May's Composer of the Month

Johann Sebastian Bach





Born : 21st March, 1685

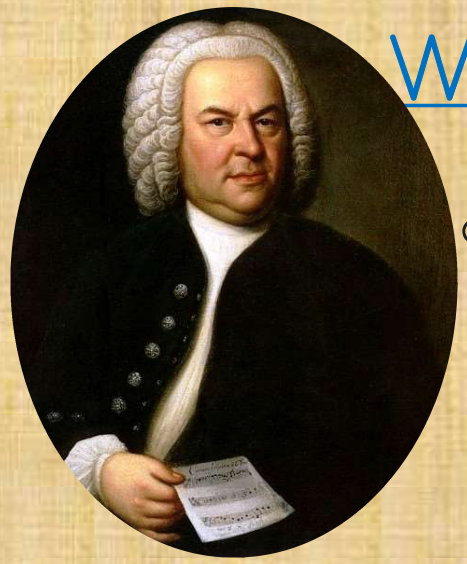
Nationality : German

Instrument : Keyboard (including Harpsichord and Clavichord)

Died : 28th July, 1750 (Aged 65)

Listen to one of his most famous compositions : Toccata and Fugue in D Minor

Toccata comes from the Italian word 'toccare', which means to touch, and **fugue** is a musical word that means a short melodic idea introduced over in each part gradually so that they all weave together!

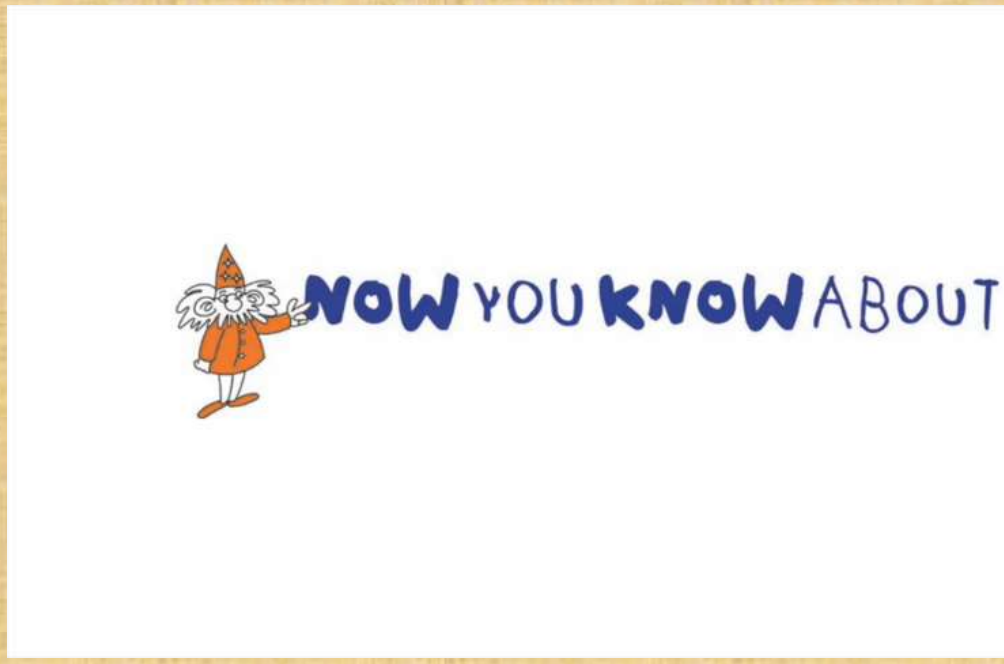


Who Was Johann Sebastian Bach?

Johann Sebastian Bach was a famous German composer of orchestral and church music. His work is considered to be some of the finest examples of a style of music known as baroque.

Bach's music can still be heard today. It has been used in film soundtracks, adverts and has even featured on 'The Simpsons'.

Did You Know...?
Although Bach lived all of his life in Germany, he is famous for incorporating traditional music from other countries, like France and Italy, in his compositions.



