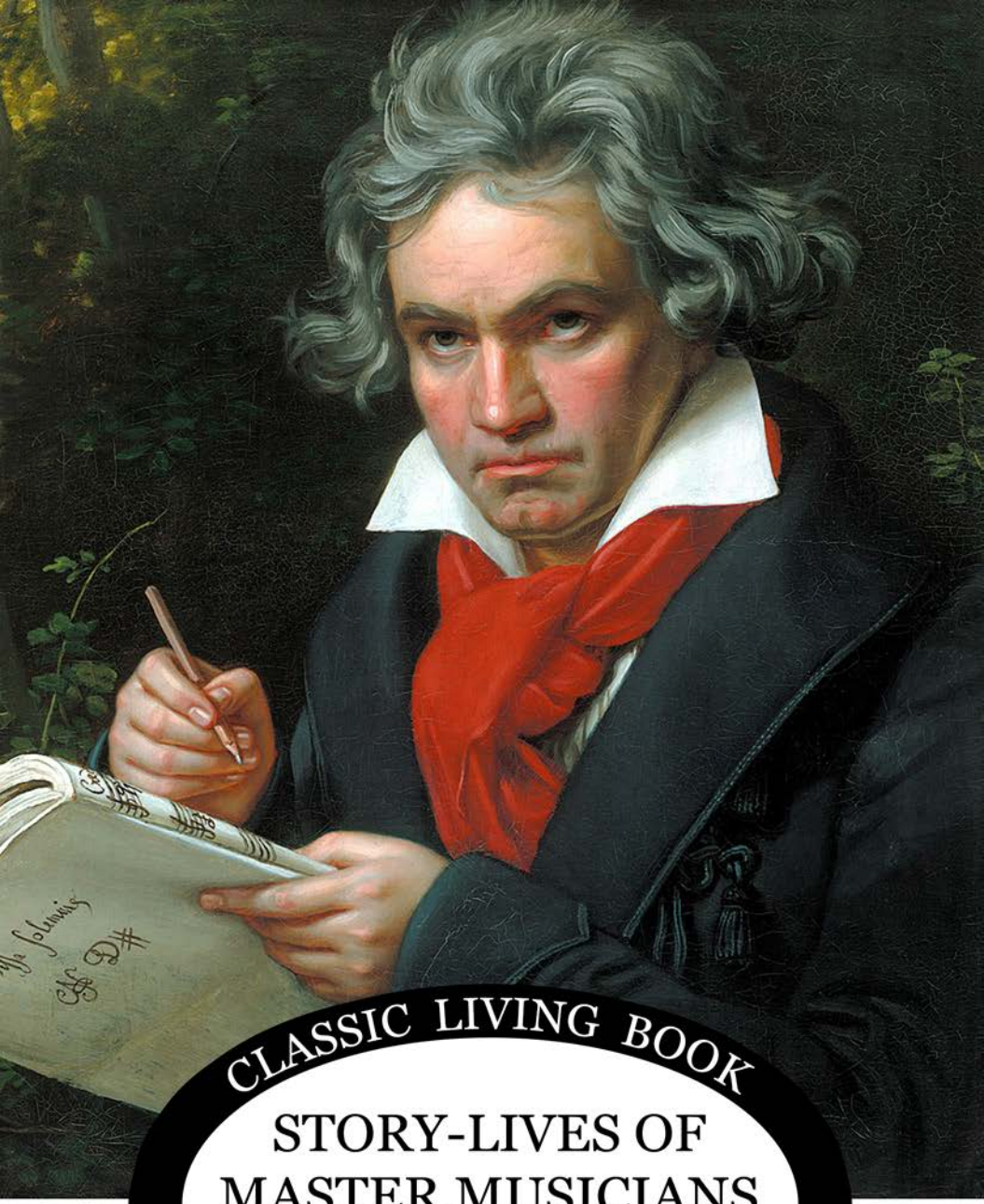

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

STORY-LIVES OF MASTER MUSICIANS

Harriette Moore Brower

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

STORY-LIVES OF MASTER MUSICIANS

HARRIETTE BROWER

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Palestrina

I

PALESTRINA

To learn something of the life and labors of Palestrina, one of the earliest as well as one of the greatest musicians, we must go back in the world's history nearly four hundred years. And even then we may not be able to discover all the events of his life as some of the records have been lost. But we have the main facts, and know that Palestrina's name will be revered for all time as the man who strove to make sacred music the expression of lofty and spiritual meaning.

