PART I

The historical context: society, beliefs and world-view

1 The Bach family

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The musical family is by no means an unfamiliar phenomenon, and nearly everyone must be acquainted with at least one household in which practically every member delights not only in listening to music but also in singing or playing musical instruments. Even with the weakening of family ties and the proliferation of ready-made forms of home entertainment in western society today, it is still possible for many a *paterfamilias* to echo the words that J. S. Bach wrote in 1730 in a famous letter to his former schoolmate Georg Erdmann:

> From my first marriage three sons and a daughter are still living ... [and] from my second marriage one son and two daughters ... The children from my second marriage are still small, the boy (as firstborn) being six years old. But they are all born musicians, and I assure you that I can form both a vocal and an instrumental *Concert* within my family, especially since my present wife sings with a pure soprano voice, and my eldest daughter, too, can join in quite well.[1]

Moreover, musical talent of an unusual kind has manifested itself in modern times in families such as the Menuhins and the Torteliers. One could discuss at length the relative importance of heredity and environment in the formation of musical families at whatever level of attainment, but it seems quite clear that the role played by environment is more important in fostering a talent for music than it is in influencing other forms of artistic and intellectual endeavour. By its nature, musical activity impinges on everyone within earshot (and, some would say, even on the child in the womb) and therefore invites at least some degree of communal engagement. Literature, painting and mathematics (to mention three branches of cultural activity closely connected to music) are, on the other hand, solitary pursuits, and – the Brontës, the Breughels and the Bernoullis notwithstanding – the musical family is a phenomenon rarely paralleled in the other arts.

We have so far mentioned musicians only as performers (as did Bach in his letter to Erdmann); when we turn to composition the picture appears somewhat different. The popular view of the 'great composer' as a solitary creative artist struggling for self-expression in an indifferent

and uncomprehending world is largely a legacy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many of the foremost composers found themselves in conflict both with their parents and with society at large. The Strauss family in Vienna was perhaps the only one to produce several composers of note in the nineteenth century, and it is probably no accident that they excelled in genres in which elegance and craftsmanship counted for more than self-expression. The nineteenth century was also a period which saw an increasing separation between composer and performer, the two activities usually being combined in the case of instrumental virtuosos such as Liszt and Paganini or (at a relatively humble level) in the church organ loft.

Such a dichotomy hardly existed in earlier centuries, when practically every notable performer, whether church organist, court *maestro* or opera singer was expected in some measure to be a composer. Like other branches of musical activity, including instrument-making, composition was a craft which could be handed down from one generation to the next; indeed the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced a number of particularly prominent and prolific musical families, among them the Couperins in France (who flourished from the early seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth), the Scarlattis in Italy (from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth) and the Bendas in Bohemia and Germany (from the early eighteenth century to the early nineteenth). A feature of all three families, one which distinguishes them from the Bachs, is that the most important representatives of each dynasty came near the beginning of the line (Louis, c. 1626–61, and François *le grand*, 1668–1733, among the Couperins; Franz, 1709–86, and Georg, 1722–95, among the Bendas; the lives of its two most gifted members, Alessandro, 1660–1725, and his son Domenico, 1685–1757, almost define the chronological boundaries of the Scarlatti family).

The Bach family, by contrast, reached prominence only after several generations of musicians – with Johann Sebastian (1685–1750) and his two most important and influential sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–88) and Johann Christian (1735–82) – and then declined rapidly. It is almost inevitable, given the standard dictionary meaning of the German word 'Bach', that the history of the Bach family from about 1550 to 1750 and its impact on European music should be likened to a stream which gradually widens into a river and gains strength until it overflows into the surrounding territory. According to another etymology, however, the word 'Bach' (and variants such as 'Bachen', 'Pach' and 'Pachen') was used from at least the fourteenth century in certain countries of eastern Europe (including Hungary and Moravia) to mean 'musician'.[2] Günter Kraft has suggested that, as in so many other cases, the word for an occupation was gradually adopted as a surname.

