VINTAGE

THE CELLO SUITES

ERIC SIBLIN

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About the Book

One autumn evening, not long after ending a stint as a pop music critic, Eric Siblin attended a recital of Johann Sebastian Bach's Cello Suites. There, something unlikely happened: he fell deeply in love with the music. So began a quest that would unravel three centuries of mystery, intrigue, history, politics, and passion.

Part biography, part music history, and part literary mystery, *The Cello Suites* weaves together three dramatic narratives: the first features Bach and the missing manuscript of these mesmerisingly beautiful eighteenth-century pieces for solo cello; the next, the legendary cellist Pablo Casals and the historic discovery of the music in Spain in the late nineteenth century; and the last, Eric Siblin's own infatuation with the suites in the twenty-first century.

This love affair leads Siblin to the back streets of Barcelona and a Belgian mansion; to interviews with world-renowned cellists; to archives, festivals, and conferences; and even to cello lessons – all in pursuit of answers to the mysteries that continue to haunt this music more than 250 years after its composer's death.

The Cello Suites is a lovingly written, true-life journey of discovery, fuelled by the transcendent power of a musical masterpiece.

About the Author

Eric Siblin is an award-winning journalist and film-maker, and was pop critic at the *Montreal Gazette. The Cello Suites* is his first book.

www.ericsiblin.com

‘An erudite and immensely readable miscellany that will give you the sensation of having consumed a library over a weekend or less . . . Conveying in mere words sounds as rich and multifarious as those that comprise *The Cello Suites* takes no small literary gift. To say the author has done justice to his subject is the highest praise of all’
Montreal Gazette

‘*The Cello Suites* is a rare combination of history and a journey of self-discovery and self-fulfilment written for a general reader . . . Siblin’s inquiring mind turned him into a cultural sleuth, a would-be amateur cellist and singer’
Toronto Star

‘It’s not often that one begins reading a book with mild interest and then can’t put it down, which happened to me with this beautiful book’
Diana Athill

‘Siblin, with disarming and contagious enthusiasm, tells a multilayered story of artistic genius and suffering’
Boston Globe

‘If Siblin is correct that “Bach is what you make of him” then *The Cello Suites* has made him, if possible, yet more legendary’
Quill and Quire

‘With each new chapter, we embark on an exciting journey of discovery and are not disappointed as surprises lurk on every page. Expertly crafted, with the narrative as finely structured and controlled as the music that led Siblin on his quest, *The Cello Suites* is a wonderful read. The language is beautiful, the research impeccable’
Irish Times

‘It is cultural-political history of the most compelling kind . . . What *The Cello Suites* does wonderfully . . . is celebrate the good fortune of discovering great works of art’

New Statesman

To my parents, Herbert and Jacqueline Siblin

ERIC SIBLIN

The Cello Suites

In Search of a Baroque Masterpiece

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

SUITE NO. 1

(G major)

Suitte 3.

Prelude

PRELUDE

We find a world of emotions and ideas created with only the simplest of materials. LAURENCE LESSER

THE FIRST MEASURES unfold with the storytelling power of a master improviser. A journey has begun, but it’s as if composition is taking place on the spot. The deep-toned strings take us back to the 1700s. The soundworld is happy. The jauntiness youthful. Discovery is in the air.

After a pause that contemplates the future, the cello resumes with aching soulfulness. Things will not come easily. The notes are murmured, stated with courtly purpose, and blasted through with rapture. We peak higher. A new vista opens up, rhapsodic resolution, the descent a soft landing.

This is how the opening notes of Bach’s Cello Suites sounded to me as I sat in the courtyard of a seaside villa in Spain that once belonged to Pablo Casals, the Catalan cellist who discovered the music as a boy one afternoon in 1890. As I listened to the music on headphones, shaded by the palms and pines of a lush garden, the shimmering waves of the nearby Mediterranean seemed to roll perfectly in time with the prelude of the first cello suite.

There was no more fitting place to appreciate the music. Although the Cello Suites first flowed from the composer’s quill sometime in the early 1700s, it was Casals who, two centuries later, made them famous.

My own discovery of the Cello Suites had taken place one autumn evening in 2000, a “Bach Year” marking two and a half centuries since the death of the composer. I was in the audience at Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music to hear a cellist I’d never heard of play music I knew nothing about.

