

JOHN SEBASTIAN BACH.

John Sebastian Bach was born at Eisenach, Germany, on the 21st of March, 1685. For more than a hundred years previous, the family, of which he was the most illustrious member, had been celebrated for their wonderful musical talent. So universally, indeed, had the name of Bach and the idea of sweet harmonies become connected, that the majority of the organists and choir masters in several provinces of Germany had long been selected from this family. Once a year the scattered relatives all met at an appointed place, and spent a day in musical converse, which must have been sweet indeed, not to themselves only, but to others fortunate enough to be present at these reunions. The little genius was, therefore, born and bred in the very atmosphere of music, and all the encouragement was given him in his early aspirations which the most ardent devotee could desire. But this was not for long. He was left an orphan at ten years of age; and while an elder brother assumed the care of the little fellow, and the guidance of his musical studies, he would not allow him to attempt such works as his soul longed for. And when the child surreptitiously borrowed the difficult scores of some celebrated composers of the day, and copied the music by moonlight while all in the house were asleep, and then began cautiously to practise it on the harpsichord, it was the cause of a severe punishment, when, as was soon the case, he was found out. But this little incident shows the strong, natural love for music which the boy inherited, and the invincible will and daring which led to his great achievements later in life. In a few months, after, however, his brother died, and Sebastian regained possession of his treasures. But he was now alone in the world, and dependent upon himself at the early age of twelve or thirteen years. He had a sweet soprano voice, and this, with his fine knowledge of music, gained him a place as a chorister in the "Michaelis" school in Lüneburg, by which he maintained himself, and prosecuted with ardor, his musical studies. At the age of eighteen, his fine voice failed him, but through the influence of relations, he secured an appointment as second violinist in the court band at Weimar. His favorite instrument, however, was the organ, and when he gained a position as organist, which he did a year later at Armstadt, his happiness was for a time complete. A valuable musical library was open to him here, by which he prosecuted his studies further, and a wearisome foot journey of two hundred and fifty miles to a distant city, enabled him to hear some of the most famous organists of the day, though his means did not allow of his studying with them. From this time his fortunes began to mend, and indefatigable study and energy brought their reward. When twenty-two years old, he married a cousin, and removed again to Weimar, where he became organist and conductor of the Court church. Composition of music for the church occupied much of his time, and his works were received with great delight. He was soon considered to be the first musician in Germany, for Handel, who alone could rival him, had gone to live in England. His fame was completely established by a musical contest with a very celebrated French pianist and organist, Jean Louis Marchand, in which Bach was so emphatically the winner that Marchand fairly ran away from a second tournament which the king had appointed, and left the young genius entire master of the field. The company being all gathered, Bach gave an entertainment in which he surpassed all his former efforts, and excited the wonder of all. Soon afterwards he accepted the post of leader of the orchestra at the court of the Duke of Cothen, where he remained till the death of his wife, after which, in 1722, he removed to Leipsic, where he was appointed musical director and choir master of St. Thomas school, a post of great honor and emolument, which was soon followed by the title of "Capellmeister to the Duke of Weissenfels," and a little later by that of "Chief d'Orchestre to the King of Poland and Elector of Saxony." About this time he married his second wife, the daughter of one of the musicians of the Duke's court.

Demands for private tuition poured in upon him, and among the few pupils whom he could take were some who were celebrated in later life. After services on Sunday it was his habit to call these pupils together in the organ loft, and each was expected to play a composition of his own. His best pupils were his own sons, of whom he had eleven. The first born, Friedemann, though his favorite child, thoroughly educated and very talented in all matters, lacked the character to make a noble man, and brought much sorrow upon himself and his father. The second son, Emanuel, was also very successful in music, and was appointed, at an early age, private accompanist to the King of Prussia, Friederic II. This was in 1740, and the king, who was extravagantly fond of music, soon became extremely anxious to see and hear Sebastian Bach himself. This desire was especially augmented after hearing a performance of the wonderful "Passion Music," and at last his presence was demanded so peremptorily that, although grown old and reluctant to leave home, he finally obeyed the summons. By special order of the king, Bach was brought directly to the presence in his travelling clothes, much to the old man's mortification. A concert was even then in progress, or, rather its opening was postponed till the great *maestro* should arrive. The king owned no less than seven pianos, of Silbermann's renowned make, and nothing would satisfy his majesty but an immediate adjournment of the whole company from the concert hall, and the tour was made of the several rooms wherein were the instruments, on each of which, in turn, Bach had to play and improvise. The crowning feat of all was when, on return to the concert room, he asked the king to favor him with a theme for a fuge, which he improvised on the spot. The next day the king took his guest in the royal coach, and they drove in turn to every church in the city that Bach might try all the organs.

Not long after his return home the health of the great master began to decline, and from long study and overwork, his sight rapidly failed him, and he became almost totally blind. Two severe operations were made upon his eyes by renowned oculists, but so entirely in vain that the last gleam of light expired. For several years he lived on, but in ever increasing pain and weakness, until, on the 28th of July, 1750, at the age of 65 years, he breathed his last. A few days before his death he suddenly awoke from sleep, exclaiming, "I can see!" which was so true that he once more beheld his loving family, and even bore the light of the sun without pain. His death was quiet, calm and painless. His most distinguished sons were Emanuel, John Christopher and John Christian, all of whom became celebrated musicians and composers. But, beyond his own children, the mantle of genius did not descend, and the name of Bach was never again connected with music, except as a thing of the past. One of his children, who died at the age of twelve years, was an idiot, whose whole faculty was the hereditary gift. For hours the poor little fellow would improvise on the harpsichord fantastic and original, though somewhat confused strains of music, to which the father, in his years of blindness, would sit and listen. Sebastian Bach's works were chiefly sacred music. Among those which are known are three hundred cantatas, a great number of masses, and five works of passion music, of which latter, however, only three are extant. Only one fourth of his works were published during his life time. After his death, his manuscripts were distributed among his sons, and thus scattered widely. The work of their recovery has been ardently pursued, and many of them have only been brought to light during the past ten years. The "St. Matthew Passion Music" was buried in oblivion for one hundred years, and was at last revived by Mendelssohn. All his music was deeply imbued with his own piety, and produced, as it was, in the time of the great political and religious revolution which shook the world, much was lost entirely, and it is only in these later days that the great master is truly appreciated.—*Musical Herald*.