Upon a hoary spur of the Apennines stands the crumbling town of Palestrina. It is very old now; it was old when Rome was young. Four hundred years ago Palestrina was dominated by the great castle of its lords, the proud Colonnas. Naturally the town was much more important in those days than it is to-day.

At that time there lived in Palestrina a peasant pair, Sante Pierluigi and his wife Maria, who seem to have been an honest couple, and not grindingly poor, since the will of Sante's mother has lately been found, in which she bequeathed a house in Palestrina to her two sons. Besides this she left behind a fine store of bed linen, mattresses and cooking utensils. Maria Gismondi also had a little property.

To this pair was born, probably in 1526, a boy whom they named Giovanni Pierluigi, which means John Peter Louis. This

boy, from a tiniest child, loved beauty of sight and sound. And this is not at all surprising, for a child surrounded from infancy by the natural loveliness and glory of old Palestrina, would unconsciously breathe in a sense of beauty and grandeur.

It was soon discovered the boy had a voice, and his mother is said to have sold some land she owned to provide for her son's musical training.

From the rocky heights on which their town was built, the people of Palestrina could look across the Campagna—the great plain between—and see the walls and towers of Rome. At the time of our story, Saint Peter's had withstood the sack of the city, which happened a dozen years before, and Bramante's vast basilica had already begun to rise. The artistic life of Rome was still at high tide, for Raphael had passed away but twenty years before, and Michael Angelo was at work on his Last Judgment.

Though painting and sculpture flourished, music did not keep pace with advance in other arts. The leading musicians were Belgian, Spanish or French, and their music did not match the great achievements attained in the kindred art of the time—architecture, sculpture and painting. There was needed a new impetus, a vital force. Its rise began when the peasant youth John Peter Louis descended from the heights of Palestrina to the banks of the Tiber.

It is said that Tomasso Crinello was the boy's master; whether this is true or not, he was surely trained in the Netherland manner of composition.

The youth, whom we shall now call Palestrina, as he is known by the name of his birthplace, returned from Rome at the age of eighteen to his native town, in 1544, as a practising musician, and took a post at the Cathedral of Saint Agapitus. Here he engaged himself for life, to be present every day at mass and vespers, and to teach singing to the canons and choristers. Thus he spent the early years of his young manhood directing the daily services and drumming the rudiments of music into the heads of the little choristers. It may have been dry and wearisome labor; but afterward, when

Palestrina began to reform the music of the church, it must have been of great advantage to him to know so absolutely the liturgy, not only of Saint Peter's and Saint John Lateran, but also that in the simple cathedral of his own small hill-town.

Young Palestrina, living his simple, busy life in his home town, never dreamed he was destined to become a great musician. He married in 1548, when he was about twenty-two. If he had wished to secure one of the great musical appointments in Rome, it was a very unwise thing for him to marry, for single singers were preferred in nine cases out of ten. Palestrina did not seem to realize this danger to a brilliant career, and took his bride, Lucrezia, for pure love. She seems to have been a person after his own heart, besides having a comfortable dowry of her own. They had a happy union, which lasted for more than thirty years.

Although he had agreed to remain for life at the cathedral church of Saint Agapitus, it seems that such contracts could be broken without peril. Thus, after seven years of service, he once more turned his steps toward the Eternal City.

He returned to Rome as a recognized musician. In 1551 he became master of the Capella Giulia, at the modest salary of six scudi a month, something like ten dollars. But the young chapel master seemed satisfied. Hardly three years after his arrival had elapsed, when he had written and printed a book containing five masses, which he dedicated to Pope Julius III. This act pleased the pontiff, who, in January, 1555, appointed Palestrina one of the singers of the Sistine Chapel, with an increased salary.