I had no reason to be there aside from a concert listing in a local newspaper, idle curiosity, and the fact that I was staying at a nearby hotel. But I might have been searching for something without knowing it. Sometime earlier I had ended a stint as pop music critic for a daily newspaper in Montreal, *The Gazette*, a job that had filled my head with vast amounts of music, much of which I didn't want to be there. The Top 40 tunes had overstayed their welcome in my auditory cortex, and the culture surrounding rock music had worn thin. I still wanted music to occupy a central place in my life, but in a different way. The Cello Suites, as it turned out, offered a way out of the jam.

The program notes for the recital by Laurence Lesser, a distinguished cellist from Boston, explained that "amazingly, for a long time," the Cello Suites were seen as only a collection of exercises. But since Casals had started playing the suites at the dawn of the twentieth century, "we now know how lucky we are to possess these extraordinary masterworks. What most music-lovers don't know, however, is that no known composer's manuscript of these works exists . . . There exists no truly reliable source for the suites." This got the journalistic wheels in my head turning: what had happened to Bach's manuscript?

It was in the small German town of Cöthen in 1720 that the Cello Suites were said to have been composed and inscribed by Bach's raven-quill pen. But without his original manuscript, how can we be certain? Why was such monumental music written for the cello, a lowly instrument usually relegated to background droning in Bach's time? And given that Bach regularly rewrote his music for different instruments, how can we even be sure that the music *was* written for the cello?

From my seat in the Royal Conservatory concert hall, the lone figure producing this massive sound with such modest resources seemed to defy the musical odds. Only one instrument, and one anchored to a very low register, the

cello appeared unequal to the task, as if some supreme composer had devised an overambitious score, an ideal text, with little regard for the crude vehicle that was to carry it out.

Watching Laurence Lesser expertly play the suites, I was struck by the bulkiness of his instrument—in former times called the violoncello, or ’cello for short—bringing to mind some lumbering peasant from a medieval string kingdom, rough-hewn and primitive, nowhere near sophisticated enough for the refined music it was playing. But on closer examination I could see the intricately carved wooden scroll and the curvaceous sound holes, shaped like some exquisite baroque time signature. And what was coming out of those sound holes was music more earthy and ecstatic than anything I’d ever heard. I let my mind wander. What would the music have sounded like in 1720? It was easy to imagine the violoncello proving itself in aristocratic company and seducing the powdered wigs.

But if the music is so uniquely captivating, why were the Cello Suites virtually never heard until Casals discovered them? For nearly two centuries after this baritone masterwork was composed, only a small circle of professional musicians and Bach scholars knew of this epic music. And those who did thought they were more technical exercises than anything fit for the concert hall.

The story of the six suites is more than musical. Politics shaped the music, from the Prussian militarism of the eighteenth century to the German patriotism that propelled Bach’s fame a century later. When European dictatorships ruled in the twentieth century, the notes became so many bullets in the anti-fascist cello of Casals. Decades later, Mstislav Rostropovich played the Cello Suites against the backdrop of a crumbling Berlin Wall.

After Casals gave the music mass appeal—which happened long after his discovery of the music—there was no stopping the suites. There are now more than fifty

recordings in the catalogue and upwards of seventy-five performance editions of the music for cellists. Other instrumentalists found they could transcribe and tackle the Cello Suites: the flute, piano, guitar, trumpet, tuba, saxophone, banjo, and more have all essayed the music with surprising success. But for cellists the six suites quickly became their alpha and omega, a rite of passage, the Mount Everest of their repertoire. (Or the Mount Fuji: in 2007 Italian cellist Mario Brunello climbed to the summit, nearly 3,750 metres above sea level, where he played selections from the Cello Suites, declaring that “Bach’s music comes closest to the absolute and to perfection.”)

The music is no longer considered overly challenging for the average listener. New recordings of the suites regularly win “disc of the year” honours. And the scratchy old mono recording made by Casals continues to be a top seller among historical titles.

But it is not lighthearted music. A cursory scan of recent performances shows that the suites were played at memorial services in England and the U.S. held in honour of the victims of 9/11, at another memorial marking the Rwandan genocide, and at various high-profile funerals, including the massive one held for the former publisher of *The Washington Post* and for Senator Edward Kennedy. I recall one occasion, not long after I was first smitten by the suites, when I was upbraided by a dinner party hostess for putting “funereal music” in her disc player.

