vivaldi, who “taught him how to think musically,” and Bach “drew from . . . his clear melodic contours, the sharp outlines of his outer parts, his motoric and rhythmic conciseness, his unified motivic treatment and his clearly articulated modulation schemes” (Wolff and Emery,). However, Vivaldi did not influence his vocal works. It is not clear who specifically influenced his vocal compositions, however, according to Wikipedia, “Handel, Telemann, and Vivaldi . . . composed . . . four-part choral music” (“Johann Sebastian Bach,” Musical Style, par. 1) as well. Given that they were writing music during the same time period, it is safe to assume that they each had at

least minimal influence on Bach's vocal works. Bach had many influencers throughout his life, and the variety of these influencers shows how Bach evolved as a composer of each genre of music.

As stated before, Bach wrote around 300 cantatas for the Lutheran Church, and he also wrote complicated music for instruments he played himself, like voice, violin, viola, and harpsichord (Hanning). However, a surprising fact about Bach was that he never composed an opera (Wolff and Emery). In the vocal pieces he wrote, Bach utilized many stylistic attributes in his works, like contrapuntal phrases, four-part harmonies, points of imitation, and the incorporation of recitatives and arias (Hanning). However, sometimes his music received bad reviews due to their complexity and technicality. Overall, a way to describe Bach's choral music is well summarized with this quote from Wolff and Emery: "deliberately more artistic, rhythmically often more lively . . . and frequently bolder in their harmonies" (Wolff and Emery, *Motets, chorales, and songs par. 4*). However, Hanning says that it's a "mixture of secular and sacred models and of old-style counterpoint and cantus firmus with modern Italianate style" (284).

The stylistic attributes mentioned before are seen clearly in his piece *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, the cantus firmus from Martin Luther's hymn. Using the video posted by Edoardo Lambertenghi, in the first movement, one can immediately tell that there is a relatively fast tempo, which is around 110 beats per minute, and fast-moving notes. For the first full minute and fifteen seconds, the instrumentalists (two violins, a viola, cello, double bass, two double reed instruments and either a piano or fortepiano) are playing a ritornello, an "instrumental introduction or interlude between sung stanzas" (Hanning A20). This ritornello plays throughout the whole movement with slight variations; the ritornello is featured when the choir rests and the listener can clearly hear the music that has been occurring quietly under the voices. The

ritornello sounds very cheerful and patient, and it has running sixteenth notes playing in at least one voice at all points. The altos come in at the time marking 1:15 with the melody from Martin Luther's hymn, and then the tenor and bass voices follow on points of imitation at 1:17 and 1:24 respectively. Then, at the time marking of 1:33, the sopranos join with the long, held-out notes of the cantus firmus, which is a repeat of the melody from Martin Luther's hymn. Then, at around 2:25, the ritornello acts as an interlude for the movement with the same spirited melody. When the voices enter again, there is a slight variation; the sopranos start with the cantus firmus, and then the alto, tenor, and bass parts follow on points of imitation. When the second verse ends, the ritornello is featured again, still with no change in its melodies or rhythms. The male voices start the third verse with eighth note runs and sixteenth-note melismas while the other voices have slight variations in their previous melodies. At the end of this verse, the ritornello is featured again, and these characteristics continue until the last ritornello that serves as the end of the movement at the time mark of 5:08, where it slows down significantly in the last several beats.

The second movement, "Bewundert, o Menschen, dies große Geheimnes," ("Admired, o People, this great Secret") has a tempo of around 135 beats per minute, but it sounds slower than the first movement due to the lengths of the notes in this movement. The first movement was a slower tempo with sixteenth notes, and this movement is a fast tempo with only eighth notes. Like the last movement, the ritornello introduced and interluded throughout the piece. However, in the second movement the ritornello melody is not played in the entirety of the piece like in the first movement. Also, this melody is slightly more relaxed than the first melody. The solo tenor voice starts at the time mark of 5:52. During this, the performer accompanied by the same instrumentalists of the former movement. However, while the soloist is singing melismas and trills, the accompaniment is acting as standard accompaniment, with chords played throughout

the measure to add density to the movement. This movement ended similarly to the last movement; it ended with a ritornello that slowed down in the last couple beats of the movement.

The next movement is the “recitative and aria for bass” (Hanning 284), titled “So geht aus Gottes Herrlichkeit und Thron” (Thus from God's glory and throne”). A recitative is an introduction to a song that sounds speech-like with minimal accompaniment. This recitative is accompanied by fortepiano and one of the lower sting instruments only acting as a bass line. This recitative also contained word painting; the most notable instance is when the soloist sang “laufen” (“to run”) on a run of the scale. The movement began at the time mark of 12:55 and ended at 13:42. The aria that was being introduced was “Streite, seige, starker Held” (“Disputes, seige, strong hero”). Its tempo is around ninety-five beats per minute, and it is similar to the aria because the only instruments that accompany the same solo voice are the cello and fortepiano. This aria starts with a long sixteenth-note melisma and is enhanced with ornamentation in the form of trills and melismas throughout.

The next movement begins with another recitative performed by a soprano and mezzosoprano called “Wir ehren diese Herrlichkeit” (“We honor this Glory”). However, the recitative is not speech-like. It contains harmony and significant leaps in the melodies. There is only string accompaniment throughout the recitative, and the voices are of equal importance, so it is considered polyphonic. Because of its polyphony, there was no ornamentation in this recitative because it would have been difficult for the soprano and mezzosoprano to perform in perfect time with each other. The recitative introduced the last movement “Lob sei Gott, dem Vater, g’ton” (“Praise be given to God, the Father”). This is a chorale that has four-part harmony throughout and no ornamentation. In addition to this, it has the same melody as the cantus firmus in the first movement of the piece. However, the words are different. They are two different verses of Martin Luther’s hymn *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*. As one can see, in Bach’s choral

works, he used ornamentation and recitatives very frequently. He also featured a couple singers in the aria and recitatives. In addition to this, the style of the ritornellos was similar in the emotions they radiated.

Johann Sebastian Bach is one of the most famous Baroque composers of his time. He was born into a musical family on March 21, 1685. He mostly contributed to keyboard music; however, he also composed many vocal works—both sacred and secular. He composed and performed keyboard music during his time at Weimar, and his orchestral and chamber music during his time at Cöthen. Most of the vocal music he composed was for the Lutheran Church from his time in Leipzig. This music often incorporated many stylistic attributes like figured bass, four-part harmonies in the last movement, frequent changes of key, and specific ornamentation or improvisation in solo parts. In addition to these attributes, he is also known for contrapuntal phrases, which used points of imitation, and word painting. A cantata that represents several of these attributes is *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, a piece based on one of Martin Luther's hymns. Throughout his life, his career seemed filled with responsibilities—like having lessons with every student and directing town music as well as church music. This shows his strong work ethic, which probably contributed to his success as a musician. He was influenced by many composers throughout his lifetime. Some include Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Froberger, Frescobaldi, Handel, Telemann, Hasse, and Vivaldi. The first few composers are mostly influencers of Bach's keyboard pieces, and the last four are mostly influencers for orchestral and vocal music, and the change in types of composers that Bach was influenced by shows his development as a composer himself. Johann Sebastian Bach was a very talented and intelligent composer of the Baroque era who did and will influence many others.

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