It seems however, that the Sistine singers resented the appointment of a new member, and complained about it. Several changes in the Papal chair occurred at this time, and when Paul IV, as Pope, came into power, he began at once with reforms. Finding that Palestrina and two other singers were married men, he put all three out, though granting an annuity of six scudi a month for each.

The loss of this post was a great humiliation, which Palestrina

found it hard to endure. He fell ill at this time, and the outlook was dark indeed, with a wife and three little children to provide for.

But the clouds soon lifted. Within a few weeks after this unfortunate event, the rejected singer of the Sistine Chapel was created Chapel Master of Saint John Lateran, the splendid basilica, where the young Orlandus Lassus had so recently directed the music. As Palestrina could still keep his six scudi pension, increased with the added salary of the new position, he was able to establish his family in a pretty villa on the Coelian Hill, where he could be near his work at the Lateran, but far enough removed from the turmoil of the city to obtain the quiet he desired, and where he lived in tranquillity for the next five years.

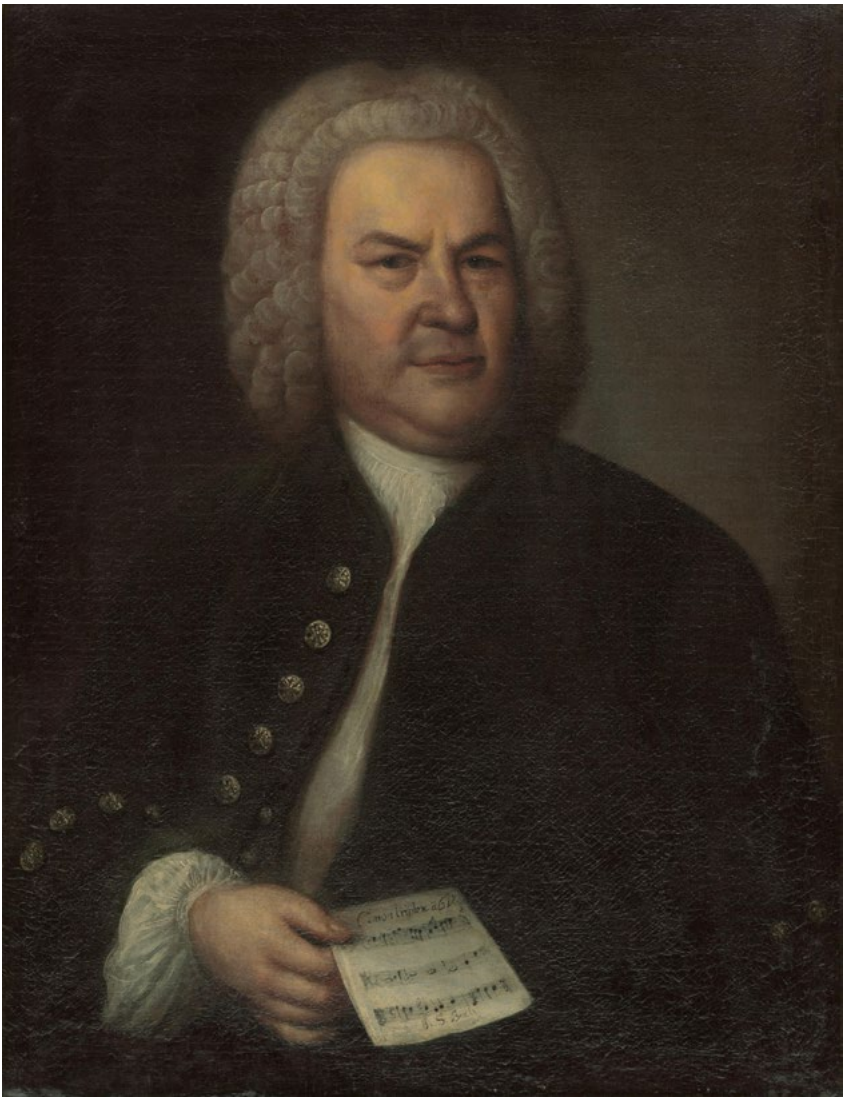
Palestrina spent forty-four years of his life in Rome. All the eleven popes who reigned during this long period honored Palestrina as a great musician. Marcellus II spent a part of his three weeks' reign in showing kindness to the young Chapel master, which the composer returned by naming for this pontiff a famous work, "Mass of Pope Marcellus." Pius IV, who was in power when the mass was performed, praised it eloquently, saying John Peter Louis of Palestrina was a new John, bringing down to the church militant the harmonies of that "new song" which John the Apostle heard in the Holy City. The musician-pope, Gregory XIII, to whom Palestrina dedicated his grandest motets, entrusted him with the sacred task of revising the ancient chant. Pope Sixtus V greatly praised his beautiful mass, "Assumpta est Maria" and promoted him to higher honors.

