



Johann Sebastian Bach

1685-1750

A Spiritual Journey

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, Thuringia in 1685. Here was "the town wherein Luther hid himself from his enemies...where he made his translation of the Bible and created some of his hymns."



Veit Bach, his great-great-grandfather, was known to play the zither; his son Hans was a fiddler, and the trend continued through his father's generation, when Johann Ambrosius was "court musician at Eisenach," and "had two brothers and six first cousins in this walk of life." One other thing the Bach family had much of was the name Johann," so I will use middle names when using "Bach" would be confusing.



Sebastian spent his early years in Eisenach, attending grammar school and singing soprano in the church choir. When his father died in 1695, he went to live with his organist brother, Johann Christoph, a former student of Pachelbel, who continued Sebastian's music education. In 1700, Christoph found the boy a choir position at St. Michael's, Lueneburg. Sebastian continued at

Lueneburg after his soprano voice broke, "presumably because he was also a useful player of various instruments."



While still living with Christoph in Ohrdruf, Bach had his "first experience with Pietism." Ohrdruf was a Pietist stronghold, but the school authorities had taken their oaths to the Orthodox formulations, and thus the community was split. Perhaps because the battle was so close to home (Christoph was on record with his

signature supporting Orthodoxy), Sebastian may have seen too much, too soon. But whatever else, the school's stand did influence Sebastian. "Well grounded in the humanities, his character absorbed the theological bias of the school...."

St. Michael's Church

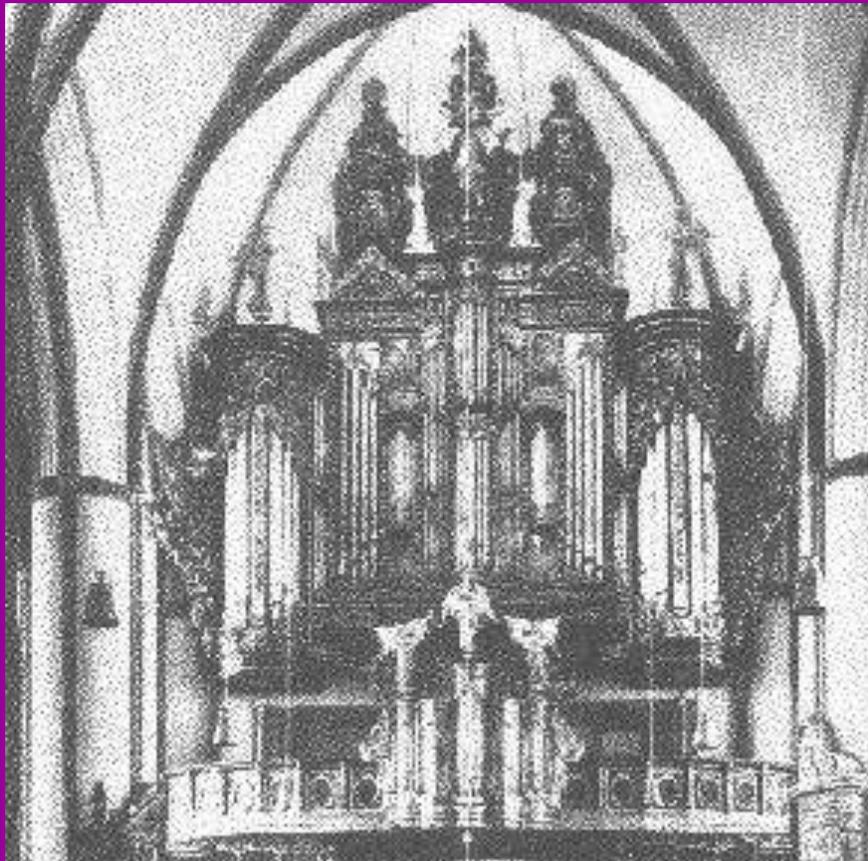


There is also some early evidence that Bach was not only seeing the major theological controversy of the day first hand, he was

