

The life of Bach

PETER WILLIAMS



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1 Early years, 1685–1703

Johann Sebastian Bach belongs [sic] to a family in all of whose members equally a love for and skill in music seem, as a common gift, to have been imparted by nature.

The Obituary's chief author, C. P. E. Bach (Emanuel), was well aware of the musical part of his family's history as it had been handed down, for although his father seems to have contributed little if anything to the day's published biographies, he spent time compiling a genealogical table, the 'Origin of the musical-Bach family' ('Ursprung der musicalisch-Bachischen Familie', *Dok I*, pp. 255–67). He did this at or around the age of fifty, and Emanuel added to it. It numbers fifty-three Bachs over some two hundred years, many of them professional musicians well known in central Germany, though only one or two became so in a larger Europe—himself and, as perhaps he could anticipate by 1735, some of his sons.

One can imagine the personal reasons why a composer would compile such a table at or near his half century, especially after suffering so many bereavements from early childhood on: his parents (mother at fifty, father two days short of fifty), gradually all seven of his siblings (he was the youngest), a wife, no fewer than ten children and a beloved employer. The wider the extended Bach family in Thuringia, the more constantly news of deaths circulated. In addition, J. S. Bach might have

been open as much to the day's fashions as to any atavistic compulsions of his own. For genealogies were well known in the book centre of Leipzig, where, throughout the 1720s and 1730s, Johann Hübner was publishing aristocratic and other family tables for what was evidently a ready market. One such book had some 333 tables.

In its pride at the size and musical achievements of the large clan to which he, a child-orphan, belonged, Bach's table is doing two things: establishing the story of an exceptional family and saluting an art practised to the greater glory of God. The story is not a fairy tale but sets out an (as it were) apostolic succession, not entirely unlike the genealogical tables in two Gospels and parts of the Pentateuch, consciously or otherwise. Chiefly as a result of it, the Bachs have become the best-known musical family, though positions of higher prestige were occupied by some of the Couperin family in Paris. The first name in the table, Veit Bach, was that of a man said to have fled Hungary for his Lutheran faith, and although this is doubtful – Hungary (meaning modern Slovakia?) had early on become predominantly Protestant – from Veit a Tree of Jesse springs, a genealogy of Protestant church musicians active over generations.

Probably a few years later, the table was joined by another family document, the Old-Bach Archive, a collection of choral works by older family members, including Sebastian's father and first father-in-law. The collection seems to have passed to J. S. Bach on the death (and perhaps by particular request) of his first cousin Johann Ernst in 1739, an organist who like Sebastian had studied in Hamburg, and who succeeded him at Arnstadt in 1708. Both the Archive and the main copy of the table passed later to Emanuel Bach.

By the 1730s, music as an honourable family trade reflected the growing respect for art and the artist, 'Kunst, der Künstler': this was not a dynasty of shoemakers. A surgeon and a shopkeeper who qualified for listing among the table's 'musical Bachs' were, one can assume, gifted amateurs, unlike the Bach who had been a court jester but is not included, despite Sebastian's certain knowledge of him (Geiringer 1954, p. 9). Of course, the list also excludes the mothers, wives and

daughters. In a letter of 1748, Bach informs a cousin of Emanuel's 'two male heirs' without mentioning their sister, for it was the boys through whom the family tree grew further. Yet his own mother, a Lämmerhirt, was undoubtedly musical, being a member of a family closely connected with music in Erfurt, the region's largest city. She was related to other significant musicians, composers to whose music J. S. Bach was to respond in one way or another: J. G. Walther (as stepsister to his great-aunt) and J. H. Buttstedt (as second cousin to his wife). (See below for remarks on Bach's engagement with the music of 'minor composers'.) Something surely came to Sebastian from his mother, as it came to his sons from their mothers, both of whose original families were also musical.

It would be something to wonder at that such fine men should be so little known outside their fatherland, if one did not consider that these honourable Thuringians were so content with their fatherland and their status that they would not venture far from it, even to go after their fortune.