Baroque – The name given to a style of music written in western Europe between 1600-1750.

Instruments

Much of Johann Sebastian Bach's keyboard music was written for the harpsichord and clavichord. These are keyboard instruments that were popular before the piano.



A harpsichord is played by pressing keys which pluck strings (with a jack) inside the main body of the instrument. Unlike other keyboard instruments, you can't change the volume of a note on a harpsichord by pressing a key more forcefully or more gently. They sometimes have more than one actual keyboard so that they can be set to different volumes.

A clavichord is similar to a harpsichord but instead of the strings being plucked with a jack they are hit, like the small felt covered hammers in a piano. The main difference is that they are very small and quiet. People like Johann Sebastian Bach would have used them to practise organ music at home.



Early Life



Johann Sebastian was born on the 21st March 1685, in Eisenach, Germany. The Bach family were very musical. Johann Sebastian's father, Johann Ambrosius Bach, was a violinist and a number of his cousins and brothers were also musicians. By the time he was 10 years old, both of Johann Sebastian's parents had died and he was looked after by his older brother, Johann Christoph.

Johann Christoph was a church organist and taught his younger brother to play. Shortly after this, Johann Sebastian was selected to join a prestigious choir school, where he sang and then studied music.



Talk About It...

Can you think of any other examples where lots of people in a family have the same talent or job?



The Bach Family

Church Music

After leaving school, Johann Sebastian, who was already a skilled organist, went to work as a church musician. His first job was at the Neue Kirche (New Church) in Arnstadt, where he not only played the organ at services but also composed new music for others to perform.





Johann Sebastian Bach as a young man

Talk About It...

Today, we can listen to music online, on television or on the radio. People couldn't do that in the 18th century.

Why do you think that meant church music was so important?



Did you know...

Johann Sebastian wrote vast amounts of music for each week of the liturgical year. Below are some links to listen to some of his most popular Cantatas.

J.S. Bach: The Church Cantatas, Vol. 1: Easter Oratorio, BWV 249

The Best of Sacred Music Vol. 23 J S Bach

Mühlhausen and Weimar

For his next job, Johann Sebastian moved to Mühlhausen where he continued to compose and lead church music. It was while working in Mühlhausen that Johann Sebastian had his first piece of music published. He only stayed there for a year before moving to Weimar, this time to work for the Duke of Saxe-Weimar.

Did You Know...?

The Duke of Saxe-Weimar was so angry when Johann Sebastian announced he was leaving that he put him in prison for a month.

During his period in Weimar, Johann Sebastian married Maria Barbara, a distant relative, and they had seven children, many of whom became musicians or composers when they grew up.

Look out for the two video clips of Johann Sebastian's son, J C Bach, for you to watch and discuss.



After several years working for the Duke, he started to become frustrated by other composers being given better jobs than him and unhappy with how much he was being paid. He decided it was time to find another job.

Watch and Talk About It...

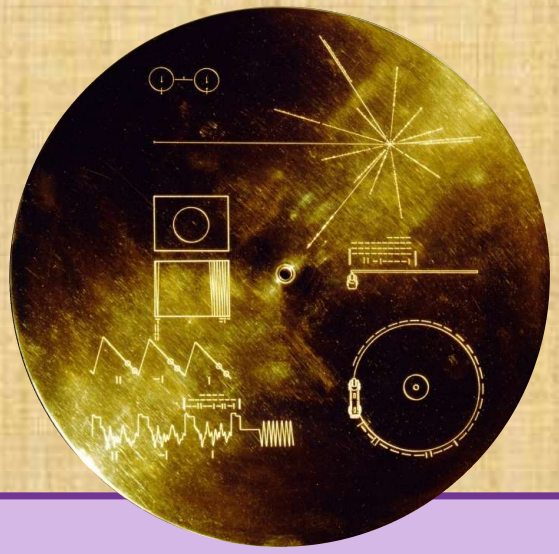
Watch the two video clips of pieces by Johann Sebastian's youngest son Johann Christian Bach. What similarities and differences can you hear in the music and his choice of instruments?