Plate 1 Bachhaus Wechmar; home of Veit Bach and his son, Hans Bach, c. 1590–1626

It was in fact from Hungary (or, more accurately, from what was known in the eighteenth century as 'Ungarn' – a region which included the Habsburg territories of Moravia and Slovakia) that the first of the Bach musicians (if that is not a tautology) came, when

> Vitus Bach, a *Weißbecker* [baker of white bread] in *Ungern*, was forced to flee the country in the sixteenth century because of his Lutheran religion. After selling his belongings for as much as he could get, he left for Germany and, finding adequate protection for his Lutheran religion in Thuringia, settled in Wechmar, near Gotha, where he continued in his baker's trade. His greatest delight was a small cittern [*Cytheringen*] which he took with him to the mill and played while the grinding took place [see Plate 1].[3]

Such, at any rate, is the account given in the Genealogy that J. S. Bach compiled in 1735, to which I shall refer later in this chapter.[4]

From these humble beginnings can be traced the seven generations of the Wechmar line that produced over seventy sons who earned their living as musicians. But it is not only the unprecedentedly large number and long lineage of its members that distinguish the Bach family from the

Couperins, the Scarlattis and the Bendas. The Bachs seem to have shown a particularly keen self-awareness, a consciousness of their place in society, and even (at least by J. S. Bach's time) of their place in history. This sense of family, and more particularly of a musical family, is manifest in the annual reunions that J. S. Bach's first biographer, J. N. Forkel, describes:

> the different members of this family had a very great attachment to each other. As it was impossible for them all to live in one place, they resolved at least to see each other once a year, and fixed a certain day, upon which they all had to appear at an appointed place. Even after the family had become much more numerous, and many of the members had been obliged to settle out of Thuringia, in different places of Upper and Lower Saxony, and Franconia, they continued their annual meetings, which generally took place at Erfurt, Eisenach, or Arnstadt. Their amusements, during the time of their meeting, were entirely musical.[5]

J. S. Bach himself must have been present at family reunions such as these, but his own awareness of the tradition to which he was heir – his sense of destiny, in a word – showed itself with particular clarity during the last two decades of his life. The 1730s, in particular, were of special significance for Bach. After completing an incomparable repertory of music – cantatas, Passions and other works – for the Leipzig churches during the 1720s, he appears almost to have given up composing new works during the 1730s. The 'ordinary' weekly meetings of the *Collegium musicum*, which he directed from 1729, seem not to have spurred him to write much new instrumental music, and most of the large-scale homage cantatas he performed with the *Collegium* on 'extraordinary' ceremonial occasions may be seen as a bid for court employment in Dresden. He was, on the other hand, much concerned with arranging, perfecting and publishing his music, and with bringing his musical legacy to a final form.

It is in this context that we may view Bach's involvement with two documents, or sets of documents, which are concerned with his forebears in the Bach clan. One of these is the *Alt-Bachisches Archiv*, a collection of works by older members of the family which his father Ambrosius is reputed to have assembled. Bach cared for and added to the archive, which on his death went to his son Carl Philipp Emanuel. By the time it became part of the library of the Singakademie, Berlin, it included twenty sacred vocal works by at least four of the Bachs (Johann, 1604–73; Georg Christoph, 1642–97; Johann Christoph, 1642–1703; and Johann Michael, 1648–94).[6] From this anthology, and from works preserved in other sources, Johann Christoph is seen to be the most gifted of the early Bachs, but there is considerable merit, too, in some of the music by Johann Michael, father of J. S. Bach's first wife, Maria Barbara.

One cannot be certain about the date of Bach's contributions to the *Alt-Bachisches Archiv* (the manuscripts were destroyed in World War II),[7] but 1735 was the year in which he compiled a Genealogy, the *Ursprung der musikalisch-Bachischen Familie*, which has remained of fundamental importance to Bach studies ever since. In it he listed fifty-three members of the family (including himself) with brief biographical notes on each. Bach's original manuscript has not survived, but a copy made in 1774–5 by Carl Philipp Emanuel's daughter Anna Carolina Philippina (1747–1804), with additions by Emanuel himself, was sent to Forkel, and has often been quoted and reproduced. Modern scholarship has added other musicians to the list and extended it beyond Bach's own time, resulting in a total of over seventy Bachs who earned their living wholly or partly from music between the early sixteenth century and the mid-nineteenth.