With this encouragement and patronage, Palestrina labored five years at the Lateran, ten years at Santa Maria Maggiore and twenty three at Saint Peter's. At the last named it was his second term, of course, but it continued from 1571 to his death. He was happy in his work, in his home and in his friends. He also saved quite a little money and was able to give his daughter-in-law, in 1577, 1300 scudi; he is known indeed, to have bought land, vineyards and houses in and about Rome.

All was not a life of sunshine for Palestrina, for he suffered many domestic sorrows. His three promising sons died one after another. They were talented young men, who might have followed in the footsteps of their distinguished father. In 1580 his wife died also. Yet neither poignant sorrow, worldly glory nor ascetic piety blighted his homely affections. At the Jubilee of Pope Gregory XIII, in 1575, when 1500 pilgrims from the town of Palestrina descended the hills on the way to Rome, it was their old townsman, Giovanni Pierluigi, who led their songs, as they entered the Eternal City, their maidens clad in white robes, and their young men bearing olive branches.

It is said of Palestrina that he became the "savior of church music," at a time when it had almost been decided to banish all music from the service except the chant, because so many secular subjects had been set to music and used in church. Things had come to a very difficult pass, until at last the fathers turned to Palestrina, desiring him to compose a mass in which sacred words should be heard throughout. Palestrina, deeply realizing his responsibility, wrote not only one but three, which, on being heard, pleased greatly by their piety, meekness, and beautiful spirit. Feeling more sure of himself, Palestrina continued to compose masses, until he had created ninety-three in all. He also wrote many motets on the Song of Solomon, his Stabat Mater, which was edited two hundred and fifty years later by Richard Wagner, and his lamentations, which were composed at the request of Sixtus V.

Palestrina's end came February 2, 1594. He died in Rome, a devout Christian, and on his coffin were engraved the simple but splendid words: "Prince of Music."



Johann Sebastian Bach

II

JOHN SEBASTIAN BACH

Away back in 1685, almost two hundred and fifty years ago, one of the greatest musicians of the world first saw the light, in the little town of Eisenach, nestling on the edge of the Thuringen forest. The long low-roofed cottage where little Johann Sebastian Bach was born, is still standing, and carefully preserved.

The name Bach belonged to a long race of musicians, who strove to elevate the growing art of music. For nearly two hundred years there had been organists and composers in the family; Sebastian's father, Johann Ambrosius Bach was organist of the Lutheran Church in Eisenach, and naturally a love of music was fostered in the home. It is no wonder that little Sebastian should have shown a fondness for music almost from infancy. But, beyond learning the violin from his father, he had not advanced very far in his studies, when, in his tenth year he lost both his parents and was taken care of by his brother Christoph, fourteen years older, a respectable musician and organist in a neighboring town. To give his little brother lessons on the clavier, and send him to the Lyceum to learn Latin, singing and other school subjects seemed to Christoph to include all that could be expected of him. That his small brother possessed musical genius of the highest order, was an idea he could not grasp; or if he did, he repressed the boy with indifference and harsh treatment.

Little Sebastian suffered in silence from this coldness. Fortunately the force of his genius was too great to be crushed. He knew all the simple pieces by heart, which his brother set for his lessons, and he longed for bigger things. There was a book of manuscript music containing pieces by Buxtehude and Frohberger, famous masters of the time, in the possession of Christoph. Sebastian greatly desired to play the pieces in that book, but his brother kept it under lock and key in his cupboard, or bookcase. One day the child mustered courage to ask permission to take the book for a little while. Instead of yielding to the boy's request Christoph became angry, told him not to imagine he could study such masters as Buxtehude and Frohberger, but should be content to get the lessons assigned him.