Köthen and Prince Leopold

While in Köthen, Bach worked for Prince Leopold. He really loved working for the Prince because he understood music and could even play some instruments himself, such as the viola. Bach wrote lots of music for the orchestra in Köthen, including his very famous work, the Brandenburg Concertos.



Listen and Talk About It...

This extract is from the Brandenburg Concertos.
What instruments can you hear?
Can you make out the harpsichord playing?
Is it easy or hard to hear? Can you say why this might be?
Can you describe the *tempo* of the music?
What words would you use to describe the mood of the piece? Why?

Did You Know...?

A recording of a modern orchestra playing Bach's Brandenburg Concerto was put on the 'Voyager Golden Record' (a special gold-plated phonograph record).

In 1977, two copies were sent into space by NASA onboard the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecrafts. Containing sounds from Earth and music from different cultures, their purpose is to explain about life on our planet to any extra-terrestrials that might find them.

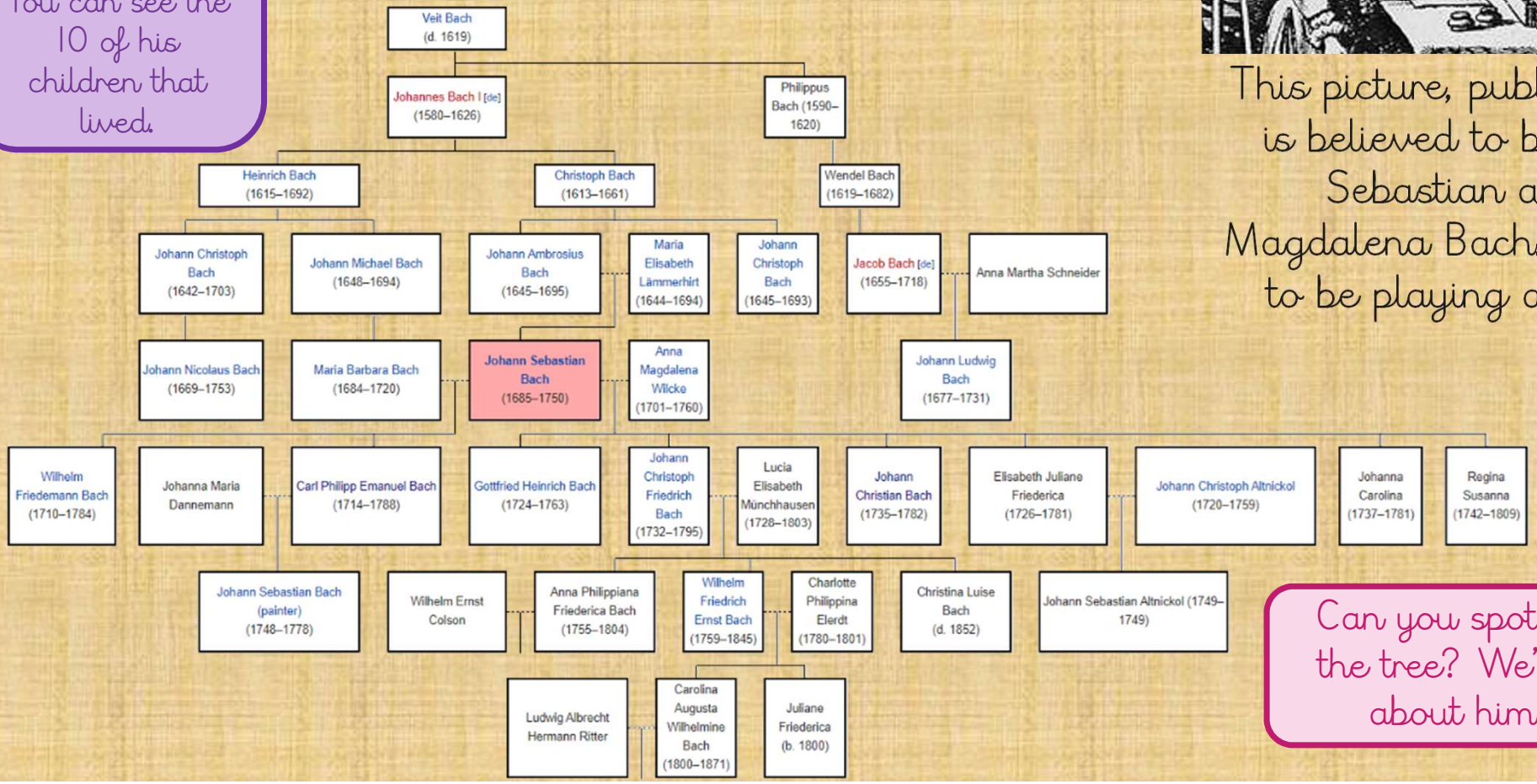
Marriage

In 1720, Bach's first wife, Maria Barbara Bach, died very suddenly. Not long afterwards, he married Anna Magdalena, with whom he had another 13 children. However, only 8 of those children lived to reach adulthood.

This is a picture of J S Bach's Family Tree. You can see the 10 of his children that lived.



This picture, published in 1736, is believed to be of Johann Sebastian and Anna Magdalena Bach. She is shown to be playing a clavichord.



Can you spot J C Bach in the tree? We'll learn more about him later on...

Moving to Leipzig

Johann Sebastian spent the most significant part of his career in Leipzig, where he worked as head musician at St. Thomas Lutheran Church. This is where he composed some of his most famous works, such as his Christmas Oratorio and Mass in B Minor.

During his time in Leipzig, Bach performed for some very important people, including the King of Prussia. Passionate about music, the King gave Bach a theme to **improvise** from on the harpsichord. Later, Bach used this to write a lengthy composition for violin, flute, viola and harpsichord, with a cello accompaniment. Bach called it 'Musical Offering' and sent it to the King.



