

# Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685-1750)

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A little church spire sparkled brightly in the sunshine on the day Johann Sebastian Bach was born. Wooded slopes and gently rolling fields welcomed him warmly to the village of Eisenach, Germany. Eisenach was in the central region of Germany called Thuringia.

Johann was born on March 21, 1685. He was born just one month after another famous musician named George Frideric Handel. And he was born only 50 miles away from where George lived, but they never met.



Johann's family had been musicians for many generations. They could trace their family history back to the early 1600s.

Johann's great-great grandfather, Veit Bach, lived in a country called Hungary before moving to Germany. Veit was a baker and a miller. He enjoyed playing the cittern. The cittern is a stringed instrument that looks something like a lute. Veit even took his cittern with him to the mill. At the mill he played in rhythm to the grinding of the wheel.





Johann's father was the town musician. He played the violin, viola and organ very well.

When he was still very young, Johann began studying music with his father.

Both of Johann's parents died before he was 10 years old. He went to live with his older brother. His brother taught him to play the clavichord and the harpsichord. These are both musical instruments that look something like a small piano.

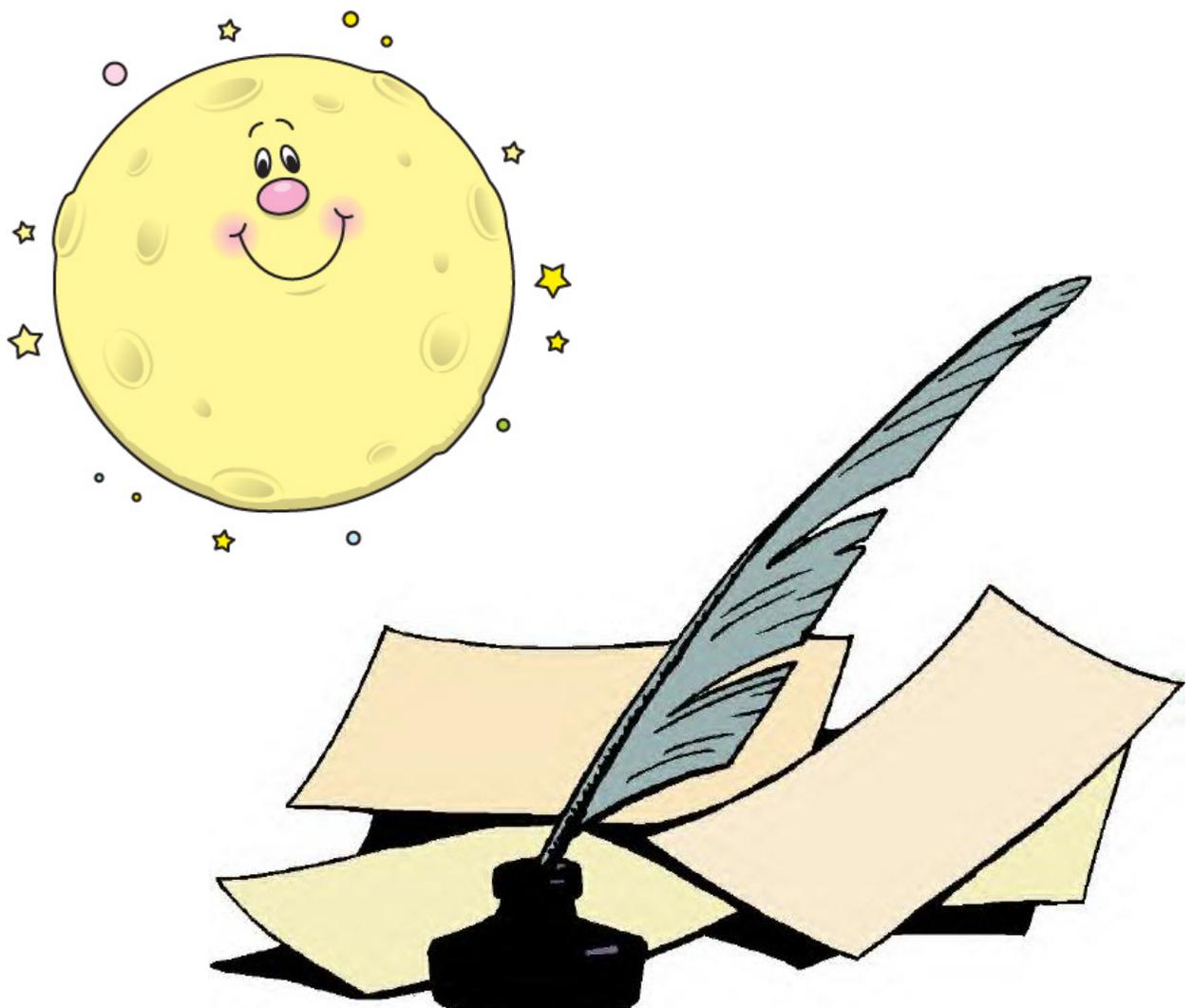
Johann was always experimenting and always wanting to learn new things. In a short time he was able to play all the music pieces his brother had given to him to learn. However, his brother owned a very valuable book of music pieces by some of the most famous composers of the day - Froberger, Kerl and Pachelbel. Johann decided to find a way to secretly look at the special music book.

