

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Biography of Johann Sebastian Bach

By Beth Beutler

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When thinking of classical music composers, the name of Johann Sebastian Bach often comes to mind. He wrote many pieces of music, and some pieces are still popular today. He was very skilled in producing beautiful pieces that had depth to them as well.

Bach came from a long line of musicians. His own father played trumpet and violin, and many other family members were talented in music. His father worked as a court trumpeter and director of the town musicians. Johann kept written records of his family's contributions to music.

Sadly, Bach's parents both died while Bach was very young - around ten years old. He was then raised by his oldest brother, who gave him many opportunities to learn music and be exposed to talented artists such as Pachelbel. In his early teen years, he studied at a prestigious school with a friend, and, in addition to music, was educated in many other subjects. After he graduated, he began work as a court musician for Duke Johann Ernst in Weimar. Later, he became an organist for a church.

Although he stayed in that position for several years, at times Bach acted rather independently. During one period, he left his responsibilities without permission to study for several months with another musical mentor. Eventually, he left the church job and moved on to another city and an organist position with more promise. He married and had seven children, three of whom passed away before adulthood.

Bach again moved on when he was offered an even better position in Weimar, the town where he began his career. By now, he had an established reputation. He held an honored position of leadership. He created many works during his nine years there.

From 1717 to 1723, Bach worked as a director of music for Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Kothen. He had much freedom to do what he wished. Most of the music needed was for secular rather than church performances. In 1720, Bach's wife suddenly died. The next year Bach married a woman sixteen years younger than he was. They had 13 children. (Six of them lived to become adults.) Between his two marriages, Bach fathered 20 children.

In 1723, Bach became a leader of church music in Leipzig. This was a position different than in the past when he served the upper class. As musical director for the major churches for 27 years, he also became somewhat involved in politics. During this period, he created many works and led several performances that showcased his talent.

His sight had declined in the last year of his life. In 1750, Bach passed away. He was 65 and had composed more than 1,000 pieces. It is said that he dictated his last piece to his son-in-law as he lay dying.

One of the elements of style that Bach was known for was adding in detail. In the Baroque style, composers often did basic notations and allowed musicians to add to them as they played. Bach instead added variety in the actual writing. Thus, the piece of music would already have suggested additions to the basic melody. In some of his major works, however, he did leave some freedom for the performer.

Bach was also known for his sacred music and appeared to have been a dedicated Lutheran. Some of his musical elements appear to be religious symbolism, such as connections between heaven and earth.

During his life, Bach made major contributions to music. His best-known pieces include *The Art of Fugue* and *Brandenburg Concertos*. While alive, his skill as an organist was celebrated. Since his death, he has been appreciated more as a composer. Many music lovers regard him as one of the greatest composers of all time.



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### Questions

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1. About how old was Bach when his parents died?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 2. How many children did Bach father?

- A. twenty
- B. thirteen
- C. seven
- D. ten

3. Bach's first wife suddenly died when he was employed by whom?

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4. What is one of Bach's best known works?

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5. Bach added much \_\_\_\_\_ to his musical works.

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6. In what year did Bach die?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 7. True or false? Bach produced just under 1,000 pieces of music.

- A. true
- B. false



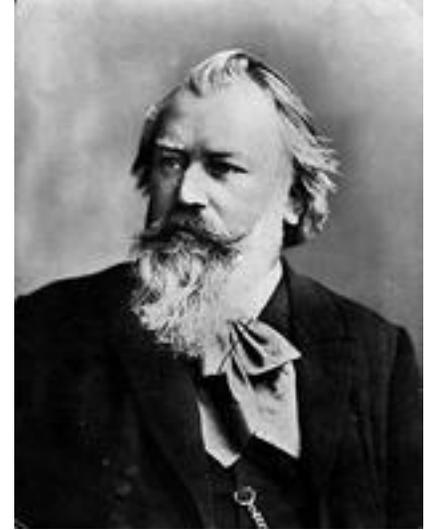
# Johannes Brahms

By Beth Beutler

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Considered by some to be "Beethoven's true heir," Johannes Brahms impacted the musical world for nearly 60 years. Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany, he showed early musical ability and receive his first training from his father, beginning as early as age 7. By the time he was 19 and went on his first musical tour, he was beginning to be recognized for his ability, having also earned money for the family through his musical pursuits. He worked with his father's orchestra. On this tour, he traveled with violinist Remenyi and met composers Joseph Joachim and Franz Liszt. He would form a good friendship with Joachim.

Brahms had a self-critical personality. He destroyed some of his own works and chose not to publish others. He was a scholar of old music and a logical thinker who wrote in a classical and orderly style, yet he was willing to add variety to his compositions. He sometimes acted harshly with adults, although he was often seen handing out candy to children. He walked a lot, inspired by the open air, had a melancholy side, and lived a modest lifestyle. He preferred what is called "absolute music," meaning that the music was not tied to a particular scene or meant to be about any particular story or setting - in other words, music for its own sake.



In 1856, Brahms began to spend time in both Hamburg and at Detmold, leading a ladies choir and being a conductor and teacher. Brahms was engaged briefly, but the engagement was quickly broken off in 1859, and he never married. He visited Vienna in 1862 and moved there in 1863, involving himself in music there.

