

The Composer's Composer

Module 6 of *Music: Under the Hood*

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Outline

- Biography of J. S. Bach
- Joy and celebration: *Brandenburg 3*
- Misconceptions about Bach's music
- Analysis of *C-sharp Minor Fugue* (WTC)
- Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

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Biography

- **Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750**
 - Part of large musical family
 - Children were surrounded by music.
 - Orphan at age 10, lived with older brother.
 - Choirboy, but a musical prodigy.
 - Why did he become the most famous?
 - "I have had to work hard. Anyone who works just as hard will get just as far."

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Biography

- **Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750**
 - Details of his life are sketchy.
 - He would have it this way. The music was not about him.
 - Wrote "INJ" (*In Nomine Jesu*) on many of his scores, including secular music.
 - Difficult relations with employers
 - Complained of too much work and too little pay.




Bach at age 30


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Biography

- **Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750**
 - Married twice
 - 7 children with cousin Maria Barbara
 - 13 children with Anna Magdalena, met at Köthen
 - Half of his children died before adulthood



Maria Barbara




Anna Magdalena

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Biography

- **Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750**
 - Liked to have a good time
 - Sang barroom songs with friends on Sundays after church
 - Devoted to family
 - Became blind in old age
 - But kept working.
 - May have been diabetic.




Bach with 3 of his sons

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Biography

- **Career**
 - Court musician at age 18, Weimar.
 - Choir director & organist at 3 churches, age 20-23
 - Expected to write cantatas for church services
 - Bad relations with employers
 - Court organist at Weimar, age 23
 - Wrote *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*



Bach's house in Weimar

Biography

- **Career**
 - Court musician at Köthen, age 32
 - Got along well with Prince Leopold
 - Wrote *Brandenburg Concertos* for Duke of Brandenburg
 - Wrote *Well-Tempered Clavier*



Schloß Köthen

Biography


- **Career**
 - Church organist and choir director in Leipzig, age 38
 - Wrote a cantata every week
 - Wrote *St Matthew Passion* and other passions
 - Wrote part of *Mass in B Minor* at age 48, finished at age 64
 - Wrote *Art of the Fugue* (unfinished) shortly before his death, age 65.



Thomaskirche, Leipzig

Biography

- **Musical achievement**
 - Primary musical task of Baroque era: make abstract music intelligible
 - Bach indulged in some numerology to do this.
 - This didn't work.
 - His main contribution is highly-structured counterpoint.



Biography

- **What is counterpoint?**
 - **Counterpoint** consists of several independent musical voices that interact in harmony.
 - For example, [Dixieland music](#).
 - A metaphor for Western culture.
 - We are individualists but coexist by following the rules.
 - Bach became all-time master of counterpoint.
 - Reflects Enlightenment view that order underlies the complexity of the universe.



Misconceptions

- **Think Bach is always serious? Try these:**
 - [Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major](#)
 - YouTube performance at Schloß Köthen, where it was composed and first performed (with Bach playing viola)!
 - Check out 3rd movement, 5:52
 - [Coffee Cantata](#)
 - Father upset because daughter wants to "drink coffee" with her boyfriend.
 - Coffee = "The Devil's drink"
 - Check out scene at 3:25



Misconceptions

- Think Bach isn't emotional? Try these:
 - Chaconne from *Partita No. 2 in D minor*, for solo violin
 - One of the great monuments of Western civilization
 - Mass in B minor
 - Likewise.



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Misconceptions

- Think Bach organ fugues are boring? Try this:
 - "Gigue" Fugue in G major for organ



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C-sharp minor Fugue

- Well-tempered Clavier
 - Perhaps **greatest music book ever**.
 - **Unparalleled collection** of 48 preludes and fugues
 - Incidentally, demonstrates tempered tuning (but not equal temperament).
 - Preludes & fugues use all 24 major & minor keys.



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C-sharp minor Fugue

- C-sharp minor fugue
 - From **Book 1** of WTC.
 - A complex fugue for 5 voices
 - **Somber mood**.
 - Shows that even the most highly **cerebral** music can be highly **emotional**.
 - This is the essence of Western music.



Bach's manuscript

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[Audio file – with graphics](#)

[Audio file – Hélène Grimaud \(3:12\)](#)

Key:

- Major Section**
- Minor Section**
- Episode, Stretto, etc.
- S = subject
- CS1 = countersubject 1
- CS2 = countersubject 2

FUGA IV
in A 1709

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Appogiatura with intense dissonance

Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Bach's organ music lifts us out of the muck of everyday existence.
 - To a higher state of mind.
 - This requires horsepower, both from the instrument and the composer.

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Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Should music be loud?
 - In this case, yes!
 - The power of the music supports the power of the instrument.

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Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Example: Joy and celebration
 - Toccat, from *Toccat* and *Fugue in F major*.
 - Interweaving voices over pedal point, tonic key (F major)
 - Multiple suspensions 1:00
 - Pedal solo, modulates to dominant key (C major) 1:20
 - Opening material in dominant 1:52
 - Pedal solo in dominant key, modulates to G major 2:50
 - Episode w/ cascading counterpoint, cycles through keys 3:33
 - Episode, increasing complexity 4:06
 - Episode with cascading counterpoint 4:45
 - Deceptive cadence 6:20
 - Closing section with powerful descending pedal 7:17
 - Coda over C major pedal point, final cadence 7:48

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Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Example: An epic journey
 - Fugue, from "Dorian" *Toccat* and *Fugue in D minor*
 - The subject seems to reach for something higher, but slides back.
 - Metaphor for human struggle through history?
 - All hell breaks loose in the closing section. Armageddon?

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