

LUDWIG ZIEMSEN



The Story of Bach

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Translator: George P. Upton

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Contact: info@e-artnow.org

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The musical tournament

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

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There is no person in musical or general history whose life can be studied by young people with more advantage, or followed in its general characteristics with more profit than Johann Sebastian Bach. The old saying that genius is only the highest capacity for work has sometimes been attributed to him. Whether he originated the saying or not, his life illustrates its truth. His industry was astonishing, whether in adverse or prosperous circumstances, though his remuneration, considering the magnitude of his achievements, now seems a beggarly pittance. He worked for the highest in his art, and always with the utmost of his ability, and consecrated his work to the divine honor. Upon all his important pieces he inscribed the letters, "S. D. G." ("Soli Deo Gloria"), "to the glory of God alone." What the simple, God-fearing, art-loving cantor of Saint Thomas accomplished, the world knows. Gounod summed it up in the declaration that if all the music written since Bach's time were lost, it could be reconstructed upon what he wrote. His life was as noble as his music. He was an affectionate father, laboring manfully and incessantly to support his large family; a good citizen, faithfully fulfilling his duties and commanding universal respect; a musician without an equal in the profundity of his knowledge and the richness of his productions; the founder of modern music, the master of the organ, the composer of the highest forms of sacred music; a plain, humble man, despising rank and

show, making no boast of his grand achievements, and yet recognized in the court of Frederick the Great as above courtiers and nobility by the title of his genius. "Seest thou a man diligent in business; he shall stand before kings." He was a self-reliant, self-sustained, evenly poised man, plain and unostentatious in his bearing, honorable in his intercourse with men, strong and unvarying in his home love, and guided in every event of life by a strict morality born of sincere religion. He followed the bent of his genius untrammelled by the accidents or troubles of life, and sought for no higher reward than his own conviction of the worth of his accomplishments. Such a life is to be commended not only to the young student entering upon the profession of music, but to every young person entering upon the duties of life. This little volume, therefore, worthily claims a place among "Life Stories for Young People." Though the original is inaccurate in some small details, which later biographers have corrected, the general story of his life is reliable and nearly every event of importance is included in its pages.

G. P. U.

CHICAGO, 1905

CHAPTER I.
A FRIEND IN NEED

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At the close of a beautiful Summer day, in the year 1699, subdued and solemn strains of music from the little house of the organist of the market-town of Ohrdruff¹ floated through its quiet streets. A boy sat crying upon the stone steps leading to the house-door. Now and then he lifted his head, looked into the hallway, and saying in a mournfully complaining tone, "False again," or, "The second violin plays most abominably," or making some similar protest of musical sensibility, bowed his head again in sorrow and tears.

As he sat thus, a quick step was heard coming up the street. A lad, somewhat older than the other, approached and said in a clear, cheerful voice: "Why are you crying, Bastian, and what means this funeral music?"

The one addressed raised his handsome eyes, red with weeping, bowed in a dejected manner to his questioner, and said in a low voice: "My brother is dead. Did you not know it?"²

"I had not heard a word of it," he replied. "All last week I was at my cousin's in Eisenach,³ and I have but just returned. Is he dead? And so suddenly! Poor boy, I pity you from my heart. When did it happen?"

“Last evening just about this time. He had not been in his usual health for a week. He often complained of dizziness and difficulty in breathing, and yesterday while cleaning his old violin he suddenly fell and died.”

Passionate sobs made his last words almost unintelligible, and the boy for a few seconds gave way to irrepressible grief.

His young friend regarded him in silence for a time, and when he had somewhat recovered from his passionate sobbing delicately sought to divert his attention from his troubles by asking, “Who are these playing so wretchedly? Friends of the deceased?”

“Three of them are. They have engaged the town clerk’s assistant for second violin, and he plays badly enough to set one’s teeth on edge. If my dead brother could hear him, he would jump out of his coffin and drive the bungler out of his house.”

His friend smilingly nodded assent. “He is certainly a slovenly player, but it can’t be helped now.”

“That is true,” sobbed the boy.

A brief pause in the conversation was filled with the tones of the funeral music, during which his friend’s gaze rested thoughtfully and sympathetically upon the countenance of his mournful comrade, and his lips moved as if he were talking to himself. At last he resumed reluctantly, but with manifest cordiality and good-will: “Well, Bastian, what is to be done now that your brother, the organist, is dead?”

“The town will install a new organist, I suppose.”

“Of course, but that is of little consequence; I mean what will become of you?”

“Of me?” replied Sebastian, thoughtfully. “Who can say? But with God’s help I will become a skilful musician, like my good father, and as all the Bachs have been for a hundred years past.”

“You mistake my question,” said his friend. “I mean where will you live now that this house is henceforth to be closed? You are now a poor orphan. Do you expect that any of your relatives will take you in?”

Sebastian shook his head. “No, Erdmann,⁴ I do not. Who can do it? My only remaining brother, Johann Jakob, has left the country and gone into business in Sweden. Both my uncles, my father’s brothers, have been dead for some years, and my cousins have trouble enough to get along upon their small chorister’s allowance without being burdened with me. Again—”

“It must be very hard for you, my poor Bastian.”

Sebastian for a moment regarded his sympathetic friend with moistened eyes, then cordially took his arm and went slowly down the street with him.

“I will tell you about this, Erdmann; they possibly may look at the matter differently. The relatives will come to the funeral ceremonies in the morning, and it may be perhaps that this or that one will take me in until something definite can be arranged; but I am not sure that I wish them to do so. How could I be happy? These poor people have no higher ambition than to get musical education enough to fit them for an ordinary organist’s position and enable them to secure a place in some Thuringian country town, and, when

they get it, to go on, day after day, practising noble music as if it were a trade, just as if they were cobblers or tailors. If I were to find a home with cousins Tobias Friedrich, Johann Bernhard, Johann Christoph, or Johann Heinrich, what would become of me? All my life I should hear only the music I made myself. I should make no progress, I should never penetrate the noble mysteries of our art; I should remain a town musician like a thousand others.”

“But, Bastian, why should you trouble yourself about these matters? Why fix a goal for yourself now? You are still very young.”

“I am old enough to know that I must escape from this narrow musical life. Even if my brother had lived, I should not have remained with him much longer.”

“Why not? He was a skilful musician.”

“Yes, but only for himself. He either could not or would not assist me to advance. I was disgusted with his dry and uninteresting exercises, and he refused to let me practise more useful and difficult ones. He had a manuscript volume of piano studies by famous masters, like Froberger, Fischer, Kerl, Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Bruhns, and Böhm—valuable works, I assure you. Do you suppose he allowed me to have them? When I begged for the volume, he refused me and locked it up.”

“This is strange. Why should he have acted so? He could not possibly keep you from advancing in the art for which you have such decided talent.”

“Certainly not. He could do well for himself, like all the old organists round here, but he had not the faculty of making others progress. There is something forbidding and