The injustice of this refusal fired Sebastian with the determination to get possession of the coveted book at all costs. One moonlight night, long after every one had retired, he decided to put into execution a project he had dreamed of for some time.

Creeping noiselessly down stairs he stood before the bookcase and sought the precious volume. There it was with the names of the various musicians printed in large letters on the back in his brother's handwriting. To get his small hands between the bars and draw the book outward took some time. But how to get it out. After much labor he found one bar weaker than the others, which could be bent.

When at last the book was in his hands, he clasped it to his breast and hurried quickly back to his chamber. Placing the book on a table in front of the window, where the moonlight fell full upon it, he took pen and music paper and began copying out the pieces in the book.

This was but the beginning of nights of endless toil. For six months whenever there were moonlight nights, Sebastian was at the window working at his task with passionate eagerness.

At last it was finished, and Sebastian in the joy of possessing it for his very own, crept into bed without the precaution of putting away all traces of his work. Poor boy, he had to pay dearly for his forgetfulness. As he lay sleeping, Christoph, thinking he heard

sounds in his brother's room, came to seek the cause. His glance, as he entered the room, fell on the open books. There was no pity in his heart for all this devoted labor, only anger that he had been outwitted by his small brother. He took both books away and hid them in a place where Sebastian could never find them. But he did not reflect that the boy had the memory of all this beautiful music indelibly printed on his mind, which helped him to bear the bitter disappointment of the loss of his work.

When he was fifteen Sebastian left his brother's roof and entered the Latin school connected with the Church of St. Michael at Lüneburg. It was found he had a beautiful soprano voice, which placed him with the scholars who were chosen to sing in the church service in return for a free education. There were two church schools in Lüneburg, and the rivalry between them was so keen, that when the scholars sang in the streets during the winter months to collect money for their support, the routes for each had to be carefully marked out, to prevent collision.

Soon after he entered St. Michael's, Bach lost his beautiful soprano voice; his knowledge of violin and clavier, however, enabled him to keep his place in the school. The boy worked hard at his musical studies, giving his spare time to the study of the best composers. He began to realize that he cared more for the organ than for any other instrument; indeed his love for it became a passion. He was too poor to take lessons, for he was almost entirely self-dependent—a penniless scholar, living on the plainest of fare, yet determined to gain a knowledge of the music he longed for.

One of the great organists of the time was Johann Adam Reinken. When Sebastian learned that this master played the organ in St. Katharine's Church in Hamburg, he determined to walk the whole distance thither to hear him. Now Hamburg was called in those days the "Paradise of German music," and was twenty-five good English miles from the little town of Lüneburg, but what did that matter to the eager lad? Obstacles only fired him to strive the harder for what he desired to attain.

The great joy of listening to such a master made him forget the long tramp and all the weariness, and spurred him on to repeat the journey whenever he had saved a few shillings to pay for food and lodging. On one occasion he lingered a little longer in Hamburg than usual, until his funds were well-nigh exhausted, and before him was the long walk without any food. As he trudged along he came upon a small inn, from the open door of which came a delightful savory odor. He could not resist looking in through the window. At that instant a window above was thrown open and a couple of herrings' heads were tossed into the road. The herring is a favorite article of food in Germany and poor Sebastian was glad to pick up these bits to satisfy the cravings of hunger. What was his surprise on pulling the heads to pieces to find each one contained a Danish ducat. When he recovered from his astonishment, he entered the inn and made a good meal with part of the money; the rest ensured another visit to Hamburg.

After remaining three years in Lüneburg, Bach secured a post as violinist in the private band of Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar; but this was only to fill the time till he could find a place to play the instrument he so loved. An opportunity soon came. The old Thuringian town Arnstadt had a new church and a fine new organ. The consistory of the church were looking for a capable organist and Bach's request to be allowed to try the instrument was readily granted.

