

JOHANN GOTTFRIED BERNHARD BACH: FACT AND FICTION.  
A REMEMBRANCE AND BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE.

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Johann Gottfried Bernhard Bach was born three hundred years ago on 11 May, 1715, the sixth of seven children born to Johann Sebastian and Maria Barbara Bach, and the fourth to survive childhood. Unlike his two older brothers, very little is known of his brief life--he died suddenly on 27 May, 1739, barely twenty-four years old. Apart from the record of his baptism the day after he was born, the few known facts relate mostly to his brief career as an organist in Muehlhausen and Sangerhausen. The rest is largely supposition derived to some extent by analogy from information known about the early years of his brothers, and to some extent from what is known about his seemingly tempestuous life in his last years, supplemented by the few occasional recorded facts.

What is known?

- 1) His birth and baptism: The Baptismal records of the State Church in Weimar make note of the baptism of Johann Gottfried Bernhard on 12 May 1715. They also note his birth the previous day. His godparents were Johann Andreas Schanert, the ducal Registrar in Ohrdruf; Sophia Dorothea Emmerling, the wife of the chef of the Prince of Schwartzburg; and Johann Bernhard Bach, his father's nephew, after whom he was named.<sup>1</sup>
- 2) He attended the Thomasschule in Leipzig. He is named in a list of students at the School dating from the summer of 1730 as a 'Sekundaner', and is further described as non-resident ('Extern').<sup>2</sup>
- 3) He is thought to be one of the three sons with whom J. S. Bach took communion at the Thomaskirche on four occasions between 1728 and 1733. The other sons were Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel. Whether Bernhard may have been the lone son who accompanied his father to Communion on the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, 1734 is a matter of speculation. By that time, Gottfried Heinrich would have been ten and most likely old enough to have accompanied his father. And in 1734, Carl Philipp Emanuel was still at university in Leipzig.<sup>3</sup>
- 4) It is commonly thought that Bernhard joined his Father and two older brothers in performing the Concerto for Four Harpsichords and Orchestra (BWV 1065) in the years around 1730.
- 5) A letter from Jacob von Staehlin to his son Peter dated 1784, tells of an association von Staehlin had with the three eldest sons of J. S. Bach during the years 1731-1734. Von Staehlin recalls frequently playing flute duets with Bernhard whose character he describes as *Windig*, that is vain, frivolous, or thoughtless.<sup>4</sup>
- 6) Bernhard applied for the position of organist at the Marienkirche in Muehlhausen in early 1735, undoubtedly at the suggestion of his Father and with his Father's direct assistance. J. S. Bach wrote to two acquaintances in Muelhausen in an effort to influence the decision. The town council took their time making a decision—Bernhard apparently spent and ideas about brenhard.fourteen days in Muehlhausen in early June awaiting word following his audition. He was awarded the post on 16

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\*This article would not have happened without the great kindness of my friend Dr. Peter Wollny supplying me with information about Johann Gottfried Bernhard Bach, transcribing the two surviving original documents, and sitting patiently over the years as I voiced to him my thoughts about Bernhard. In appreciation, this article is dedicated to him.

<sup>1</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. II (Baerenreiter, Kassel, 1969), p. 58

<sup>2</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. II, p. 112

<sup>3</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. II, pp. 124-125

<sup>4</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. III (Baerenreiter, Kassel 1972), p. 408; Hans-Joachim Schulze, 'Vier unbekannte Quittungen J. S. Bachs und ein Briefauszug Jacob von Staehlins' in A. Duerr and W. Neumann (eds.), Bach-Jahrbuch 1973(Evangelische Veranstaht, Berlin 1973), pp. 88-90

June 1735.<sup>5</sup> In his first letter of application, J. S. Bach describes his son as having acquired sufficient skill in music (*so habil*) that he should be properly equipped to fulfill the duties of the position.<sup>6</sup> In a slightly later second letter to another acquaintance, he speaks again of his son's musical proficiency.<sup>7</sup>

- 7) On 2 September, 1735, Bernhard wrote a letter to the Town Council of Muelhausen thanking them for the honour of being selected for the organist post—he is unusually humble in describing his talents as modest (*wenigkeit*)—and requesting that he receive the full portion of his salary and allocation of wood for the winter without deduction of the portion that was being paid to the widow of his predecessor. Interestingly, he already shows some knowledge of jurisprudence, quoting specifics of the law of Saxony relating to similar cases.<sup>8</sup>
- 8) Bernhard evidently lived well beyond his means in Muehlhausen, running up debts which were ultimately paid by his Father.<sup>9</sup> When he left Muelhausen in early 1737, it was seemingly by choice in view of the application to Sangerhausen (see below). But one cannot exclude the possibility that his departure had become a necessity: as a result of his relations with his creditors, Muelhausen may no longer have been a comfortable place for him to live.
- 9) Already some months earlier, Bernhard and his Father had started looking for an alternate position. On 30 October and 18 November, 1736, J. S. Bach wrote a second pair of letters of recommendation for Bernhard, this time to the town council in Sangerhausen.<sup>10</sup> Bernhard gave an audition there on 13 January, 1737 and, after producing two witnesses to vouch for his competence as an organist, was awarded the position on 4 April, 1737. The town council of Leipzig gave its approval—presumably a formality—on August 20 of that year.<sup>11</sup>
- 10) On 23 February, 1737, Bernhard wrote a formal letter to the Town Council in Muehlhausen effectively submitting his resignation, explaining the reasons for his actions, and informing them of his decision to take up the post in Sangerhausen. He thanks the Council for the opportunity to serve them and extends good wishes both to them and to the citizens of Muelhausen. At the same time, he cannot resist requesting restitution for the costs he incurred in coming from Leipzig in the first place. This and the earlier letter are most likely the only surviving samples of Bernhard's handwriting and signature, though the signature is printed rather than in script.<sup>12</sup>
- 11) Bernhard took up the position in Sangerhausen in Spring 1737, and stayed there for about a year until Spring 1738, when he unexpectedly left and disappeared completely. Again he left considerable