Sons of Bach would assume that normally success could only be measured by going away to study or by occupying a position of prestige away from home, in a royal court of renown, such as Emanuel's in Potsdam at the time of the Obituary. For some decades the garrulous Hamburg critic Johann Mattheson had been lionising Handel and reporting on his successes in England, and news of Handel's great if fluctuating wealth had reached his native city of Halle nearby. Bach's successor at Leipzig, Gottlob Harrer, had 'spent some time in Italy' (*Dok* II, p. 480), as Emanuel, who also applied for the job, admitted he had not (*Dok* III, p. 255). Telemann, Emanuel's godfather, had travelled, come into contact with Polish music, written operas for the free city of Hamburg, visited Paris and actually declined the Leipzig cantorate: a varied and productive musical life of fame and patent success. At about the time the Obituary was published, Emanuel's younger brother Johann Christian was leaving to study in Italy, perhaps with the renowned Padre



2 Map of Thuringia and Saxony in the time of J. S. Bach.

Martini, and soon found success in Milan and London, freelancing in the modern way.

How far the Obituary is reporting Bach's own views can only be guessed: the various grumbles he expressed over pay and conditions, particularly in Leipzig in his forties and fifties, and no doubt aloud *en famille*, may have led to a search for some form of self-justification. The Obituary authors, too, though better travelled, needed to claim the self-sufficiency of provincial learning. One hopes that for Bach there was genuine 'contentment with his fatherland': it would be dreadful to imagine him towards the end of his life regretting how he had spent it, wondering what he had missed in the musical centres of Europe, and having to find consolation by willing himself to be content with what he had done 'for God and his neighbour'.

Contentment of this kind had already been implied in biographies of German heroes familiar to Bach and his sons, such as Camerarius's life of Melanchthon, the early reformer and revered colleague of Luther. Melanchthon too was orphaned (aged eleven), expressed fidelity to his fatherland and place of origin, was headstrong, and educated himself by assiduously studying what others had written: all motifs to occur in the Bach Obituary. By 1700, several editions of Melanchthon's *Life* had been published in Leipzig, and his directives on preaching and scriptural exegesis were especially influential. (Melanchthon was drawn by Albrecht Dürer, who, though well travelled, similarly let it be known that he preferred remaining in Nuremberg to seeking fame and riches elsewhere. His family was also said to have originated in Hungary.) To knowledgeable listeners for whom a cantata was 'musical rhetoric' equivalent to the verbal rhetoric of a sermon as laid out by Melanchthon, parallels between the reformer and J. S. Bach would have appeared close.

To see Thuringia as a geographical crossroads where 'the manifold European trends met and merged' (Wolff 2000, p. 16) is rather wishful thinking. Travel overland being as difficult as it was, really lively contact between distant cities on major water routes such as Amsterdam–London or Dresden–Hamburg would have been no harder than between

Dresden and Eisenach. But a narrow province with lively traditions does have advantages: self-contained Thuringia was a province with a strong culture, concentrated on itself, competitive and vigorous in its artistic endeavours. (Compare Shakespeare's London.) Here, an exceptionally gifted and voracious boy would be stimulated to learn what he could from elsewhere and to rely on his own achievements. Of course, local or national pride can mean underrating the foreign, as shown by the Obituary's sarcastic references to Louis Marchand later. Nevertheless, it is – to this day – more typical of Protestant than of Roman Catholic cultures to be receptive to foreign achievement or to seek personal development abroad, and provincial Thuringia was no exception.

The Obituary's word 'fortune' denotes both financial and artistic success. Certainly Bach did progress financially over his career, doing so without the kind of risks Handel took. Reckoned in terms of annual income in guilders, as a young court musician Bach earned 28, as a minor parish organist 50 then 85, as court organist 150 then 200, as concertmeister 250 to 300, as court capellmeister 450 and as cantor about 800, in addition to not insignificant payment in kind at each stage (fuel, cereals, lodging, etc.). But clearly, his fame and fortune did not match Handel's.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685, on 21 March, in Eisenach. His parents were Johann Ambrosius Bach, court and town musician there, and Elisabeth (née Lämmerhirt), daughter of a town official in Erfurt.