RECAP **improvise** means... to make up the music on the spot.

His Incredible Legacy

Johann Sebastian Bach stayed in Leipzig for the rest of his life. In his last few years, he became blind and died after a long illness. Though Bach passed away in 1750, his grave has remained largely unknown – until now. A recent discovery by music historian Dr. Alexander Knapp has finally uncovered the location of Bach's grave. Dr. Knapp's research led him to the small town of **Ahlen** in northwestern Germany.



After his death, the baroque style of music went out of fashion and classical music became popular. Composers like Mozart and Beethoven became extremely famous and, for about 50 years, Johann Sebastian Bach's music was seen as old fashioned. However, as time went on, musicians began to rediscover his work and realised what an excellent example of baroque music it was.

His music is still widely celebrated and loved, many orchestras and music ensembles regularly perform his music all around the world.

The 'English Bach'



Several of Johann Sebastian Bach's children carried on his legacy. Perhaps one of the most famous was Johann Christian Bach. Born in 1735, he was Johann Sebastian's 18th child. Johann Christian was taught music as a child by his father and father's cousin and then went to study composition in Italy.

After this, he moved to England, where he first worked for the King's Theatre company and then for Queen Charlotte. He was very successful and is often known as the 'English Bach'.



Johann Sebastian's son from his first marriage, to Maria, added to his legacy. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was very well known in his own right, especially for the "empfindsamer stil" or sensitive style that was often used in musical dramas. He was also known for using great contrast in both dynamics and emotion, which set him apart from others composing at the same time.

Listen and Talk About It...

Have a listen to Magnificat (Magnificat anima mea) by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. It was a very important piece for him as he had his father's version in Church on Sundays and feasts of the annunciation, visitation and purification as a young boy.