If the music has often been employed for sad occasions, it is in large part explained by the dark, moody tones of the cello, plus the fact that the Bach suites require one lonely instrument. Yet the cello is the instrument that most closely resembles the human voice; it is capable of more than just doom and gloom. The Bach suites, most of which are written in major keys, have their fair share of upbeat merrymaking, devil-may-care attitude, and ecstatic abandon. The roots of the music are in dance—most of the movements are in fact

old European dances—and dancers have been quick to choreograph the suites. Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rudolf Nureyev, Mark Morris, and Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, among others, have all moved to its propulsive rhythms.

The music gets around. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma produced six short films that used gardening, architecture, figure skating, and kabuki to illustrate the suites. The rock star Sting made a short film in which he played the first prelude on a guitar while an Italian ballet dancer enacted the melody. And the suites have been heard in several films, most notably (and, alas, gloomily) in several by Ingmar Bergman, as well as in *Master and Commander, The Pianist*, and the television series *The West Wing*. The music can be found on discs as varied as *Classic FM Music for Studying, Bach for Babies*, and *Tune Your Brain on Bach*, not to mention *Bach for Barbecue*. The Bach suites have been cited by one opera singer as her favourite music for cooking. Snippets of the music are widely available as cellphone ring tones.

But the Cello Suites haven't quite gone mainstream. They remain "classical" music after all, and have the refined aroma of music for connoisseurs. They were considered exactly that by reviewers—"an item for connoisseurs"—when Casals' pioneering recordings were first released back in the early 1940s. "They are cool and pure and lofty," wrote the critic for the *New York Times*, "set forth with the simplicity that distinguishes searching art." They still have serious status, fuelled by highbrow reviews that suggest the suites "represent some sort of apex of Western musical creativity" or that the music "has a purity and intensity that approach the Japanese yet remains more accessible to Western ears."

The idea to write a book about the Bach suites, one that is not aimed at classical connoisseurs, came to me when I first heard three of the Cello Suites in that Toronto recital by Laurence Lesser. The idea was vague, but I had a strong

sense there was a story there, somewhere, and decided to follow in the footsteps of the notes.

Since then I have heard the suites performed on Spain's Costa Dorada, on the grounds of Casals' former villa, now a lovely museum devoted to the cellist. I listened to a young German cellist play the suites in a Leipzig warehouse, not far from where Bach is buried. Matt Haimovitz, a one-time wunderkind, gave a rollicking account of the music at a roadhouse juke joint in the Gatineau Hills north of Ottawa. I attended a master class on the suites given by the eminent Dutch cellist Anner Bylsma at a music camp perched on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. I was at Lincoln Center for Pieter Wispelwey's marathon playing of all six suites, and at a Manhattan conference on Bach in the twenty-first century, where the suites were gorgeously performed on marimba (marimBach!). At a high-rise apartment building on the outskirts of Brussels, I heard a Russian émigré violinist play the suites on an intriguing five-string fiddle that he'd built, convinced it is the mysterious instrument lost to history that Bach really composed the suites for.

The compact discs have piled up—from the Old Testament recordings that Casals made back in the 1930s to the slickly produced discs of recent years, including "authentic" early music approaches and the suites rendered on any number of instruments, in jazzified form, or blended with traditional West African music. In 2007, three centuries after composition, the Cello Suites hit number one on the iTunes classical music chart with a recording by Rostropovich. (Bach seemed to be boasting to the iPod generation that month: another version of the Cello Suites was on the same Top 20 chart, not to mention three other works by the composer.)

By then the music had become a story for me. And it seemed only natural for the story to be structured along the lines of the music. The six Cello Suites each contain six movements, starting with a prelude and ending with a

gigue. In between are old court dances—an allemande, a courante, and a sarabande—after which Bach inserted a more “modern” dance, either a minuet, a bourrée, or a gavotte. In the pages that follow, Bach will occupy the first two or three movements in each suite. The dances that come afterwards are earmarked for Pablo Casals. And the gigues that close each suite will be reserved for a more recent story, that of my search.

If I’ve been on the trail of the music for this long it’s because there’s so much to hear in the Cello Suites. The genre may be baroque, but there are multiple personalities and mood swings within the suites. I hear barnstorming peasant tunes and post-modern minimalism, spiritual lamentations and heavy metal riffs, medieval jigs and spy movie soundtracks. The ideal experience for most listeners may be as I first heard the music, without preconceptions. But connect the notes, and a story emerges.

