

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750)

The year 2000 was the 250th anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death, the great composer, an organ virtuoso, one of the geniuses of music. No composer worked harder. The volume of his music is staggering in its proportions, producing- among many other works - probably the greatest contribution to organ literature written by one person. These facts raise a few questions. Why is so very little of Bach's organ and sacred choral or vocal music used in churches today? Why do many insist that Bach is not relevant to the modern church? Why commemorate his death in an age of ever changing taste, the impact of popular culture on worship through TV and commercial music, the synthesized sound and the pop harmonies and rhythms associated with it, the religious ditties, and the Disney world?

Superficial music fashions come and go, but the permanence of the great musical classics remains solid and untarnished. Since music forms the character of believers and community, it makes a difference whether or not it is pleasing to the ear but also theologically sound. In our age, Bach still has a clear, eloquent, and a powerful message for the world. He has long been recognized as one of the greatest evangelists in history. He has, in fact, often been called the "Fifth Evangelist" and "the supreme religious composer." His works are the Reformation put to music. Through them congregations have been led to worship and to celebrate the mysteries of the Gospel. Though non-Christian lovers of classical music are often uncomfortable with the intensity of Bach's vibrant faith and its spiritual demands on them, they admire his unchallenged genius. Even the CBC has Bach specialties in commemoration of his death.

On March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, in the duchy of Saxe-Weimar, Johann Sebastian Bach was born the fourth and last son of Ambrosius Bach. He came into the greatest musical family the world has ever known. About 40 of his ancestors were practicing musicians. Johann Sebastian's family were devout believers. Rather than give up their faith, they left Hungary during the Thirty Years War. Johann Sebastian was orphaned at a young age. His mother died when he was nine; his father, a fine performer on the violin and viola, died eight months later. Johann Sebastian was taken into the family of his brother Johann Christopher, a church organist. His father had taught him the violin, his brother Christopher the clavier. He did well in school, where he studied catechism, French, Latin, Greek, history and music.

Bach was a committed Christian, an orthodox Lutheran. His faith was his comfort and strength in the great adversities he suffered throughout his life. His library was filled with theological works, including two sets of the writing of Martin Luther. When Bach was 48, he acquired Luther's monumental three -volume translation of the Bible, which he studied intensively. Bach was a Christian who lived by the Bible, for whom Luther's concept of salvation by "faith alone" was absolutely essential. He sought for direction in his ministry in the Holy Scriptures. He commented on I Chronicles 29 that "music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David." Commenting on 2 Chronicles 5: 13, he wrote: "N.B. At a reverent performance of music, God is always at hand with His gracious presence." For Bach the great doctrines of the Reformation were not dry formulas, but living truths.

Although he lived in a time, which saw the beginning of the undermining of the foundations of the Christian faith and the watering down of the liturgy of the Church, he remained strong and unwavering in his orthodox Lutheran faith. He also followed Luther in his music. For example, his cantatas mirror Luther's teachings. Someone said that they "are not intended to be works of music or art on their own, but to carry on, by their own means, the work of Luther, the preaching of the word and nothing but the word." Bach's contemporary, Hamburg composer Johann Mattheson, praised as the ideal - the only real purpose of music - the arousal and calming of human passion. This was the general view expressed at that time. But Bach's music spoke another language. Mattheson and his fellow critics did not understand that according to Bach, music was a gift from God, which must be used in God's service and for His glory.

Bach saw no insidious distinction between "sacred" and "secular" music. Historians, Will and Ariel Durant, claim that Bach did not hesitate to lavish the resources of his art upon "purely secular cantatas," such as a "Hunt Cantata" a "Wedding Cantata," and seven cantatas for civic ceremonies. But they are mistaken. In all of Bach's work - music, theology, and worship are all intertwined. On many of his compositions he inscribed the letters I.N.J. or S.D.G. or J.J., which stand for "In the name of Jesus," "Soli Deo Gloria," and "Jesus, aid." For the same music Bach used at times either sacred or so called secular works, both alike written and performed to the glory of the Most High God. The title page to his *Little Book for the Organ* declares that it was dedicated, "To the glory of God alone in the highest and to further the learning of everyone." I suppose it may startle a modern secular Bach lover that the music of the "Osanna," in the B-minor Mass had previously been used in a serenade honouring Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, on one of his state visits to Leipzig. Bach's example is an encouragement for modern musicians, whether performing in so-called secular settings, composing music, directing choirs in churches, or playing the organ or whatever instrument, to offer their best as "sacrifice" of praise unto God.

The height of Bach's work as a church musician was reached in the settings of the Passion according to St. Matthew and St. John, and the Mass in B minor. I will always associate the first two with my student years. When I was a first year seminary student in Toronto in the late fifties, the dean told us that we should go and hear Mendelssohn's choir performance of St. Matthew's Passion. He mentioned that it faithfully describes the Gospel narrative of Christ's suffering and death. We would have an unforgettable spiritual treat. He was right. It drew me near to my Saviour in a very special way. The first performance of St. Matthew's Passion was on Good Friday afternoon, April 15, 1729. In our time it is usually performed during the Lenten Season.

When I studied in the Netherlands in the early sixties, I had the privilege of hearing St. John's Passion performed in the historic Westerkerk in Amsterdam, a rich experience, which remains with me as vividly as when I heard it the first time. In his Passions Bach reveals a depth of feeling and devotion, music coming as it were from another world.

Contemporary evangelical sensibilities appear to dismiss Bach's emphasis on sin and the crucifixion. Bach did not rush to Easter joy. The medieval hymn, O Sacred Head Now

Wounded, adapted by Bach in St. Matthew's Passion is as an essential part of the performance as the resurrection hope. The darkness of the crucifixion comes before the light of the resurrection. The emphasis is on the suffering of Christ and the tragedy of the betrayal. For Bach, not only Easter, but Good Friday and Easter, is the celebration of victory. I am thinking of the moving narrative in John's Passion, "Look yonder, o my soul, with fearful joy consider, with heavy heart in sweet yet bitter ferment: you gain a prize from Jesu's torment." The latter is as important as the concluding triumphant chorale: "Lord Jesus, when we come to die, give strength to our infirmity and lead us to salvation... Lord Jesus Christ! We cry to thee! And sing thy praises endlessly."

Bach's final work, the Mass in B minor, is his greatest work. It is a rich source of doxologies. It betrays Bach's sense of high and holy privilege in having the opportunity to praise his God. But Bach's Mass does not include the Roman Catholic Canon of the Mass nor its preface. The latter conflicted with his Lutheran beliefs. Bach never heard it performed. It is choral music as awe inspiring as a cathedral, filled with joy and hope. The God adored in the Mass is the Eternal One Who revealed Himself in Christ. As a medium to express the historic Christian faith, Bach used the Nicene Creed. John Calvin once commented that the Nicene Creed is "more a hymn suited for singing than a formula for confession." Bach showed in the Mass that the doctrine of the Trinity can indeed be expressed satisfactorily and clearly in music.

At the end of his life, Bach's eyesight began to fail. In early 1750, an English surgeon operated twice on his eyes, but both operations went badly and left him further weakened. He had a stroke followed by a raging fever and died on the evening of July 28, 1750. Bach considered himself a pilgrim, a citizen of the Eternal City, liberated from the finiteness which, so easily besets us. His last composition "And now I step before thy throne" expressed his belief that for the Christian death opens the door to the eternal throne room of God. Soli Deo Gloria!

Johan D. Tangelder