A study of J. S. Bach's forebears throws interesting light on the composer's origins and background. For old Veit (or Vitus) Bach, the founder of the Wechmar line, music was no more than an accompaniment to his work as a *Weißbecker*. Veit's son Hans/Johannes (?1575/80–1626) also started out in his father's trade, but, the Genealogy informs us, 'as he showed a particular gift for music the *Stadtpfeifer* of Gotha took him as an apprentice' and Johannes 'remained with him for some time after his apprenticeship was complete'. Several of the early Bachs, and even some of Johann Sebastian's generation, are named in the Genealogy as *Stadtpfeifer*, *Stadtmusicus*, *Ratsmusikant* etc. – town musicians whose duties included playing on civic occasions, at weddings, in church services and so on. Although well organised, jealous of their training and privileges, and a cut above the common *Bier-Fiedler* (beer-fiddlers), these musicians were on the lowest rungs of the professional ladder. A court appointment might elevate their social status, as was the case with some of the Bachs, but most *Stadtpfeifer* and court *musici* earned less than a church organist or cantor.

Johannes's eldest son, also called Johannes (or Johann, 1604–73), was the first Bach mentioned in the Genealogy to combine the calling of *Stadtpfeifer* with that of organist, first at Schweinfurt and then at the Predigerkirche, Erfurt, where he was appointed in 1636. The next generation brought the first of the Bachs to achieve the status of cantor, a position which usually combined overall responsibility for the music of a church with a senior post at the local school. In 1668 Johann's son Georg Christoph (1642–97) was appointed cantor at Themar and later (probably in 1688) at Schweinfurt; his distant cousin Johann (1621–86), not included in the Genealogy, had been appointed cantor at Ilmenau in 1659.[8] The posts of organist and cantor were those most frequently occupied by members of the Bach dynasty in subsequent generations.

For the court *musicus*, especially if he were a string player, the first promotion to aim for was that of *Konzertmeister*. The Genealogy records only one such appointment (apart from that of J. S. Bach himself), when Bach's son Johann Christoph Friedrich (1732–95) was made *Konzertmeister* to Count Wilhelm at Bückeburg in 1756 (this is, of course, mentioned in one of C. P. E. Bach's additions to the Genealogy). The ultimate goal for an aspiring instrumentalist was the post of Kapellmeister, the person charged with directing the music, both sacred and secular, of an entire court, and usually expected to compose as well. The first Kapellmeister in the Bach family, and the only one before Johann Sebastian himself, appears to have been Johann Ludwig (1677–1731), who belonged to what is usually referred to as the Meiningen branch of the family and was appointed Kapellmeister to the court there in 1711. The only other Bach to achieve a similar position was apparently Sebastian's pupil Johann Ernst (1722–77), who was appointed Kapellmeister at Weimar in 1756.

A survey of the earlier Bach generations illuminates certain features of Johann Sebastian's life and career. We find, for instance, that there was a tendency among the Bachs to produce twins,[9] and that Sebastian's son Gottfried Heinrich (1724–63) was not the first in the wider family to be mentally retarded.[10] It might be wrong to suggest that these characteristics necessarily resulted from intermarriage, but one is struck by the number of times that the same few family names – the Lämmerhirts, the Wedemanns, the Schmidts – become entangled with the Bachs. This is well illustrated by the case of J. S. Bach's father, Johann Ambrosius, who was first married in 1668 to Maria Elisabetha Lämmerhirt (1644–94), half-sister of Hedwig Lämmerhirt (c. 1617–75), who had married Ambrosius's uncle Johann in 1637. After his first wife's death in 1694 Ambrosius was briefly married to the widow Barbara Margaretha Bartholomaei, *née* Keul, whose first husband had been Ambrosius's cousin Johann Günther Bach (1653–83). Johann Sebastian's first marriage was to his second cousin Maria Barbara Bach (1684–1720); their paternal grandfathers were brothers.[11]

