



Western Michigan University
ScholarWorks at WMU

WMU President Diether Haenicke

Office of the President

4-29-2009

Challenges did not keep Bach from making music

Diether Haenicke
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/haenicke>



Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "Challenges did not keep Bach from making music" (2009). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 32.

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/haenicke/32>

This Newspaper Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the President at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WMU President Diether Haenicke by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.





Challenges did not keep Bach from making music

By Diether Haenicke
April 29, 2009

Recently, the world commemorated the 250th anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death. Bach is strongly identified with the Protestant church, and, although he also left a large body of secular compositions, his music is heard more frequently in churches than in concert halls.

To most Germans, church holidays are unimaginable without Bach's great Oratorios or the Passions. His innumerable cantatas accompany the church year, and hardly a church service, a baptism, or a funeral will function well without his sacred music. His identification with religious services is indeed so complete that Bach has occasionally been called the fifth evangelist, and the French-Romanian essayist Emile Cioran, recognizing the power of Bach's music to evoke religious feelings, wrote, almost blasphemously: "If God were indebted to anyone, it would be to Bach."

As a boy, I was often called upon to pump the bellows for our church organ which did not yet have an electrically driven blower. Our congregation took great pride in the instrument, since it was an organ that Bach himself had played during Sunday services in Leipzig. In the late 19th century, when a modern organ was installed in Leipzig, my great-grandfather bought the old instrument and had it rebuilt and installed in the church in which I was confirmed four generations later. During the many hours our organist practiced, my friends and I became quite familiar with many of Bach's fugues and chorale preludes, and to this day I can remember which of his compositions required one or two boys to provide enough wind for the mighty pipes of our organ. Because of this experience, Bach's organ music has always held for me a distinct physical dimension added to its spiritual aspects.

Bach's life is an example of obstacles and challenges overcome. The son and grandson of musicians, he was orphaned at age 10. Already a decent string player, he found shelter

in the house of his older musician brother, where he learned to play the piano and received an exceptional education in the schools of the Duke of Saxe-Gotha, in whose country, it was said, the peasants were better educated than the nobility elsewhere. His brother's growing family forced Bach to move out at age 15. His good singing voice secured him a place in the choir of a school for poor boys in Lueneburg.

At 18, he secured his first full-time position as an organist in Arnstadt, from where he once walked 200 miles to Luebeck to meet the most famous organist of his time, the flamboyant and spectacular Dietrich Buxtehude. Bach was clearly interested in the older man's position, but Buxtehude had made it known that his well-paid post would only go to the man who married his daughter.

Handel had already turned down that proposition, and so did young Bach, noting that the woman was 12 years his senior. Instead he married his first cousin, Maria Barbara, a vocalist, and after her death, the very young Anna Magdalena for whom he composed the famous Notebook for harpsichord.

In his two marriages he sired 20 children; only nine survived their father. In spite of his great accomplishments as a musician and composer, it was a life-long challenge for Bach to meet the needs of his enormous family.

His various positions at the ducal courts and in the city of Leipzig demanded that he write ever-new works for court festivities, for the church holidays, and the regular services throughout the ecclesiastical year. The pressure to constantly produce was tremendous. In 1724 alone he composed 52 chorale cantatas and in other years up to 39 new compositions. Once, when money needs were pressing, he complained to a friend that there had not been enough funerals lately for which his paid services had been needed.

Yet, the creative genius of this man shines through all the hardship and adversity he encountered. When under the spell of his music, secular or sacred, I always think of the burdensome circumstances under which it was created, and I feel privileged that once I was in charge of pumping the bellows of his organ so that his immortal music could be heard.

*This column was first published Jan. 31, 2001 in the Kalamazoo Gazette
mlive.com/kalamazoo*