ALLEMANDE

> *The elegant allemandes in the Cello Suites, each preceded by a dramatic opening movement, have been described as slow and pensive pieces of great beauty.* OXFORD COMPOSER COMPANIONS: J. S. BACH

TO PIECE TOGETHER the story of the Cello Suites means getting to know the music's composer. And for anyone born in the past half-century, to become acquainted with Johann Sebastian Bach—really acquainted—means to infiltrate another art form, another era, another frame of mind. To get myself up to baroque speed, I went about listening to massive amounts of Bach's music, perusing second-hand music shops to build a respectable collection, reading everything Bachian I could get my hands on, from eighteenth-century accounts to glossy classical music magazines, and going to concerts bravo'd by mature audiences that were a far cry from the rock circuit.

I also became a card-carrying member of the American Bach Society. The main perk of membership was occasional mailings of the ABS newsletter, which was emblazoned with Bach's personal seal, his initials stylishly entwined and topped with a crown. I scoured the handful of pages trumpeting the latest scholarly research for clues about the Cello Suites. It felt as if I'd joined a secret society. In high school during the 1970s, when musical choice seemed to be between the enemy forces of disco and spaced-out synthesizer rock, being a Rolling Stones fan felt vaguely esoteric. At some point since then they became the band of choice for people practically in my mother's demographic, but back then true Stones fans were not numerous. Two

decades later, finding fellow Bach enthusiasts in my social circles was more or less impossible.

So when I learned that the American Bach Society held conferences every two years, and the next one was to take place not far away, at Rutgers University in New Jersey, I eagerly registered. Having done my homework on the Cello Suites I could qualify, sort of, as a bona fide Bachian and rub shoulders with my own people.

Thus in April 2004 I found myself walking across the emerald lawns of Princeton University with a gaggle of Bach devotees, nearly all of whom were scholars and an alarming number of whom were bearded and wearing dark blazers. We had just heard a very high-forehead lecture on Bach and were emerging from a university building, blinking in the sunlight, as a student event called “Spring Fling” was noisily underway. There was face-painting and Hacky Sack, football, a barbecue, and a garage band cranking out REM’s rock anthem *It’s the End of the World As We Know It (and I Feel Fine)*.

This was so much white noise for the Bach scholars, who were at Princeton on a musicological mission, a colourful field expedition in the otherwise staid world of Bach research. The world’s finest portrait of Bach, almost never accessible to the public, was being made available for delegates to the 2004 American Bach Society conference. Only two authentic portraits of Bach are known to exist, both by the same artist, the Saxon court painter Elias Gottlob Hausmann. They are nearly identical, both in oil, and show the composer in the same serious pose. Despite their similarity, they are thought to have been painted on separate occasions. One of the portraits today hangs in the municipal museum of Leipzig, the city where it was painted in 1746. It is in poor shape because of repeated overpainting, as well as having been used once upon a time for target practice by bored students armed with crumpled paper.

The other portrait, painted two years later, is in pristine condition. It is this one that half a century ago made its way into the hands of William H. Scheide, an independently wealthy Bach enthusiast with a long history of studying, performing, and collecting the works of his favourite composer. Normally the portrait hangs in Scheide's Princeton home, but he agreed to display the portrait for those attending the fourteenth biennial meeting of the American Bach Society.

The Hausmann portrait has, more than anything else, fleshed out the popular image of Bach—that of a severe-looking, bewigged, and somewhat corpulent German burgher. It is an image that graces countless CD covers, concert programs, and festival posters, and has gone a long way towards helping listeners imagine a composer for whom scant biographical detail exists.

So, as the Bach scholars made their way across the Princeton campus, their excitement was palpable. The Bach portrait and William H. Scheide were waiting in the special collections room of the John Foster Dulles Library of Diplomatic History. The Bach crowd, eighty-five strong, filed into the wood-panelled room and clustered around the portrait.

"Oooh!"

"Stunning."

"Like the *Mona Lisa."*

"So serious."

"It sort of hits me in the stomach, right inside there, like, whoa!"

"It has a kind of energy."

"Should we bow three times or something?"