As soon as they heard him play they offered him the post, with promise of increasing the salary by a contribution from the town funds. Bach thus found himself at the age of eighteen installed as organist at a salary of fifty florins, with thirty thalers in addition for board and lodging, equal, all in all, to less than fifty dollars. In those days this amount was considered a fair sum for a young player. On August 14, 1703, the young organist entered upon his duties, promising solemnly to be diligent and faithful to all requirements.

The requirements of the post fortunately left him plenty of leisure to study. Up to this time he had done very little composing, but now he set about teaching himself the art of composition.

The first thing he did was to take a number of concertos written for the violin by Vivaldi, and set them for the harpsichord. In this way he learned to express himself and to attain facility in putting his thoughts on paper without first playing them on an instrument. He worked alone in this way with no assistance from any one, and often studied till far into the night to perfect himself in this branch of his art.

From the very beginning, his playing on the new organ excited admiration, but his artistic temperament frequently threatened to be his undoing. For the young enthusiast was no sooner seated at the organ to conduct the church music than he forgot that the choir and congregation were depending on him and would begin to improvise at such length that the singing had to stop altogether, while the people listened in mute admiration. Of course there were many disputes between the new organist and the elders of the church, but they overlooked his vagaries because of his genius.

Yet he must have been a trial to that well-ordered body. Once he asked for a month's leave of absence to visit Lübeck, where the celebrated Buxtehude was playing the organ in the Marien Kirche during Advent. Lübeck was fifty miles from Arnstadt, but the courageous boy made the entire journey on foot. He enjoyed the music at Lübeck so much that he quite forgot his promise to return in one month until he had stayed three. His pockets being quite empty, he thought for the first time of returning to his post. Of course there was trouble on his return, but the authorities retained him in spite of all, for the esteem in which they held his gifts.

Bach soon began to find Arnstadt too small and narrow for his soaring desires. Besides, his fame was growing and his name becoming known in the larger, adjacent towns. When he was offered the post of organist at St. Blasius at Mülhausen, near Eisenach, he accepted at once. He was told he might name his own salary. If Bach had been avaricious he could have asked a large sum, but he modestly named the small amount he had received at Arnstadt with the addition of certain articles of food which should be delivered at his door, gratis.

Bach's prospects were now so much improved that he thought he might make a home for himself. He had fallen in love with a cousin, Maria Bach, and they were married October 17, 1707.

The young organist only remained in Mülhausen a year, for he received a more important offer. He was invited to play before Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Weimar, and hastened thither, hoping this might lead to an appointment at Court. He was not disappointed, for the Duke was so delighted with Bach's playing that he at once offered him the post of Court organist.

A wider outlook now opened for Sebastian Bach, who had all his young life struggled with poverty and privation. He was now able to give much time to composition, and began to write those masterpieces for the organ which have placed his name on the highest pinnacle in the temple of music.

In his comfortable Weimar home the musician had the quiet and leisure that he needed to perfect his art on all sides, not only in composition but in organ and harpsichord playing. He felt that he had conquered all difficulties of both instruments, and one day boasted to a friend that he could play any piece, no matter how difficult, at sight, without a mistake. In order to test this statement the friend invited him to breakfast shortly after. On the harpsichord were several pieces of music, one of which, though apparently simple, was really very difficult. His host left the room to prepare the breakfast, while Bach began to try over the music. All went well until he came to the difficult piece which he began quite boldly but stuck in the middle. It went no better after several attempts. As his friend entered, bringing the breakfast, Bach exclaimed:—"You are right. One cannot play everything perfectly at sight,—it is impossible!"

Duke Wilhelm Ernst, in 1714, raised him to the position of Head-Concert Master, a position which offered added privileges. Every autumn he used his annual vacation in traveling to the principal towns to give performances on organ and clavier. By such means he gained a great reputation both as player and composer.

On one of these tours he arrived in Dresden in time to learn of a French player who had just come to town. Jean Marchand had won a great reputation in France, where he was organist to the King at Versailles, and regarded as the most fashionable musician of the day. All this had made him very conceited and overbearing. Every one was discussing the Frenchman's wonderful playing and it was whispered he had been offered an appointment in Dresden.