also advancing rapidly in other areas of learning. After coming to Ohrdruf, he applied himself, and "worked his way out of Quarta in half a year. He was barely ten when he entered the class, the average age of whose pupils was twelve." When scarcely fifteen, he finished Prima, and this was almost three years earlier than was normal among his contemporaries. Thus we have evidence of a young man who had the combination of knowledge and wisdom to excel in his studies. Knowing the nature of his courses, which included much theology, Greek, and Latin, I feel that Bach was quite aware of the surrounding battles, and was able to think them through fully.



Lüneburg 1700-1702

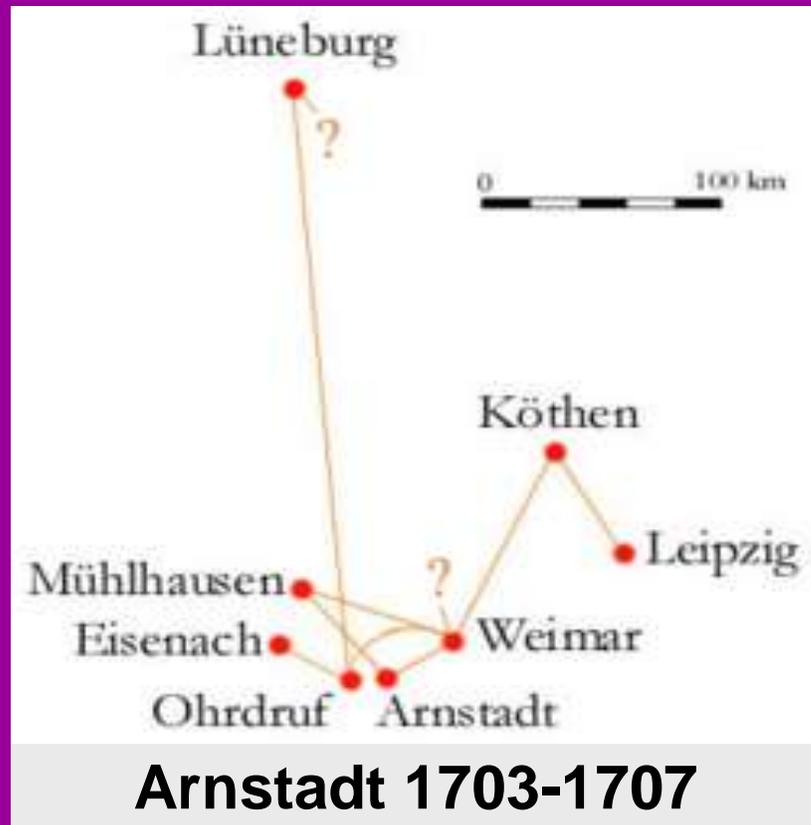


Lüeburg Organ

Following his time at Lueneburg, Bach was briefly employed in Weimar,



**1st Weimar Period
1703-1703**



before taking a position as the New Church, Arnstadt's organist. He got the job by accident; he asked the authorities for permission to try their new organ.