The portrait did have a convincing intensity. The buttons on the composer's coat glistened, his white shirt sleeves radiated crispness, the wig was springily soft and his

complexion flushed, as if the composer had drained a few glasses of the Rhineland wine he favoured. From inside the thick gold frame Bach seemed to be casting an all-knowing, wary eye over the proceedings.

William H. Scheide, ninety years old, wearing a powder-blue jacket and a red tie patterned with music notation (which may or may not have been from a Bach cantata), gave a brief talk on the other Bachiana in his collection—original manuscripts in the composer's hand and a rare letter. Then he was asked the question on everyone's mind: how he came into possession of the portrait. "A long time ago," he replied, leaning on a cane with a ski-pole grip as a handle. "I can barely remember it anymore."

The upshot is that Scheide, whose family made its fortune in the oil business, heard about the portrait sometime after the Second World War and arranged for an art dealer in London to purchase it from its owner, a German musician by the name of Walter Jenke. The owner had left Germany in the late 1920s, settling in Dorset, England; he returned to Nazi Germany a decade later to retrieve the portrait, which had apparently been in his family since the nineteenth century.

The Hausmann portrait has helped cultivate an image of Bach that is far more severe and serious than he probably was. "Part of the reason that people think of Bach as an old fuddy-duddy," music commentator Miles Hoffman once observed on National Public Radio, "is because there's only one fully authenticated portrait of him, and it shows him as an old guy with a powdered wig looking very stuffy and stolid." Hoffman made a point of saying that Bach was in fact a man of passion, the sort of man who got into a sword fight with a bassoonist, was thrown into a duke's prison at one point, and fathered no less than twenty children.

The viewing of the portrait fit nicely with the theme of the biennial conference, which was titled "Images of Bach." Along with concerts and cocktails, scholarly papers were

delivered with titles ranging from "When an Aria Is Not an Aria" to "'I Must Live Amid Almost Continual Vexation, Envy, and Persecution': A Psychological Reading of J. S. Bach's Relationship to Authority." The keynote speech was delivered by Christoph Wolff, a German-American musicologist and Harvard professor who is the world's foremost Bach expert. In his lecture, Wolff suggested that the iconic Bach portrait should not be seen as some sort of casual snapshot. "It is an official pose," he said. "The sitter likely wanted to be painted in this way. We can assume that Bach wanted to shape the image."

In the portrait, Bach is holding a sheet of music: a highly complex piece, his own composition, known as the "triplex canon." By doing so, Wolff argued, "Bach tried to avoid his fame as a virtuoso, playing down his (professional) office . . . and taking a backseat as a human being . . . all deferring to his oeuvre."

By saying that Bach had his portrait painted with an eye towards posterity, controlling his posthumous image as he wanted it to appear, Wolff was challenging a common impression of Bach. The conventional image of the baroque master is that of someone who worked day to day without any thoughts of posterity, cranking out masterworks as a matter of course and not being overly concerned about his popular reputation or the shelf life of his music. In Wolff's view, Bach in fact took an active role in "promoting his afterlife." He did what he could to safeguard examples of his art and to secure his place in history. Even in the Hausmann portrait, by holding a highly complicated piece of music (a "puzzle canon" that is like a mathematical riddle), "the man with the restrained smile wanted the viewer to feel challenged. It worked in 1748—and it works today."

Wolff then took questions from the audience. One questioner, a heavy-set man with his hair in a ponytail, sporting a bow tie and peering through oversized tortoiseshell glasses, took Wolff's comments a step further.

He accused Bach of being behind “a concerted campaign to control everything he could about what posterity thought of him.”

This was the amateur Bach expert Teri Noel Towe, well known in Bach circles and, despite being a self-described “passionate and obsessed eccentric,” well respected by the nine-to-five scholars. A New York City lawyer specializing in intellectual property law, Towe said he was outraged that Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, did not manage to get more in the way of personal details about the composer. Although Forkel was writing decades after Bach’s death in 1750, he was in touch with Bach’s sons, especially Carl Philipp Emanuel (C. P. E.). “I would love to put C. P. E. Bach on the witness stand,” Towe said. He complained that there is no mention in Forkel’s biography, published in 1802, of what Bach looked like, his height, his weight, or what his favourite dessert might have been.

“At the same time,” Wolff replied, “eighteenth-century biographers were not interested in desserts.”