This book was kept in a locked cabinet. But the doors of the cabinet were made of bars with spaces between them. With his little hands, Johann could reach between the bars and roll

the book up. You see, the book only had a paper cover.

He would get the book out at night, after everyone else had gone to bed. He did not have a light, but he copied the book by moonlight. In six months Johann had copied the whole book.

Then he eagerly learned to play the new music pieces.



When Johann was 15 years old, he earned money by singing in a church choir. When he was 18, he joined an orchestra as a violinist. Then he became an organist at a church. For the rest of his life, Johann worked as an organist and choir director in different cities in Germany.

Johann was not just a great composer. He was a great performer, too. Once the Prince of Hesse heard Johann perform. The prince was completely amazed. When Johann finished playing, the prince took off his jeweled ring and gave it to Johann.



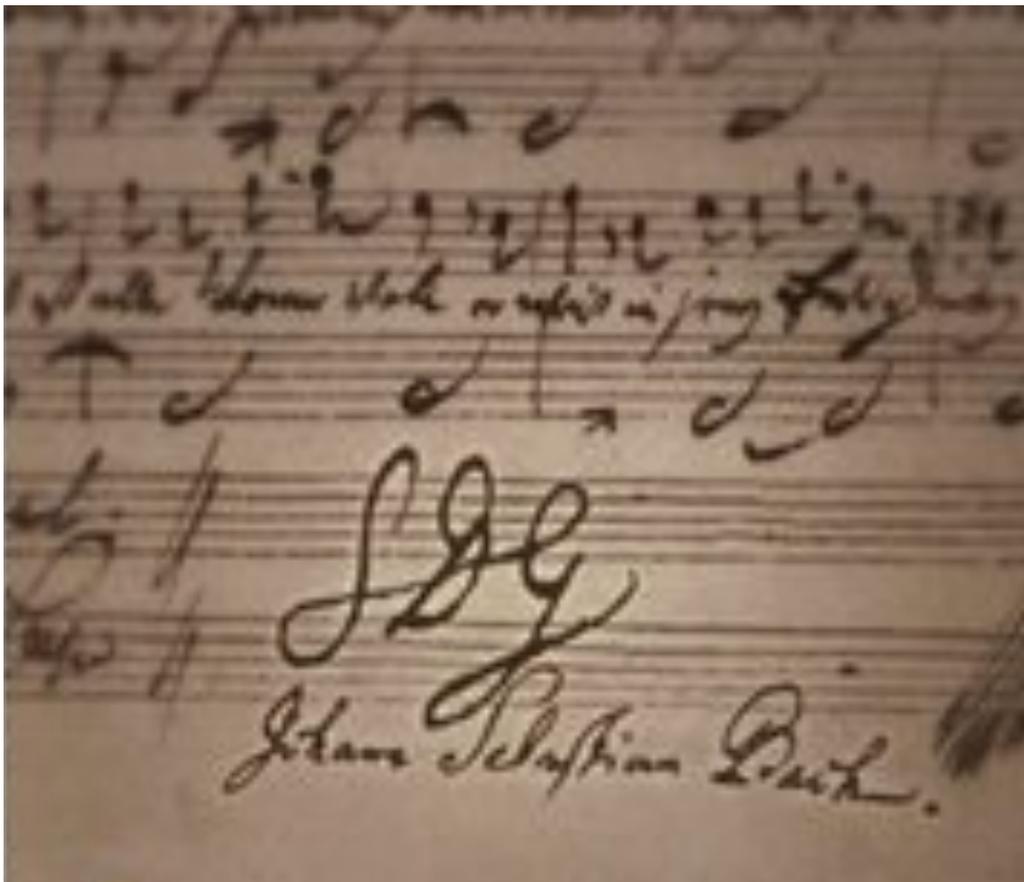
In the year 1707, Johann married his second cousin, Maria Barbara. Back in Johann's time, it was not unusual for second cousins to marry each other. Maria died in 1720. The next year, Johann married Anna Magdalena Wilcken. Anna loved music too. She was a professional singer. Four of Johann's sons also became famous composers. Johann Christoph Friederich and Johann Christian were the most famous.