It is interesting, too, to see how closely J. S. Bach's own career mirrored the development of the Bach family as a whole. In the Genealogy he describes his first post at Weimar in 1703 as that of 'HoffMusicus' (court musician); he is then employed as an organist at Arnstadt (1703),[12] Mühlhausen (1707) and Weimar (1708); he does not omit to mention his promotion to *Konzertmeister* at Weimar in 1714; his post at Köthen (1717) he lists as 'Capellmeister u[nd] *Director* derer Cammer Musiquen' and at Leipzig as '*Director Chori Musici* u[nd] *Cantor* an der *Thomas* Schule'. The actual wording here is significant. Although the post at

Leipzig was one of considerably greater importance than those occupied by earlier Bach cantors, at Ilmenau and Schweinfurt for example, the title itself carried less prestige than that of Kapellmeister, and Bach's move from Köthen to Leipzig would not have been regarded by most of his contemporaries as an advancement. That Bach himself was fully aware of this is shown in the above-mentioned letter to Georg Erdmann, in which he commented that 'it seemed to me at first not at all the right thing to become a cantor after being a Kapellmeister, and I postponed my *resolution* for three months'.[13] In letters, title-pages and other documents he usually avoided referring to himself as cantor, preferring the title of *Director* [or *Directore*] *Musices*, and he was always ready to avail himself of his honorary titles as *Kapellmeister von Haus aus* at Weissenfels, Köthen or Dresden.

A fortune-teller with any knowledge of the Bach family would have risked little by predicting a musical career for the newly-born Johann Sebastian in 1685, but it would have required remarkable prescience to prophesy his eventual standing as a composer. Only two of the Bachs in the Genealogy are mentioned as composers – Johann Christoph, the 'profound composer', and Johann Michael, 'like his brother, an able composer' – and one must go back three generations, to Veit's son Johannes, to find a common ancestor between Johann Sebastian and these two distant cousins. The other composers of note among the Bachs were all sons of Johann Sebastian and, while some geneticists might be impressed by the fact that Bach's first marriage brought together the two most creative lines of the family to produce Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–84) and Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–88), his second marriage, to Anna Magdalena Wilcke (1701–60), was no less fruitful: Johann Christoph Friedrich (the 'Bückeburg Bach') was no mean composer and Johann Christian was arguably the most individual and influential of the younger Bachs.

Once again it seems that environment, rather than heredity, was the determining factor. Sebastian, like most of his kinsmen, had found employment in Thuringia and its immediately neighbouring territories, rarely venturing further afield. With him the stream had broadened into a river which nourished the whole land. But the institutions that had supported the Bachs (and which the Bachs had supported) – the Kantorei and the minor courts – were in decline, while municipal and public music-making, to which J. S. Bach and his sons (especially Johann Christian) made important contributions, was in the ascendancy. Bach's eldest son, Friedemann, was by all accounts at least as well endowed with talent as were his younger brothers. His failure to develop that talent to the full may have resulted from weaknesses of character, as is often suggested, but it must also have had something to do with the fact that, as an

organist in Dresden and then in Halle, his orbit and aspirations remained those of his father (his post at the Marktkirche in Halle was actually one which his father had declined some thirty-two years earlier). The success of Emanuel and Johann Christian, on the other hand, may be attributed to their having sought new areas (both geographically and artistically) in which to develop their gifts. Emanuel's appointment as harpsichordist at the court of Frederick the Great in Berlin brought him into contact with a variety of musicians and musical styles limited only by the tastes of Frederick himself. His pupil and half-brother Johann Christian departed still further from family traditions, visiting Italy, converting to Roman Catholicism, becoming a freemason and spending the last and most fruitful period of his life in England.

J. C. Bach's nephew and pupil Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst (1759–1845) lived long enough to witness the revival of his grandfather's music and to be present at Mendelssohn's unveiling of the Bach memorial at Leipzig in 1843. The Bach genealogy has been traced, through two further generations, well into the twentieth century. But as proud guardians of the finest musical tradition in central Germany, the dynasty had come to an end with J. S. Bach's sons, and Carl Philipp Emanuel may have realised this when, in his copy of the Genealogy, he penned against the name of his half-brother Johann Christian the remark: '*inter nos*, machte es anders als der erliche Veit' ('between ourselves, he did things differently from honest Veit').