“We don’t know what he ate,” piped up a musicologist in the audience, “but we know what he drank!”

“And smoked!” added another scholar.

The debonair silver-haired Wolff agreed, noting that when Bach travelled he was put up in the best hotels and consumed the highest-quality beer and pipe tobacco. “It is quite clear that he indulged. He liked the good things in life.”

But all Bach scholars bemoan the lack of hard historical information available on their subject. Aside from Shakespeare, there is probably no other towering figure in modern art about whom we know so little. There is nothing like the heartfelt letters Mozart wrote to his wife, or the stream-of-consciousness notebooks that Beethoven left behind. When documentary signs of life occasionally pop up for Bach—and they do pop up—it makes the search for an

elusive personality all the more enticing. But Bach’s biographers have their work cut out for them.

“It is difficult,” Wolff said, “to see the man behind the portrait.”

COURANTE

> *[Louis XIV] danced it better than any member of his Court and with quite an unusual grace*. PIERRE RAMEAU, 1729

THE MAN BEHIND the portrait was born on March 21, 1685, in the small German town of Eisenach. Nothing is known of Johann Sebastian Bach's early years, though it can be safely assumed that he was raised to be a musician. His father, Ambrosius Bach, was a musician who was the son of a musician who was the son of a musician and so on, going back to the sixteenth century. The patriarch of the family, one Veit Bach, was a "white-bread baker" who moved from Hungary to Germany to escape religious persecution against Protestants. Veit was known to pluck his cittern, a guitar-like instrument, while the millstone turned grain into flour, pounding out a steady rhythm. As time went on, the Bach clan—staunchly Lutheran, rooted in the central German region of Thuringia—produced a distinguished line of professional musicians similar to the Couperins in France, the Purcells in England, and the Scarlattis in Italy.

There was no Germany in the modern sense of the country. The only central authority speaking for Germany was the Holy Roman Empire, an empty shell of an empire dating from the time of Charlemagne. It had virtually no army, no revenue, and no working machinery of government. To quote Voltaire, it was neither holy, Roman, nor an empire. This phantom empire encompassed a number of significant states such as Austria and Prussia, both of which would gain substantial power after 1700. But the Holy Roman Empire itself was a jigsaw puzzle of some 300 entities: dukedoms, principalities, imperial free cities,

some encompassing barely more than a few acres—a mosaic shaped by the ups and downs of dynastic change and the fortunes of war.

No dot on the map, though, was too minuscule for German absolutism. Most of Germany was ruled by petty princes, most of whom were not substantial enough to pursue an independent foreign policy or employ a standing army. But they built ostentatious palaces and adorned their small courts with ceremonial guards, dancers, fencing masters, and musicians, imitating the great absolutist power of the period—the Sun King, Louis XIV of France. The petty rulers of German lands looked to Versailles as a role model, conjugating their verbs and powdering their wigs accordingly[1].

In Bach's native town of Eisenach, 6,000 people lived in the shadow of a minor duke whose palace staff included a French elocution master, numerous pages headed by a page-master, a gaggle of ladies-in-waiting, and a master of the hunt who presided over eighty-two horses and coaches. Bach's father, Ambrosius, was a prominent town musician who became director of the municipal orchestra in Eisenach and a member of the duke's orchestra. He was first and foremost a violinist, but proficient on several other instruments such as the trumpet, which he played in a brass band that performed twice daily from the town hall balcony overlooking the market square.

A vivid portrait of Ambrosius, now housed in the Berlin State Library, shows him posing in a Japanese kimono, a fashion statement in the late seventeenth century. He has shoulder-length dark hair, a slightly exuberant moustache, and a proud but easygoing, affable expression.

Less is known about Bach's mother, Elisabetha. What we do know is that her father was a wealthy furrier and a member of the town council in nearby Erfurt, and that she was twenty-four when she married Ambrosius in 1668. They

had eight children, seven of whom were given the first name of Johann, Johanne, or Johanna. Four died early on.

Johann Sebastian was the youngest child and grew up surrounded, like all the other Bachs, by music. He presumably received lessons from Ambrosius on violin, viola, and probably cello. And he would have accompanied his father when he performed at church, castle, and town hall, joining in on various instruments as soon as he was up to the task.