Brahms received a mixed response to his compositions, particularly Piano Concerto No. 1. Some felt his work was "old fashioned," (perhaps influenced by his study of old music). However, some of the criticism came by what was known as the "New German School," made up partly of Liszt and Richard Wagner. Although Brahms admired some of their work and accomplishments, a conflict known as the "War of the Romantics" escalated. Brahms even published a paper protesting some other types of music, but it was not successful, and he stepped down from public arguments.

*Ein deutsches Requiem* (German Requiem, 1868) was perhaps his greatest work. It was certainly his largest choral work, and it brought him acclaim and quite possibly, more confidence. It used a mixed chorus, full orchestra and solos and is considered by some to be a statement of faith. It uses texts from the Lutheran Bible and was partially inspired by the death of Brahms's mother.

In addition to his formal work, Brahms also prepared some smaller-scale compositions for dancing and the commercial market. One of his most popular songs is *Brahms's Lullaby*, written to honor the birth of a son to his friend, Bertha Faber. He also wrote the familiar *Hungarian Dances*. Brahms is also considered to be one of the greatest composers of lieder (Romantic German poems set to music). He composed about 200 of them. He wrote for piano, organ, strings, and clarinets. His choral preludes are considered an important part of an organist's repertoire.

Other notable facts about Brahms are that he received an honorary doctorate in music from the University of Breslau but refused one from the University of Cambridge, and in 1889 he made a low-quality recording for Thomas Edison's invention, the phonograph. It was the earliest recording of a major composer.

Brahms wanted to give up composing in 1890 but continued writing until his death from cancer in April 1897. He was honored posthumously by the German Hall of Fame, and to this day, influences music lovers with his pleasant compositions that continue to live on.

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

Johannes Brahms

## Questions

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\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which famous composer is Brahms considered to be "heir" to?

- A. Beethoven
- B. Schumann
- C. Bach
- D. Liszt

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. "Absolute" music is music for its own sake, not meant to portray a scene or picture.

- A. true
- B. false

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Which of the following instruments did Brahms NOT write for?

- A. piano
- B. clarinet
- C. flute
- D. organ

4. Which of Brahms's most well-known compositions is often played for babies?

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5. Brahms's largest work was \_\_\_\_\_ *Requiem*.

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6. Describe Brahms's personality.

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**Do you enjoy music for its own sake? Do you prefer it to make you think of a picture or story?**

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## Music for Weddings and Beyond

By Beth Beutler

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If you attend a wedding, listen and see if you hear a work by Felix Mendelssohn. It is often used when the bride and groom leave the altar after being pronounced "husband and wife." It is a joyful, exciting piece, and very popular. This work, called *The Wedding March*, was part of a piece of music written for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Mendelssohn was born on February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany. His family was originally Jewish, but converted to Christianity in 1816, at which time Felix took on the names Jakob Ludwig and the surname Bartholdy, named after a piece of property purchased by Felix's uncle.

At six years old, Mendelssohn began taking music lessons. He is considered to be one of music's child prodigies. (A prodigy refers to people, especially young people, who seem to have an out-of-the-ordinary talent for something.) At only nine years old, he appeared in a chamber music presentation. (Chamber music refers to music performed by a small group of musicians, often in a room, or chamber, of a home.) He wrote music even as a youngster and published his first work at 13 years of age. It was a piece to be used as a piano quartet. At 15, he wrote his first symphony. At 18, he wrote an opera, but because it did not perform well, he discontinued work on that type of production.



Mendelssohn's style tended toward classical standards, and he disliked some of the forms of music coming from other places such as Paris. His music shows an influence from Mozart, Bach, and Handel, yet he incorporated unique and sometimes dramatic elements of his own as he was inspired by emotions, the outdoors, and literature.

Mendelssohn was blessed with a comfortable life and opportunities to learn different languages and artistic skills such as watercolors. He also had a friendship with Goethe, a talented man with great influence in literary and scientific circles. He attended college at the University of Berlin and then went to England for the first of ten different visits. During those years, many people began to enjoy his music, including Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Even so, he missed out on an opportunity to lead the Berlin Singakademie, a choral society. It is possible that people considered Mendelssohn too young or feared he would be too creative with musical style and add too many new elements to music. People may have even had a concern about his Jewish roots.

Mendelssohn did have an opportunity to conduct the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, which validated his feelings of connections with Germany. It also may have made up for some of the disappointment felt over losing the opportunity to have a leadership role in the Singakademie.

Mendelssohn was married and had five children. He had a happy life, but he died at the early age of 38 in November 1847 after experiencing several strokes. His sister had died earlier that year, which had a great effect on Felix. It is thought that the combination of too much work and issues with anxiety may have contributed to his health problems.

So, the next time you hear *The Wedding March* and watch the bride and groom leave the altar, think of Felix Mendelssohn and the contribution he made to the world's collection of great music.

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Music for Weddings and Beyond

### Questions

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\_\_\_\_\_ 1. True or false. You can infer that Felix Mendelssohn grew up in a poor, disadvantaged family.  
A. False  
B. True

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. How old was Mendelssohn when he performed in a chamber music presentation?  
A. 18  
B. 9  
C. 15  
D. 13

3. Mendelssohn's family was originally \_\_\_\_\_.

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\_\_\_\_\_ 4. In which country did Mendelssohn also develop a following?  
A. France  
B. United States  
C. Great Britain  
D. Sweden

5. Why might Mendelssohn have lost out on the job to lead the Singakademie?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Was Mendelssohn a family man?  
A. Yes  
B. No

7. What event happened in the year of his death that greatly affected him?

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8. At what events is one of Mendelssohn's pieces used often, even today?

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