Only after describing the composer's context in general terms does the Obituary turn to its main subject, but from those two brief sentences readers would learn much about his background. Some idea of the significance of Eisenach – a city associated with Tannhäuser, a medieval minstrel's combat, a saint (Elizabeth of Thuringia), Martin Luther (a native, translating the New Testament imprisoned in its castle) and J. S. Bach (who latinised its name in some of his signatures) – may be

gained by imagining Stratford-on-Avon as not only the birthplace of Shakespeare but the site of Richard Lionheart's pilgrimage, the mission of St Boniface, a famous bardic contest, and a prison in which Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Careful readers of Walther's *Lexicon* of 1732 would also have known that 21 March was less than four weeks after the birth of Georg Frideric Handel in Halle, a bigger town beyond Thuringia and by 1732 the proud seat of a university.

While Johann was a common family name, 'Sebastian' came from the godfather, as was customary: Sebastian Nagel, *Stadtptfeifer* or municipal musician in Eisenach and a colleague of Ambrosius. By the time of Sebastian's birth Ambrosius had served as director of the town's music for fourteen years, having previously been a municipal violinist in Erfurt, where he had married Elisabeth Lämmerhirt, daughter of a town councillor and thus bourgeois by class. Had Ambrosius succeeded a few months earlier in obtaining the release he sought from his Eisenach position and returned to Erfurt, Sebastian would have been born there, as his brother Christoph had been, the brother who was to take him in later. It was also to Erfurt relatives that his sister Marie Salome returned when their mother died.

Erfurt plays a big part in Sebastian's musical background. Its musicians over the years included Pachelbel (who taught Christoph from 1686), Nicolaus Vetter and Buttstedt (Pachelbel pupils), Johann Effler (Sebastian's predecessor in Weimar), Walther (a Buttstedt pupil) and Jacob Adlung (organist and influential writer on organs). Various Bachs remained prominent town musicians there right until Napoleonic times. In 1716 Sebastian returned to test a new organ in the Augustinerkirche, Erfurt's 'Austin Friars', where Luther himself was ordained priest in 1507. This organ was the work of the privileged Erfurt builder J. G. Schröter, with whose family Sebastian remained in contact, and whose pupils included Franciscus Volckland, builder of several instruments around Erfurt still in recognisable condition today.

Judging by his position, Bach's father was a gifted musician, officially praised as a versatile and effective music director (BJ 1927, p. 141),

much better paid than his predecessor in Eisenach, and presumably a good violinist. His duties at Eisenach included playing wind music twice a day from a balcony or tower of the town hall, participating in the music in St George's church (the church of Sebastian's baptism) on Sundays and feast days (main service and vespers), and in various ceremonial events, civic or private, for which he had the *privilegium*. Whether such musicians as Ambrosius considered themselves primarily wind or string players is not obvious, but to judge by the support shown to his eventual widow by the cantor of St George's, his senior colleague, he and his family were respected (Dok II, p. 4).

Although cantor A. C. Dedekind would have been known to young Sebastian, a more certain influence on him was the church's organist at the time, Ambrosius's cousin and colleague, another Johann Christoph Bach. In his genealogical table, Sebastian uniquely calls this Bach 'a profound composer', one of whose motets he probably planned for his own funeral. It is often conjectured now that as an active organist and composer – neither of which Ambrosius is known to have been – Christoph allowed the boy to learn as many basics of organ playing and construction as were feasible, though had he been a formal teacher, the table would have said so. Christoph laboured many years to improve the large organ in what was the town's major church, St George's, and perhaps the boy was as much interested in this as he was in accompanying his father to his various duties. Musicians had close contacts, and presumably Ambrosius's sons sang in St George's choir, whose repertory included some music by Josquin, a composer admired in writing by Luther himself.

Sebastian's schooling is uncertain before 1693 when he entered the Latin school in which Luther had been a pupil two hundred years earlier and which taught German and Latin literacy, confessional study such as the catechism and psalms, and presumably some degree of numeracy. That he was younger at entry than his brothers, went straight into the fifth rather than sixth (a lower) class and by 1695 was placed higher than his elder brother Jacob suggests he was a brighter than average child.

Johann Sebastian was still not ten years old when he found himself deprived of his parents by death. He made his way to Ohrdruf to his eldest brother, Johann Christoph (organist there), under whose guidance he laid the foundations for his keyboard playing.