The friends of Bach proposed that he should engage Marchand in a contest, to defend the musical honor of the German nation. Both musicians were willing; the King promised to attend.

The day fixed for the trial arrived; a brilliant company assembled. Bach made his appearance, and all was ready, but the adversary failed to come. After a considerable delay it was learned that Marchand had fled the city.

In 1717, on his return from Dresden, Bach was appointed Capellmeister to the young Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. The Prince was an enthusiastic lover of music, and at Cöthen Bach led a happy, busy life. The Prince often journeyed to different towns to gratify his taste for music, and always took Bach with him. On one of these trips he was unable to receive the news that his wife had suddenly passed away, and was buried before he could return to Cöthen. This was a severe blow to the whole family.

Four years afterward, Bach married again, Anna Magdalena Wülkens was in every way suited for a musician's wife, and for her he composed many of the delightful dances which we now so greatly enjoy. He also wrote a number of books of studies for his wife and his sons, several of whom later became good musicians and composers.

Perhaps no man ever led a more crowded life, though outwardly a quiet one. He never had an idle moment. When not playing, composing or teaching, he would be found engraving music on copper, since that work was costly in those days. Or he would be manufacturing some kind of musical instrument. At least two are known to be of his invention.

Bach began to realize that the Cöthen post, while it gave him plenty of leisure for his work, did not give him the scope he needed for his art. The Prince had lately married, and did not seem to care as much for music as before.

The wider opportunity which Bach sought came when he was appointed director of music in the churches of St. Thomas and St. Nicholas in Leipsic, and Cantor of the Thomas-Schule there. With the Leipsic period Bach entered the last stage of his career, for he retained this post for the rest of his life. He labored unceasingly, in spite of many obstacles and petty restrictions, to train the boys under his care, and raise the standard of musical efficiency in the Schule, as choirs of both churches were recruited from the scholars of the Thomas School.

During the twenty-seven years of life in Leipsic, Bach wrote some of his greatest works, such as the Oratorios of St. Matthew and St. John, and the Mass in B Minor. It was the Passion according to St. Matthew that Mendelssohn, about a hundred years later discovered, studied with so much zeal, and performed in Berlin, with so much devotion and success.

Bach always preferred a life of quiet and retirement; simplicity had ever been his chief characteristic. He was always very religious; his greatest works voice the noblest sentiments of exaltation.

Bach's modesty and retiring disposition is illustrated by the following little incident. Carl Philip Emmanuel, his third son, was cembalist in the royal orchestra of Frederick the Great. His Majesty was very fond of music and played the flute to some extent. He had several times sent messages to Bach by Philip Emmanuel, that he would like to see him. But Bach, intent on his work, ignored the royal favor, until he finally received an imperative command, which could not be disobeyed. He then, with his son Friedmann, set out for Potsdam.

The King was about to begin the evening's music when he learned that Bach had arrived. With a smile he turned to his musicians: "Gentlemen, old Bach has come." Bach was sent for at once, with-

out having time to change his traveling dress. His Majesty received him with great kindness and respect, and showed him through the palace, where he must try the Silbermann pianofortes, of which there were several. Bach improvised on each and the King gave a theme which he treated as a fantasia, to the astonishment of all. Frederick next asked him to play a six part fugue, and then Bach improvised one on a theme of his own. The King clapped his hands, exclaiming over and over, "Only one Bach! Only one Bach!" It was a great evening for the master, and one he never forgot.

Just after completing his great work, The Art of Fugue, Bach became totally blind, due no doubt, to the great strain he had always put upon his eyes, in not only writing his own music, but in copying out large works of the older masters. Notwithstanding this handicap he continued at work up to the very last. On the morning of the day on which he passed away, July 28, 1750, he suddenly regained his sight. A few hours later he became unconscious and passed in sleep.

Bach was laid to rest in the churchyard of St. John's at Leipsic, but no stone marks his resting place. Only the town library register tells that Johann Sebastian Bach, Musical Director and Singing Master of the St. Thomas School, was carried to his grave July 30, 1750.

But the memory of Bach is enduring, his fame immortal and the love his beautiful music inspires increases from year to year, wherever that music is known, all over the world.

George Frideric Handel