In 1723, Johann and his family moved to Leipzig, Germany. He lived there for the rest of his life. At first he became the director of music for a school. The school provided music for churches in the city. He wrote some of his most famous music during these years in Leipzig.



.People who knew Johann said, “He lived to worship God and to write music.”

Whenever he wrote a piece of music, he would write at the beginning the initials “JJ.” “JJ” stood for “Jesu Juva,” which means “Jesus help” in Latin. At the end of the music, he would write “SDG.” “SDG” stood for “Soli Deo Gloria,” which means “To God alone the Glory,” in Latin.





Johann wrote hundreds of pieces of music. His music is not just beautiful to listen to, it also makes you feel a part of it. You will feel this if you listen to his famous *Magnificat*. He wrote it for Christmas Day, 1723. The music is based on a Bible story about an angel appearing to Mary. The angel tells Mary she is going to have a son, Jesus. The words Mary says after she learns about his miracle are known as the *Magnificat*. The *Magnificat* is Mary's song of thanksgiving to God.

The next year Johann wrote *St. John's Passion*.

Passion music is always about the sufferings of Christ. For many centuries Passion music was performed during the Holy Week before Easter.

Johann's music for the Passion took a new and different approach. He wrote very dramatic and touching music. He told the Bible story with much respect, sympathy, and power.

Five years later he wrote music for the Passion from the Gospel of Matthew called *St.*

*Matthew's Passion*. This work is very moving to listen to as well.



The Nikolaikirche in Leipzig, where Bach's St John Passion was first performed. – Photo: J.M. Kolb (wikipedia)

Johann lived during the time of history known as the Baroque period. Both artists and musicians during this time were known for the feeling they put into their work. Johann always tried to put meaning into his music. And he liked to base his music on different moods such as joy or suffering.

He was also very interested in musical technique. Two techniques he was most famous for were “counterpoint” and “fugue.” Counterpoint is playing more than one melody at a time. Fugue is a musical composition that has different instruments repeat the same melody. They play the melody a little differently each time.



When Johann was in his late 50s he started to have serious eye problems. In his last years he was almost blind. The same eye surgeon who operated on George Frideric Handel tried to help Johann. Unfortunately, the surgery did not help.

On July 28, 1750, Johann Sebastian Bach died at age 65. He was buried in a little church graveyard in Leipzig, Germany.

All through his life Johann used the gift of music to celebrate God and life.

