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Johann Sebastian Bach



Johann Sebastian Bach was a German composer born in 1685. He died in 1750. He was the youngest of the children of Johann Ambrosius Bach. Musical talent had been in his family for generations. Many of his ancestors were composers and musicians. By the time Bach was ten, both of his parents had died and his elder brother took him in.

When he was a small boy living with his brother, Bach was forbidden to touch his brother's expensive handwritten music book, which was kept in a music cabinet with barred doors. The doors were kept locked unless Bach's brother was using the music in that cabinet. Temptation was too strong for young Bach, however, for he wanted to play the music in that book very badly.

Every night that had enough moonlight for the next six months, Bach slid the book between the bars of the cabinet and copied the music from the forbidden book into his own book.

One night, he was so tired that he fell asleep over his work, forgetting to slip the book back into the cabinet through the bars. When he woke, his furious brother took and hid both music books: the original, and the book that Bach had copied. Although the story did not end well for Bach, it shows his devotion to music, even at a young age.

When Bach was fifteen, he was sent to high school, or *Gymnasium*, and he joined a boys choir. At eighteen, he was appointed a violinist at the court of Weimar. A few months later, he became organist at St. Boniface's Church.

In 1709, Bach became the composer for the Duke of Saxe-Weimar. There, he wrote much religious music, a few cantatas, and some organ music. He secured enough money in that position to buy a house, and he married his cousin, Maria Bach. She gave birth to seven children, including Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, another famous composer. She died in 1720.

Eighteen months after his wife's death, Bach married Anna Magdalena Wilcken. She gave birth to thirteen children. Bach fathered twenty children with his two wives.

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Johann Sebastian Bach, *continued*



In 1723, Bach became Cantor of St. Thomas's Church. This meant he had more money, and could send his boys to a better school. He was glad because he wanted his boys to have the finest education possible within his means.

During the last ten years of Bach's life, his eyesight was poor despite attempts to restore it through operations. In his very late years, he was almost completely blind.

Although Bach is known today as a composer, during his lifetime he was better known as a musician, mainly an organist. Among the many instruments he played were harpsichord, clavichord, organ, and violin.

Two of Bach's most famous works are *St. John's Passion* and *St. Matthew's Passion*. The words to these songs come from the Bible. His Passions were a little like operas, but without the scenery and costumes.

Bach's best known works were his Brandenburg Concertos. He wrote six of them, and although he never got to hear them himself, they are enjoyed by people all over the world today.

Bach wrote so many songs that as many as half of them could be unknown or unpublished today. Many other composers and even popular music artists have taken his themes and melodies and adapted them for other uses.

Bach composed so many songs that no one knows how many he wrote. His music is enjoyed all over the world by many types of people today. Although he was never rich during his lifetime, he has made us rich in music and culture. Johann Sebastian Bach was a gifted and talented man.

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Answer the questions about Bach

1. When was Bach born?
 - a. 1565
 - b. 1685
 - c. 1865
 - d. 1492

2. When did Bach die?
 - a. 1750
 - b. 1570
 - c. 1700
 - d. 1770

3. Who was Bach's father?
 - a. Johann Christian Bach
 - b. Johann Michael Haydn
 - c. Johann Ambrosius Bach
 - d. Joseph Magdalena Bach

4. With whom did Bach live during his teenage years?
 - a. his grandparents
 - b. his parents
 - c. his sister
 - d. his brother

5. What was Bach's first job?
 - a. Choirboy at Westminster
 - b. Organist at St. Thomas's
 - c. Violinist at Weimar
 - d. Composer for the Duke

6. Who was Bach's first wife?
 - a. Maria Bach
 - b. Anna Magdalena Wilcken
 - c. Clara Schumann
 - d. Eva Johanna Bihlmaier

7. Who was Bach's second wife?
 - a. Maria Bach
 - b. Anna Magdalena Wilcken
 - c. Clara Bach
 - d. Eva Johanna Bihlmaier

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8. How many children did Bach have altogether?
 - a. 7
 - b. 13
 - c. 10
 - d. 20

9. What physical handicap did Bach have in his later years?
 - a. Deaf
 - b. Blind
 - c. Alzheimer's disease
 - d. Cerebral palsy

10. What instrument did Bach NOT play?
 - a. Harpsichord
 - b. Organ
 - c. Violin
 - d. Piano

11. What is Bach's most famous work?
 - a. Brandenburg Concertos
 - b. Goldberg Variations
 - c. The Well-Tempered Clavier
 - d. St. Luke's Passion

12. How many songs did Bach write?
 - a. 100
 - b. 500
 - c. 1000
 - d. unknown

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Answers to Bach:

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. d
5. c
6. a
7. b
8. d
9. b
10. d
11. a
12. d