Whether any pathos was intended in the Obituary's words 'still not ten years old' or 'made his way', and if so whether it came from the composer himself, cannot be certain. Both add a shade of meaning beyond the brute facts, and perhaps Emanuel did not know that another orphaned brother, Jacob, also went to Ohrdruf. Certainly neither boy's prospect can have been good at that moment.

Also unknown is whether the younger orphan's loss affected him in such a way as to lead to the single-mindedness, defiance and even irascibility that people have read into the pitifully small number of later documents concerning him. Handel lost his father around his twelfth birthday, but his biographer notes only that it 'produced a considerable change for the worse in the income of his mother' (Mainwaring 1760, p. 29), a remark probably from Handel himself: again, it is not personal feelings but practical circumstances – could the boy now afford further training in music, etc. – that are the business of biography. Bach's mother had died before his father, about 1 May 1694, so there was less of a financial problem at that point. Sebastian and Jacob had then remained with their father, who remarried some seven months later, only to die barely three months after that, leaving a wife who already had children of her own.

So common was bereavement and so normal for relations to take in orphans – Sebastian's parents had too, and Emanuel was to take in his brother Johann Christian – that one can only guess how the deaths were taken, how much financial anxiety there was when Christoph became responsible for two younger brothers, and how problematic life became in any regard for any of them. Christoph himself was only twenty-three at the time, married a year before. His younger brothers received charity income (free board) as poor scholars, Sebastian for

a longer period as a chorister. Whether what the Obituary calls his foundations as a keyboardist were laid by Christoph in regular lessons or as circumstances allowed is not recorded, though it may be wrong to assume that young musicians merely picked up what they could within an active musical family. There would have been music copying to do, spinets to tune, services to deputise in.

From age fourteen, and presumably at his father's cost, Christoph had studied three years with Pachelbel in Erfurt and – to judge by his impressive MSS of organ music – become a player with wide interests, indeed an 'artistic man', 'optimus artifex', according to church registers. Perhaps he had picked up an interest in French organ music from Pachelbel and passed it on to his younger brother. His recent marriage had been the occasion for some music in which their father had participated with Pachelbel himself, whom presumably the boy Sebastian saw on that occasion. Ohrdruf was a minor town in comparison with Eisenach, but St Michael's church library was better than many, and the organ was meant to be adequate for all the repertory of the time. According to the contract of 1690 (*BJ* 1926, pp. 145ff.), it was to have two manuals and twenty-one stops, including chair organ and a pedal solo stop for chorales with cantus firmus. Construction work on it in the late 1690s could well have interested a young teenager.

Walther's *Lexicon* of 1732 says that Sebastian learnt 'the first principles' of keyboard playing from his brother, and according to Emanuel 'nothing more than that' (*Dok* III, p. 288) – that is to say, the boy taught himself composition. In broad terms both statements might be true, but the second was also part of a picture of self-reliance consistently drawn by Emanuel, who was adjusting for later readers what was said in Walther's book. (So little did Emanuel know of his father's Ohrdruf period that he thought Christoph died in 1700 and left the fifteen-year-old to make his own way: see below.) Both brothers had a lively interest in both local and 'foreign' keyboard music. Had his father still been alive, Sebastian would presumably have worked just as much on string instruments, but as it was he was soon producing imitations of the various kinds of keyboard music composed by the accepted masters of

the region, Pachelbel and Kuhnau. Some organ chorales attributed to J. S. Bach probably date from about this time, his mid-teens, including some of the so-called Neumeister collection, BWV 1090–1120, chorales not always distinguishable from the work of Pachelbel pupils. In some of these modest pieces, however, there is both a sureness of harmonic touch and an imaginative waywardness in the treatment that one would dearly like to be proved authentic.

It is odd that there is still some uncertainty as to who composed what amongst these and other keyboard pieces, but 1700 was too soon for conspicuously gifted boys to be such a wonder that their work would be systematically preserved. As a recognised phenomenon, the child prodigy barely existed yet in music, particularly in composition. Fortunately, the Ohrdruf Lyceum registers at least show Sebastian to have been successful in school, being fourth in the *prima* class (largely for eighteen-year-olds, and with a wide curriculum) when he left in March 1700. Another sign that he was smarter than most?