Wender Organ

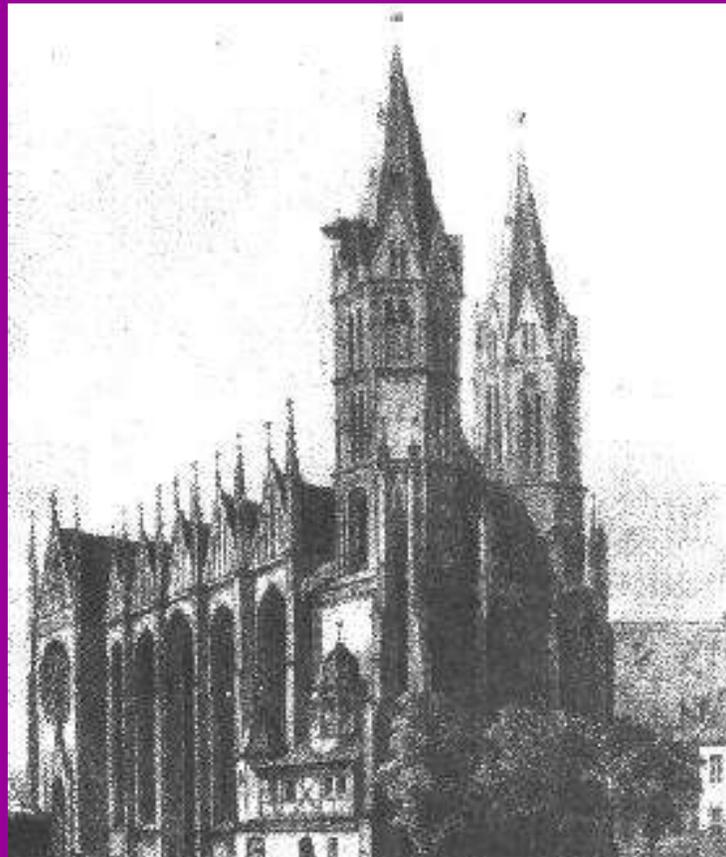
They "were so impressed with his skill that they offered him the post ... on the spot." He was only eighteen. However, Bach didn't devote all his time to the organ and the church choir. When he was twenty-one, "he was reprimanded by the Church Consistory for 'making music' with 'a stranger maiden' in the choir loft," during a time when girls were not allowed in church choirs. So no matter what his other inclinations, Bach was not overly concerned

at that time about the individual expressions associated with a staunch Pietist.

Bach married his second cousin, Maria Barbara, about a year after this incident. Whether or not she was the "stranger maiden," he had already moved on to



Muehlhausen and a fresh start, and had to return to Arnstadt to tie the knot. At this time, Bach was employed By St. Blasius Church.



Blasiuskirche

Here is the time when the young Sebastian Bach disappears and his mature incarnation begins to assume full stature. When he left

for his next position, his resignation showed a well thought-out plan for himself and for the future of his music:

[I]t was my intention to advance the music in the divine service toward its very end and purpose, a regulated church music in honor of God; ... also ... to improve the church music ... [as well as starting and financing other projects]: it so happened that none of this was possible without vexatious relations.... So God willed to bring about an opportunity that will not only put me in a better position as far as the subsistence of my livelihood is concerned, but will also make it possible for me ... **to persevere in working for my very end which consists in organizing church music well.**

Any further work should be considered in light of these farewell remarks, and how Bach accepted or rejected the destiny he laid out for himself.

No matter what else, Bach showed his orthodox Lutheranism and his great love of music at this time. His desire was to keep his

family well, but his over-arching goal was to keep music as an integral part of corporate worship. Whether or not he stayed his course is a matter to consider as he grew and evolved musically.

From Muehlhausen, Bach moved on to Sachsen-Weimar, and the court of Duke Wilhelm Ernst.



He was to be chapel musician, and hoped to pursue the plans he laid in Muehlhausen.

