

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685 ~ 1750)

(Docent should dress as if they were going to a wedding or party)

(Start by playing the Minuet in G major – Track 11) Where do you think this music would play? *(At a wedding or a party)*. Can you imagine the Bride and Groom in Van Eyck's painting dancing to this music? Can you tell what instruments are playing? *(Wind, violins, cellos, violas)*. The music you are listening to is called "Minuet in G Major" and was written by Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the greatest composers of all times. *(Let the music keep playing while you discuss wind instruments – the song is just 1:35 long)*

Bach was a prolific composer who wrote over 500 pieces of music – sonatas (a composition for 1 or 2 instruments), concertos (a composition featuring one or more principal instruments with orchestra accompaniment), fugues (a type of music where the theme is repeated by each instrument), minuets (slow, stately dance music written in 3:4 time), chamber music (written for performance in a small room using only a few instruments), cantatas (compositions usually featuring sacred (religious) text and sung by one voice, accompanied by a chorus or instruments), masses (religious music), and the list goes on.

All this music, though, was written for three instruments: the pipe organ, harpsichord and clavichord. The pipe organ is a wind instrument while the other two are stringed keyboard instruments. What are other wind instruments? *(flute, clarinet, sax, etc.)* – they all use wind to make the sound. *Show the visual on wind instruments.* Although the harpsichord and clavichord are no longer in use, has anybody in this class ever played a stringed instrument? *Many hands should go up since kids will recognize that violins, guitars, and violas fall in this category.* Has anybody played on a modern stringed keyboard? *(If there are no responses, ask whether anybody is taking piano lessons and let them know that a piano is a modern stringed instrument)* Why do you think Bach did not compose for the piano? *(Because it was not invented until the early 1700's)*

We first listened to a minuet. Now, let's listen to Bach's "Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor" *(Play Track 7)*. This music is very different from the "Minuet in G Major" and I want you to listen for the theme being repeated by different instruments. What instruments are playing? *(Bass, viola, strings, trumpets, etc.)* Let's listen to one last piece of music that I'm sure will be familiar to many of you. It is called "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" and is an example of a cantata *(Play Track 1)*. The melody line is carried by the wind instruments, accompanied by the stringed instruments. See if you can tell what instruments are playing. *(violin, harp, flute, clarinet, oboe, trumpet, etc.)* It is also a piece that is often played or sung at weddings. Has anyone ever heard or even played this piece themselves?

Composer biography

Bach was born in 1685 in Germany into a long line of outstanding musicians. Even those family members who were carpenters and weavers sang or played instruments. The entire huge family had an annual reunion that was marked with feasting, playing, and joyous music.

Johann Sebastian and his younger brother were orphaned when Johann was ten so they went to live with an older brother, Christoph, who was a church organist. While they were treated kindly, there was never much money so Bach and his friends would sing on the streets for pennies. His earliest music teacher was his older brother. Johann Sebastian wanted to play more challenging pieces than his brother let him play, so the ten-year-old carefully poked his fingers into the locked cabinet where the music was stored and started copying it by moonlight. This continued until he was caught by a very upset Christoph, who promptly took away the manuscript.

Johann was married twice and had seven, and then thirteen, children for a total of twenty children from his two marriages! Since children often died young in those days, only seven lived to adulthood, but all of them lived a very happy childhood in a home filled with love and music. Two of his sons also became important composer – Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach and Johann Christian Bach. At one time in Germany, 30 Bachs held organ posts. In fact, anyone who was a reputable musician was automatically referred to as a “Bach”. Quite a compliment!

Bach held jobs as a teacher, court musician, and finally the most famous organist of his time. Yet, when he died in 1750 there was no marker on his grave. It was only fifty years later that his grave and music were rediscovered. Mozart, in 1789, was instrumental in the rediscovery process. However, by then, most of Bach’s written music had either been sold for small sums or used as wrapping paper for food. Another FAME composer who was strongly influenced by Bach was Beethoven, who practiced Bach’s music as a student and many years later organized a benefit concert for Bach’s daughter who by then was an old lady.

How did he die? Diabetes was an unknown disease in those days; however, it was probably the cause of his blindness and loss of neural (brain) function. Even though he became blind right before his death, he still dictated music to his son-in-law from his sick bed. The ultimate cause of his death was a stroke, and he died in a great calm with his wife and family around him, singing a peaceful chorale to him.