A book full of keyboard pieces by the then most famous masters Froberger, Kerll and Pachelbel, which his brother owned, was however denied him. [Nevertheless, he] copied it by moonlight. After six months this musical booty was happily in his own hands, [and he] was attempting to put it to use when, to his greatest dismay, his brother became aware of it and mercilessly took from him the copy he had prepared with such trouble.

This must have been a large book, to take six months to copy (even in secret) and to provoke such a reaction. Considering how few intimate details there are in the Obituary, this episode must have loomed large in family tradition, and touches on motifs familiar in any musician's life.

Several things can be learnt from it, therefore. The MS was of keyboard music and contained work by 'southern' composers (Froberger and Kerll were Roman Catholic, Pachelbel was by now working in Nuremberg); it gives a glimpse of how a young musician *in statu pupilari* learnt by copying music, as does another MS from this period but

associated with the young Handel;¹ and it gives a picture of how industrious and single-minded the young Bach was, how deep his feelings were, how much he deserves our sympathy. Another evocative and verisimilar detail is that the MS could be rolled up and pulled through the grill-doors of the cupboard by little fingers, though quite how this was done is not easy to envisage. This and the ‘six months’ could be nestorian embellishment.

The original narrator of the story, whether Emanuel or his father, meant to give a sense of the boy’s several virtues, but how far either had meant to malign the elder brother is uncertain. Since Christoph himself seems to have been content to remain an organist, one could read either personal envy or genuine solicitude in the anecdote. Either way, unauthorised copying of valuable and hard-won professional materials was improper, especially if they were then put to use, as the Obituary says they were. (Was the boy presuming to play them in his brother’s church?) Equally improper was defiance of a guardian *in loco parentis*, one solicitous, amongst other things, for a younger brother’s eyesight.

Perhaps there was a further, more musical reason for Christoph’s action: their father had been a violinist active in various musical spheres, and Sebastian, if brought up properly, could look ahead to being more than a church organist. If he developed as a string player, as could have been his father’s wish, he might become *capellmeister* to a great king or, better still, opera and music director of an important city. Too single-minded a pursuit of keyboard music would lead at best only to the cantorate of a major church . . .

At what point the young Bach dedicated his *Capriccio* in E major BWV 993 to his brother is not known, though its turgid formlessness and harmonic poverty are early signs. This piece suggests at least two things, one musical, one personal: that already the young composer was interested in creating length, in sustaining a movement without the aid of a text or programme; and that despite the moonlight episode there was a positive contact between the brothers. This last is also

¹ Lost but documented, containing music by Zachow, Alberti, Froberger, Krieger, Kerll, Strungk and others: see *HHB*, p. 17.

suggested by Christoph's extant books of music – the richly comprehensive Andreas Bach Book and Möller MS – to which Sebastian probably contributed some of his own and other composers' music. On the personal level, some years later, in 1708, Christoph's wife was godmother to Sebastian's first child, as in 1713 Sebastian was godfather to one of Christoph's twin sons. Another of his sons, Bernhard, came to Weimar in 1715 to study with his uncle, going on to an appointment at Cöthen in 1719, no doubt also on his recommendation (Dok II, pp. 47, 202–3). As to the moonlight episode, the Obituary says that Bach had the book returned to him only on his brother's death. This could have been via Bernhard, but if Emanuel and his father were unsure when Christoph died, perhaps the book had been returned long before and subsequently lost.

The motif of adult resistance to a child's musical gifts is found again in Mainwaring's biography of Handel, who, when his father

forbad him to meddle with any musical instrument . . . found means to get a little clavichord privately convey'd to a room at the top of the house. To this room he constantly stole when the family was asleep
(Mainwaring 1760, p. 5)

and presumably he played by moonlight. Mainwaring also refers to the mathematician Pascal, a child prodigy who pursued studies 'against the consent of [his] parents, and in spite of all the opposition'. So an exceptionally gifted child conquers resistance and is noted for his persistence. Furthermore, studying by moonlight was itself a desirable motif for an orphan's biography: it appears again in Melanchthon's, and suggests an ardent young spirit, self-reliant, never afraid of hard work and of self-improving study.