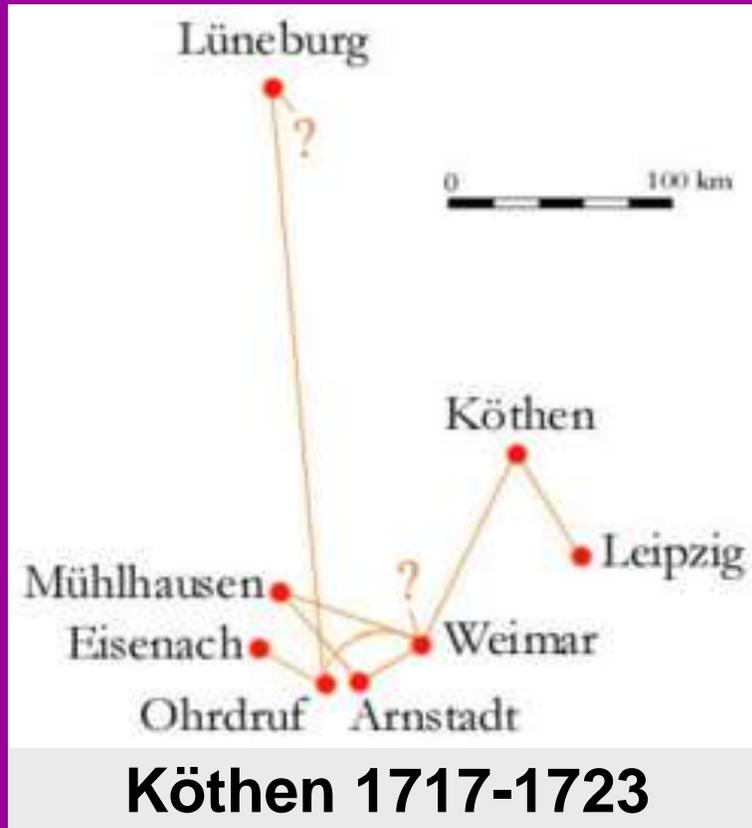


Here, Bach was charged with composing a new cantata every month, and with the musical instruction of the Duke's nephews. The Duke was not overly carried away with passions in any area, but seems to have been content to rule quietly, wisely and well. "Holding a middle course between orthodox zealotry and fanatic

Pietism, he curbed the acerbities of ecclesiastical controversy and ruled his churchmen with Erastian firmness." It is interesting that Bach did so much with the cantata. While many strong Pietists enjoyed music, and included hymns along with the chanting of Bible texts and Psalms, Pietism de-emphasized corporate worship. Not so Bach. His cantatas and chorales were designed to be integral parts of the worship service, and required much preparation and the organization of a great amount of talent among the congregation's singers.

Bach spent almost ten years at this job, then picked up his stakes again. At least part of the problem was the promotion of a musical inferior to the post of Kapellmeister. Even if Bach had a strong faith and a deep love for God, he also had strong pride, and a deep love of his own work. But when he attempted to leave for Koethen, where the climate was pro-music (even if also strongly Calvinist), he found himself under arrest "for too stubbornly forcing the issue of his dismissal."

When in 1717 he went to Koethen,



Bach's output underwent drastic change. Some of the authors I've examined consider this period to show a shallowness of faith, since little religious music was composed or presented, while others argue that Koethen was a only a respite, and that it is impossible to separate "sacred" from "secular" when considering the music of Bach.

