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## Johann Sebastian Bach

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany in 1685, the same year that witnessed the births of George Frederick Handel (d. 1759) and Domenico Scarlatti (d. 1757). Another of Eisenach's famous sons was Martin Luther, (1483-1546) founder of a movement which would eventually become the Lutheran Church. The youngest of eight children, Sebastian, as he was called, first studied strings, then harpsichord and organ. He took his first position as organist at a church in Arnstadt in 1703, where he began composing works for the organ. After a fairly short time, Bach moved on to a church in Mühlhausen, and began writing his now - famous series of cantatas for the church year.

In 1707, Bach married Maria Barbara, and moved once more to take a larger position at the court of Weimar. A significant part of his duties here was to play the organ, thus many of his major organ works were composed during this time. He was also able to write a fairly large number of cantatas during his tenure there.

In late 1717, Bach moved with his wife and family to Cöthen, where he enjoyed a great deal of support from his employer, Prince Leopold. This was a very fruitful time for Bach, as he composed the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the first book of *The Well Tempered Clavier* and the *Orgel-Büchlein*. It was also a sad time, as in the summer of 1720, his wife Maria Barbara died. However, in 1721 Bach won the hand of Anna Magdalena, a gifted singer, who would go on to bear him 11 children. It was for his new wife that he wrote the famous *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach*. This is actually a collection of mostly short, practical pieces, many of which are vocal, by Bach and other contemporary composers. Some of Bach's most well known pieces (or those attributed to him) are contained in this collection, which also served as a teaching tool for his children.

In 1723, after competition from another famous composer, Georg Philip Telemann, Bach was eventually offered the important post of Kantor at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. Among his many duties was teaching Latin and music at the St. Thomas School, providing music for civic ceremonies, directing the town's instrumental ensemble, the *Collegium Musicum*, and providing music for the St. Thomas Church, as well as overseeing music at the town's two other Lutheran churches. In spite of the formidable demands of these various duties, Bach composed such major works as the B Minor Mass, the Christmas Oratorio, the St. Matthew Passion, and a cycle of one complete cantata each week for nearly three years. During the last years of his life, he gradually succumbed to blindness, although he continued to compose intermittently. He suffered a stroke and died on July 28, 1750.

Bach was a devout Lutheran his entire life and music was his pulpit. There was, for the most part, little distinction between his sacred and secular music (with some notable exceptions), in that a sense of the sacred permeated all of his works. Bach (not unlike Handel) was a man with one foot in heaven and one on earth; in his manuscripts, he often began with the initials, "J. J.", Latin for "Jesu Juva" (Jesus, help me) and at the end, the letters, "S.D.G.", *Soli Deo Gloria* (to God alone be glory).



The Bach family monogram, designed by Johann Sebastian

## The Harp in 18th Century Germany

Although Bach played quite a few instruments himself and composed for virtually every instrument in existence at the time (including some nearly obsolete ones such as the *zink* or *cornetto*), he conspicuously neglected the harp. The reason for this is fairly simple. Although the harp was a popular instrument in Europe at the time, it was restricted to playing largely folk music because of its limitation to the diatonic scale. Without the ability to play chromatically, most composers of the period overlooked the harp in favor of the more fashionable harpsichord and organ, which could play in any key. In various countries, luthiers tried to get around this problem by creating the double harp, the triple harp, and the chromatic harp. In Germany, the addition of small hooks to raise the pitch one half step by hand was an attempt to solve the problem. This so-called “Hook Harp”, which first appeared in the Tyrol region of what is now Austria, was not fully chromatic. Bach would have been extremely limited by the instrument and most likely the technique of the players at the time. The vast majority of his music incorporates a fairly high degree of chromaticism as well as a great deal of virtuosity which would not have been possible to execute by the contemporary harpists playing on the early 18th century German harp available at the time.

## Adapting Bach for the Modern Lever Harp

With the invention of accurate, reliable levers, the modern non-pedal harp comes a step closer to being useful as a vehicle for performing the music of Bach. The composer himself would likely have had no problem with this idea, as he was constantly adapting, transcribing and rearranging his own music and that of others for the need at hand. Original vocal works would often show up later as instrumental pieces, and violin, oboe and harpsichord were often interchanged in his concerti. While it is true that the vast majority of his compositions would not work at all on the modern lever harp, there are still enough gems to make this prospect viable with a bit of artistic license. Some of the pieces in the present collection are direct, complete transcriptions from the originals and are as faithful as possible to the harmonies that Bach intended. Others are sections of works that have been lifted out and made practical for the lever harp, with perhaps some harmonic alterations. Of course, it is entirely possible to play just about anything Bach wrote on a modern double-action pedal harp, assuming, of course that one is a virtuoso harpist. But for those who love Bach, and have chosen the simpler path of the lever harp, this collection is designed to enable them to perform some of these beautiful pieces.