At St. George's Latin School, where Sebastian (like Martin Luther two centuries earlier) was a pupil, the perfection of God's will was never doubted. Yet creation was a coin tossed in the air, forever on the verge of landing on its dark side. At the age of six Sebastian was standing by the graveside of his older brother Balthasar. Two years later his father's twin brother died. Then, when the boy was nine, his mother died. Ambrosius remarried a twice-widowed woman, but within three months he too died, leaving Sebastian an orphan before his tenth birthday.

The family unit was broken apart and relatives picked up the pieces. The Bachs' seventeen-year-old daughter, Marie Salome, moved to Erfurt to be with her mother's family, while Sebastian and his older brother Jacob went to live with their newlywed brother Christoph, twenty-three, an organist in Ohrdruf, a small town at the northern edge of the Thuringian Forest. With Christoph serving as music teacher as well as caregiver, Sebastian regained his emotional footing and channelled his grief into learning the keyboard.

Later in life Bach told the story of being denied a certain collection of Christoph's sheet music that was locked away every night in a cupboard. Sebastian apparently managed to slip his small hands through the grilled doors of the cupboard, roll up the music, and funnel it out. He'd copy out the scores by moonlight, so the story goes, until Christoph got wind of this and confiscated his treasure. The tale of the "moonlight manuscript," whether or not it really happened,

was recounted in later years to give the impression of a young musician who’d stop at nothing to educate himself. That much was true.

After five years Sebastian had risen to the top of his class and was old enough to strike out on his own. In March 1700, a couple of weeks before his fifteenth birthday, he set out on a journey of more than 300 kilometres, apparently on foot, perhaps toting a violin inherited from Ambrosius. He was accompanied by an older schoolmate named Georg Erdmann (who, far in the future, would provide precious clues about his travel companion). Their objective was the north German town of Lüneburg, where high school scholarships offered to boys with singing talent awaited them.

In Lüneburg Sebastian soaked up every musical influence in the vicinity, from a French orchestra employed by the local duke at his imitation-Versailles court to Hamburg, the largest city in Germany, where he travelled to hear the renowned organist Johann Adam Reinken. He also had access to the school’s library, which contained more than a thousand scores. After two years he had completed the equivalent of high school and, either not wanting to go to university or lacking the funds, he was ready to start his professional career as a musician.

Bach’s first job took him to the minor court of Weimar in 1703, where he was hired as a violinist and “court lackey.” Despite his low employment status (the job entailed non-musical tasks and valet services), Sebastian’s musicianship must have been obvious. The teenager was soon contracted to evaluate an organ in the town of Arnstadt, and in the process so awed the authorities with his playing that he was offered on the spot a job as church organist.

His new employer was Count Anton Günther II, ruler of the main town in the territory of Schwarzburg-Arnstadt. A certificate of appointment is the first historical document that sheds any light on Bach’s professional life:

> Whereas our Noble and Most Gracious Count and Master, Anton Günther, one of the Four Counts of the Empire, has caused you, Johann Sebastian Bach, to be accepted and appointed as organist in the New Church, now, therefore, you are to be true, faithful, and obedient to him, His above-mentioned Noble Grace, the Count, and especially to show yourself industrious and reliable in the office, vocation, and practice of art and science that are assigned to you; not to mix into other affairs and functions; to appear promptly on Sundays, feast days, and other days of public service in the said New Church at the organ entrusted to you; to play the latter as is fitting; to keep a watchful eye over it and take faithful care of it.

The job contract continued on a moral note that the organist was also expected “. . . in your daily life to cultivate the fear of God, sobriety, and the love of peace; altogether to avoid bad company and any distraction from your calling; and in general to conduct yourself in all things toward God, High Authority, and your superiors, as befits an honour-loving servant and organist . . .” This would challenge the most upstanding of teenagers, and it soon challenged the eighteen-year-old organist. On an August evening in 1705, Bach allegedly drew his dagger and brawled with a student bassoon player named Johann Heinrich Geyersbach.

With so many dry facts and question marks surrounding Bach’s life, every shred of documentary evidence that exists, direct or indirect, is pored over by scholars desperate for insight. Colourful accounts from his life that have survived the centuries, being few and far between, are cause for biographical excitement.

One such account, recorded in the minutes of the Arnstadt consistory, the church governing body, begins by summarizing Bach’s complaint that, as he passed the town hall late at night, Geyersbach (who despite being a student