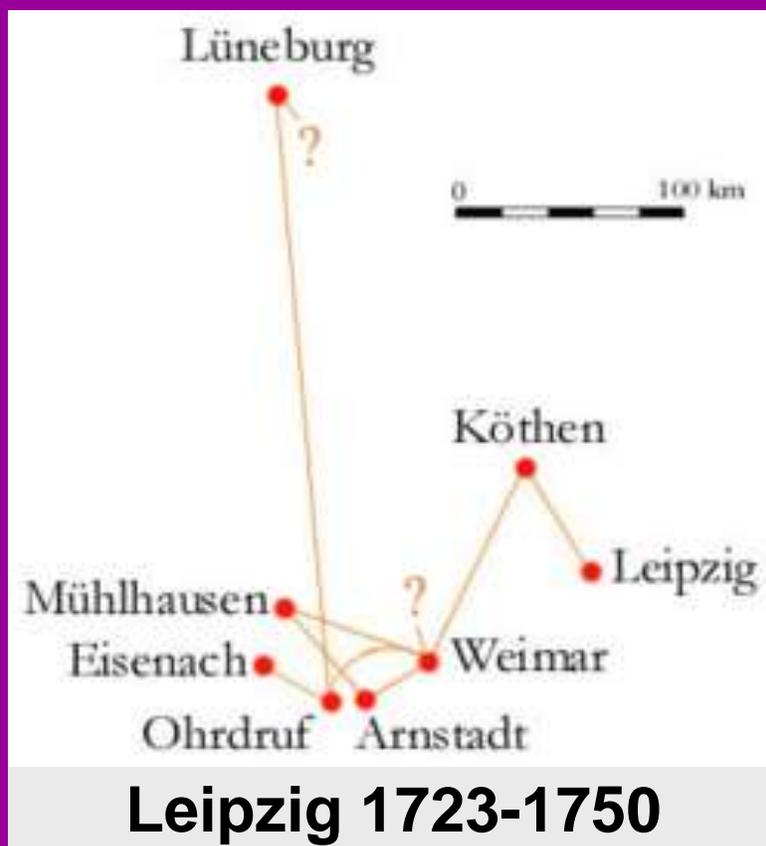


**Jacobikirche
Hamburg**

At Koethen,

[H]e really flowered as a secular composer, producing ... the Brandenburg concertos ... although he continued to compose religious music as well.... It was the best job he ever had,

and he might have stayed indefinitely had it not been for the death of the prince's wife, who loved music.... [T]he new princess turned out to be a woman who cared little---and spent less---for music.

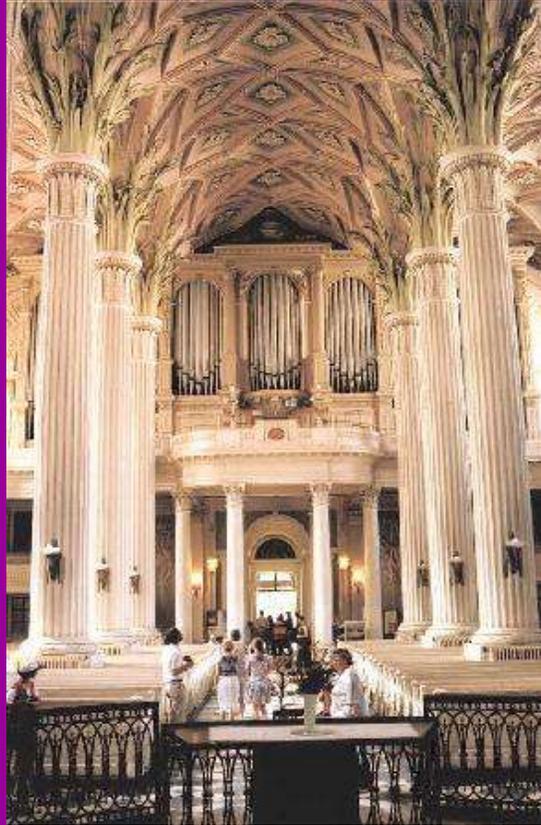


Following his time in Koethen, Bach once again sought greener pastures, and accepted in 1723 the position of Cantor of St. Thomas Church, Leipzig



Thomaskirche

---which is probably his most famous position. Besides a few trips to other parts of Germany, it was in Leipzig where Bach stayed until he died. Leipzig was home to his greatest religious compositions.



St. Thomas Nave

Here he wrote and introduced to the world the *Magnificat in D*, the *St. John Passion*, the *St. Matthew Passion*, the *B-Minor Mass*, and the *Christmas Oratorio*. Bach also returned to the heart of Orthodox worship services, when "he composed five sets of Church cantatas for all the Sundays and holy days of the ecclesiastical year, a total of about 300."

In Leipzig, Bach continued his practice of heading most manuscripts with "*Jesu Juva*" ("save, Jesus"), while concluding them with "*S.D.G.*" (*Soli Deo Gloria*; "to God alone the Glory"), which, along with the texts and their settings, is "indicative of his personal faith." Bach died in 1750.



Bach Window