This music is ideally to be played on a lever harp tuned in the key of C, but will readily work with other tuning systems. If tuned in C, there is somewhat of a compromise in several of the pieces which call for an isolated B-flat here and there. An alternate note has been given, along with the original B-flat in parenthesis. There are several schools of thought on how the lever harp should be tuned. The inherent beauty of the harp, be it lever or pedal, is that the strings vibrate in full sympathy with one another (assuming the harp is itself in tune), when it is played with no levers or pedals engaged. The harp is one of few instruments that have this unique property of sound, but this effect diminishes the more the strings are “stopped” by engaging levers or pedals. The lever harp tuned in the key of E-flat does certainly give the harpist more choices of keys and repertoire in which to play, but when the levers are engaged to play in other keys, the resonant tone of the harp overall is greatly diminished. Some high-end levers on the market today come very close to minimizing this loss of resonance, but many do not. The choice therefore, left up to the lever harpist, is whether to have somewhat fewer pieces available, yet be able to bring out the optimal tonal properties of the harp, or to have a larger selection of music, but with compromised sound quality. Bach himself was very picky about the tone quality of the organs and harpsichords for which he was a consultant, and his pieces for solo violin, cello and lute take full advantage of this phenomenon of “sympathetic vibrations” from adjoining open strings.

Editorial markings, such as tempo, dynamics, expression, etc. have been largely omitted, as they would not have been found in the original editions. It was usually left up to the performer to interpret the piece, based on the performance practice of the day. The pieces are arranged from simplest to more complex, and some fingerings have been suggested.

## The Music

**Arioso**—Bach used this piece as the opening Sinfonia for Cantata BWV 156, and also as the middle movement of the F minor harpsichord concerto. It has been transposed to the key of G major for the harp, with both a simple and intermediate version included.

**Menuet** (in G Major) - No. 4 in the Anna Magdalena Notebook, BWV Anhang 114, attributed to Christian Petzold, and arranged by Bach. This is a direct transcription of the original.

**Sheep May Safely Graze**—from one of Bach’s few secular cantatas, BWV 208, “The Hunting Cantata”, written for the birthday of the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen. This was originally scored for solo soprano, recorders and strings. The Prince is likened to a shepherd taking care of his flock, which is also clearly a means for Bach to express the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. The highly chromatic “B” section has been omitted, as it is not feasible for lever harp.

**Bist Du Bei Mir**—No. 25 in the Anna Magdalena Notebook, BWV 508. The music is actually attributed to Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel. The solo version included here is simplified, but the more advanced accompaniment to the vocal version can also be played as a harp solo. This piece was likely included for Bach’s second wife, who was an accomplished soprano. The original key was E-flat.

**Menuet** (in A Minor) - Originally in the key of G Minor, this piece is No. 5 in the Anna Magdalena Notebook, BWV Anhang 115. Bach attributes its composition to Christian Petzold. The present arrangement is a somewhat free interpretation of the original, in terms of harmony and voicing.

**O Sacred Head**—The original text of this famous chorale is attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, 1153, as the Latin hymn, *Salve caput cruentatum*. It was translated into German by Paul Gerhardt, 1656 (*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*), and then into English by James W. Alexander, 1830. The music for the German chorale was originally composed by Hans Leo Hassler in 1601, and then harmonized by Bach in 1720. Bach uses this chorale tune in several of his works, such as the *Christmas Oratorio*, but set to different texts.

**Sleepers Awake**—from Cantata BWV 140, “Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme”. This is an abbreviated arrangement of the well-known chorale setting from the cantata. The “B” section has been omitted, and the key has been changed from E-flat to G major.

**Bouree No. 1**—From the Suite for Solo Cello No. 1, BWV 1009, this piece was originally in the key of C, but here transposed to the key of G major, which is more idiomatic for the modern lever harp. The melody is original, but the implied harmonies have been given to the left hand. There was also a second section to the work, which of technical necessity has been omitted.

**Marche**—No. 16 in the Anna Magdalena Notebook, BWV Anhang 122, composed by Bach’s most famous son, Carl Philip Emmanuel (1714-1788). This is virtually a direct transcription in the same key as the original.

**Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring**— from the Cantata BWV 147, “Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben”. It was composed in Leipzig in 1723 for the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some liberties have been taken in this arrangement, such as the change of meter from 3/4 to 9/8, and simplification of harmony. The first section, up to the repeat sign, may be played alone as a simplified, abbreviated version. Both solo harp and vocal versions with original German and English texts are included.

**Sonatina**—from Cantata BWV 106, “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit” (God’s time is the best of all). This is the opening movement of a funeral cantata, written during Bach’s time at Mühlhausen. The original is scored for 2 recorders and 2 violas da gamba and continuo. This arrangement is a complete transcription of the original, except that the key has been changed from B-flat to D.

**Prelude No. 1, from the “Well Tempered Clavier, Book I”**, BWV 846. This is the first in a collection of pieces for the keyboard that Bach composed in 1722. The entire collection (Books I and II) consists of 48 preludes and fugues, written in every major and minor key. It was intended “for the use and profit of the musical youth desirous of learning as well as for the pastime of those already skilled in this study”, according to Bach himself. It is presented here as a virtual transcription in the original key.

**Prelude**—Originally the first movement of the Suite for Solo Cello in G Major, BWV 1007. This is a literal transcription, although the key has been changed to C major to accommodate the lever harp. Bach would likely not have been opposed to this key change, as he often did the same in his own transcriptions. Like the original, it takes advantage of sympathetic vibrations created by the strings.

# Arioso

from Cantata BWV 156  
(simplified version)

Johann Sebastian Bach  
arranged by Rhett Barnwell

2 3 3 4 1 1

Set 3 3 4 3 3 4 2 3 4 2 1 4

5 2 4 1 4 2 1 3 4 3 4 3 3 4 3

10 2 1 4 3 2 1 1 3 (tr) 2 3 2 1 2

15 1 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 2 1

20 (tr) 3 3 2 1, 1 3 (tr) 4 4 2 1 3 4 4 2 1