[In 1700] Johann Sebastian made his way, in company with one of his schoolfellows, called Erdmann . . . to Lüneburg and St Michael's Gymnasium there, [where] our Bach, because of his unusually fine soprano voice, was well received.

The Obituary claimed that the move occurred on Christoph's death, but this was not for another twenty-one years. Whether Bach had forgotten

or was suing for sympathy (the lone orphan) or whether Emanuel had misunderstood and/or was guessing is not known, although the genealogical table had also left Christoph's dates blank (Dok I, p. 259).

Fifteen was an age when generally boys became more independent, as apprentices: at about that age Christoph himself had gone to Pachelbel, and at fourteen Jacob had gone back to Eisenach as apprentice to his father's successor. Rather than remain locally, Sebastian sang well enough to take himself off to an important establishment farther north, surely a sign of higher horizons. To be 'well received' there, if it actually happened, meant recognition for the boy's gifts; if it was only a later claim, it was an important one to make, comparable to the praise given to the maturer Bach by the doyen of north German church musicians, Adam Reinken.

As an orphan Bach had qualified for charity money, though not beyond the watershed fifteenth birthday. It could have been his brother's cantor Elias Herda who arranged for Bach and his friend to go to the fine northern city of Lüneburg, to sing in St Michael's and attend school there (Dok I, p. 69), in time for Easter 1700 – a week before he was fifteen and perhaps only a few weeks before his 'uncommonly beautiful treble' voice broke, in the words of Emanuel, who either assumed this or had it from his father (Dok III, p. 82). Voices often broke later than nowadays, and it was not unknown for fifteen-year-olds to continue in a choir school. Erdmann was three years older and by then a Bassist; but it is not impossible that Sebastian's voice settled so quickly that he too could soon sing both bass and countertenor. He remained a scholar in the top class (the *prima*) until 1702, in a school known to have had a distinguished curriculum, including rhetoric, Greek, and German verse, and where the church library was also unusually well stocked.

Although the move to Lüneburg is unlikely to have gone against the fifteen-year-old's wishes, whether he had a conscious desire to study organs and organ playing in north Germany is uncertain, even if he did admire the music. Perhaps a recent book, Werckmeister's *Orgelprobe*, which he certainly knew at some point (see below, p. 41), had whetted his appetite for hearing big instruments with colourful effects,

including those built in Hamburg by the unrivalled Arp Schnitger, who wrote a dedicatory poem for Werckmeister's book. Or perhaps he had an inkling that his voice was about to break, and took steps to be in a distinguished church choir in a cosmopolitan city when it happened, one where he might hope to find a suitable apprenticeship.

It is striking that, unlike his brother, Sebastian did not go off to study with Pachelbel, who was by then a respected teacher in Nuremberg, a city of some importance and closer to Ohrdruf than Lüneburg. Closer still were Halle, where the famed Zachow had taught the young Handel in 1698 (HHB, p. 17), and Leipzig, where Kuhnau was admired and not yet vexed by the pushy Telemann. Was the reason for going to Lüneburg personal – he was really close friends with Georg Erdmann? Or, more significantly, cultural – the Lutheranism of Nuremberg or Halle was too Low Church for him? Or, most likely, partly musical, partly personal – in Lüneburg there worked Georg Böhm, whose music would surely have impressed him more than would Pachelbel's, Zachow's, Kuhnau's or Reinken's, and who had links with the young Bach through family connections in Ohrdruf, his own birthplace? There is something in the make-up of J. S. Bach that allows one to think he could both explore family connections and at the same time follow where a discriminating or ambitious taste led him.

From Lüneburg he travelled from time to time to Hamburg, to hear the then famous organist of St Catherine's, Johann Adam Reinken.

Further questions arise here too. Was one reason for the Lüneburg move to study further with a northern master, to seek an apprenticeship in Hamburg which, because Bach had no money for one, did not materialise? Did he really go there several times, as the Obituary said? Did he seek Reinken in Hamburg rather than the more gifted Buxtehude in Lübeck because in Ohrdruf Reinken's music had been better known, being published? Or because Hamburg was nearer than Lübeck? Or was it that for musicians of Emanuel Bach's generation Reinken's longevity

made him better known than Buxtehude, and that, for the purposes of an Obituary, his fame bestowed more credit on the young Bach? Another possibility is that Hamburg attracted him for a reason not recognised by the Obituary authors – for its opera, by now in the hands of Reinhard Keiser, whose directorship later drew the young Handel to Hamburg. Bach's eventual first job as a court musician (see below) might mean that he had looked earlier in the direction of courts and theatres.

These are some of the possible questions which, were one to know the answers, could give some idea of the kind of boy the young Bach was – whether he planned his career carefully, whether he made decisions for professional or personal reasons, whether he was at the time as interested exclusively in keyboard and church music as the Obituary wished to suggest. It could be that he did later recognise Buxtehude as the more important master, hence taking leave from his job in 1705 for the express purpose of studying with him (see below). But either way, simply to 'hear Reinken' cannot be the whole story: for a young man to study with such established church musicians, outside the auspices of a school or university, the most promising arrangement would have been to take up some kind of apprenticeship with one or other of them. Could the young Bach not afford this?

Curiously, at this point the Obituary does not mention Georg Böhm, whose church of St John was the biggest in Lüneburg, and who may have recommended the boy go to Hamburg, again for the purpose of putting a foot on the career ladder. Böhm is not known to have been directly connected to the Michaeliskirche or its choir but was nevertheless the most gifted, inspiring organ composer Sebastian could have heard so far, with an unusual melodic flair for setting chorales and a sense of drama in other works. In his *Lexicon* of 1732, Walther again gives much more space to Reinken than to Böhm, and this could have influenced the Obituary writers. In a later letter, Emanuel actually crossed out the phrase 'his Lüneburg teacher Böhm' to replace it with 'the Lüneburg organist Böhm' (*Dok III*, p. 290), but this conforms to the old image of the self-taught composer, learning (like Melanchthon) *sine duce*, without a guide. Quite possibly the fifteen-year-old had hoped

to become Böhm's assistant, then turned to the northern masters. But many of Bach's earlier organ works, such as the preludia in C major and D minor, are closer to Böhm's style than to anyone else's, unaware of this though Emanuel very likely was. And the two composers were still in contact in 1727, as is clear from Böhm having copies of two of Bach's harpsichord partitas for sale.

'To hear Reinken' is thus part of the self-taught picture: Bach neither took lessons as such nor became an apprentice-assistant but made study visits, to a major figure in a major church of a major Hanseatic city. Though not as old as was later thought, Reinken was nevertheless a venerable musician who presided at the famous organ of the Katharinenkirche, and was known to look after it exceptionally well. The instrument had some sixty stops including 32' reed, distributed over four manuals in the style of Arp Schnitger, the Hamburg builder. J. F. Agricola, a later pupil of Bach and part-author of the Obituary, said that Bach admired not only this great Hamburg organ but the fine condition in which Reinken kept it (*Dok III*, p. 191). In other words, Reinken was a master such as the Obituary envisaged and admired: both artistic and practical, both a creative musician and a skilled player *au fait* with his instrument's technicalities. But Böhm also had an unusually fine organ in the Johanniskirche, Lüneburg, and it would be strange if he were not a similarly careful curator of it.

Hamburg's varied musical life in theatre and church was well known to Böhm, even though the Obituary does not draw attention to it: its preference was to establish Bach's credentials as organist, much as Walther's *Lexicon* did when it told of another significant German organist, Georg Leyding, visiting Reinken for the same purpose. Did these young musicians really have no interest in Hamburg's music outside the church? That is hard to believe, and certainly, in more ways than one, Hamburg composers left their mark on Bach, for at some point he arranged chamber sonatas by Reinken for keyboard (e.g. BWV 965 and 966, perhaps as late as 1715), copied F. N. Brauns's *St Mark Passion* (performing it in Weimar, as later in Leipzig?) and came to compose arias of a kind made familiar by Hamburg opera composers,

either to Bach direct or to others (such as Telemann) who impinged on him.

Like so many organs with which Bach came into contact, in Eisenach, Ohrdruf, Weimar and Leipzig, the instrument in the Lüneburg Michaeliskirche was regularly being worked on. Its mishmash of historical periods – a big Gothic main organ with pedal pulldowns, Baroque chair organ and a *Brustwerk* – made it desirable for the organist to keep to old genres such as stereophonic toccatas, simple chorale settings and variations based on common-property formulas. Other musical experiences would be necessary before Bach could develop his music in newer directions.

And from here too he had the chance, through frequent listening to a then famous band kept by the Duke of Celle (consisting largely of Frenchmen), to give himself a good grounding in French taste, which at the time was something quite new in those parts.

Once again, the Obituary says nothing about the young Bach having teachers but shows him learning ‘through frequent listening’ to various kinds of music. So having as a boy sung the standard repertory in one important Lutheran parish church, then heard Reinken play and direct in another, now he was experiencing French music as performed by French instrumentalists in a duke’s *cappella*. Handel’s biography, too, at a similar point in his life, finds it important to testify to its subject’s grasp not only of local German church music but also of French and in his case Italian styles, claiming amongst other things that he had instructed Corelli himself ‘in the manner of executing these spirited passages’ in French *ouvertures* (Mainwaring 1760, p. 56).

The Duke of Lüneburg-Celle’s band played in Lüneburg,² and since, as the Obituary uncharacteristically points out, the players themselves were mostly Frenchmen (thanks to the duke’s Huguenot wife?), the

² The Obituary’s phrase ‘from here’ (‘von Lüneburg aus’) suggests that the authors thought Bach had to go to Celle to hear the band.

composer could have spoken of the experience so as to give an impression that he had learnt about French styles from the horse's mouth. One would indeed learn more from French players than from the way the music was notated, for this gives only a pale impression of how vivid and tuneful the apparently convention-choked music of France actually is. A good string group would have introduced the young Bach to rhetorical gesture and such expressive articulation as he is unlikely to have heard either from local musicians or in the average Lutheran cantata. Parisian wind players would have given ideas on what a minuet or bourrée or gavotte was better than any German harpsichord suite. The full ensemble, if good enough, produced harmony of a sensuousness out of place in church, and the manner of playing it – the rhythms, rubato, articulation, ornaments – would, one imagines, have been a revelation to any imaginative young musician.

A clear grasp of French style is evident throughout Bach's creative life, from the early keyboard overture in F major BWV 820 right through to a movement in the *Art of Fugue*, BWV 1080.vi. Others such as Telemann must have learnt from similar experiences, and certainly Handel had done so already by the time of his first operas in Hamburg (1705). One can assume that Bach heard *ouvertures* or ballet suites played by the Celle band, something entirely different from Reinken's organ music, if not from Böhm's. Perhaps Böhm was responsible for suggesting these visits to the duke's band, having himself previously learnt something of French *manière* from the Hamburg opera director J. S. Kusser, who had studied with Lully. Handel too had learnt enough in Hamburg about ballet suites to preface his first opera in Italy, *Rodrigo* (1707), with a fine, extensive and idiomatic example. The Duke of Celle's theatre had Italian opera for a time, but it was the French court ensemble founded in 1666 that became famous.

Many details in the F major suite BWV 820 signal the young Bach's keen ear, with harmonic, rhythmic and melodic details typical – too thoroughly typical, even – of a Parisian composer of 1690. For example, it imitates the way French string players ended the stately dotted-note first section of an *ouverture* with a big chord the first time but not on

the repeat, when the first violin shoots off with a lively fugue – a subtle detail that takes the word ‘fuga’ (‘flight’) literally. To what extent his visits first introduced Bach to typical French harmonies, rich discords, characteristic bowings, leaning grace notes and lilting rhythms is hard to know, since church music would not have been the place for them. But he certainly maintained an interest in French keyboard music, and it is probably fair to say that his overtures for orchestra (BWV 1066–1069) and later for harpsichord (especially in C minor, BWV 831a) enrich the original elegant French style with a carefulness, harmonic sophistication, melody and counterpoint seldom if ever found in France itself.