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<sup>5</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. I (Baeranreiter, Kassel 1963), pp. 79-82 The selection process is described in an article written by Georg Thiele, 'Die Berufung Johann Gottfried Bernhard Bach nach Muelhausen als Organist an Beatae Mariae Virginis' published in 1907 in the Muelhauser Blaetter pp. 60-64. This is the only study in the secondary literature devoted to J. G. B. Bach.

<sup>6</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. I, p. 79; The Bach Reader (Norton, New York 1966), p. 134

<sup>7</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. 1, p. 81; Bach Reader, p. 135

<sup>8</sup> The letter is kept in the archives of Muelhausen. The writer would like to thank Dr. Peter Wollny for bringing the letter to his attention and providing him with a transcription.

<sup>9</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. I, p. 93; Bach Reader, p. 160; Bach-Dokumente, vol. II, p. 283

<sup>10</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. I, pp. 91-95; Bach Reader, pp. 149-151

<sup>11</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. II, p. 95

<sup>12</sup> The letter of 23 February, 1737 is reprinted as an adjunct to Peter Wollny, 'Zur Uberlieferung der Instrumentalwerke Johann Sebastian Bachs: Die Quellenbesitz Crl Philipp Emanuel Bachs' in Bach-Jahrbuch 1996 (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig 1996), pp. 7-21. The photos of Bernhard's letter appear on pp. 20-21.

debts behind in Sangerhausen which his Father refused to pay without confirmation from Bernhard who appears to have deliberately avoided making any contact with his family.<sup>13</sup>

- 12) Bernhard reappears in January, 1739, where he is recorded as having matriculated as a law student at the University of Jena on 24 January of that year. He died in Jena of a high fever on 27 May, 1739.<sup>14</sup> His place of burial is not known.

In the genealogy of the Bach family written in 1735 by J. S. Bach but surviving now only in secondary copies originating with Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Gottfried Bernhard appears as 'No. 47' in the listing of family members. He is described as the third son of J. S. Bach, born on 11 May 1715, and serving at the time as organist at the Marienkirche in Muehlhausen.<sup>15</sup> In a second copy, C. P. E. Bach added in his own hand 'Died 1739 in Jena'. Bernhard is also mentioned in a manuscript addition to the entry about his Father in a copy of Johann Gottfried Walther's Musikalisches Lexicon of 1732 now in Vienna. The unknown writer notes that Bernhard was the third son of his father, born on 11 May 1714 (*sic!*), and living at the time (1738) in Jena. An obviously later addition reports his death there on 30 (!) May 1739 from an ardent inflammatory fever (*hitzigen Fieber*).<sup>16</sup>

No other explicit references to Bernhard and his life are presently known to have survived. Most of what we know about Bernhard and his character comes not from his childhood but from the handful of references from the mid- and late 1730s. He was evidently a proficient musician, both on the flute and the keyboard. One would hardly have expected otherwise considering his family background and the implicit competition from his brothers. More relevant is the fact that he was considered thoughtless, unreliable, and frivolous by his friends. This appears indeed to have been a valid characterization of his personal life. Once he was living on his own and not in the protected atmosphere of his Father's house, he evidently took up a capricious and self-indulgent lifestyle, looking for the pleasure of the moment regardless of the cost. He had nowhere near the business sense of his brother Emanuel, living beyond his means even though- in Muehlhausen at least- his Father paid for his lodging.<sup>17</sup> He seems to have acted on impulse, indulging his life-style without any thought of the cost and of the manner in which he would repay the considerable debts that he ran up. Admittedly, we know only about the existence of debts, not how much money was involved nor how the debts were incurred. Did Bernhard spend his evenings drinking? Was he carousing with women of ill-repute? Did he gamble and lose heavily? All we know is that his Father called him 'misguided'.<sup>18</sup> There does not appear to be any evidence that his lifestyle impacted his job performance, nor that his temperament, as opposed to his lifestyle, led to problems with his superiors. It would seem that, thanks to his apparent talents, he had no difficulty holding down a job. His departure from both positions was the result of the debts that he ran up from the excesses of his personal life. His unexplained departure from Sangerhausen and subsequent disappearance suggests on the one hand that the extent of his debts may have substantial and led him to fear threats of bodily harm, and on the other, that he may have been ashamed to face his Father and the Town Council with a repetition of the situation in Muehlhausen. But there one enters the realm of speculation. He certainly appears to have been self-centered—not in the sense that his older brother Friedemann was vain and egotistical—but rather self-indulgent, seeking immediate pleasure without giving thought as to the consequences. In that context, one would hesitate to suggest that he was generous or

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<sup>13</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. I, pp. 107-110; Bach Reader, pp. 160-162

<sup>14</sup> Bach Reader, p. 162

<sup>15</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol. I, p. 261.

<sup>16</sup> Bach-Dokumente, vol II, pp. 231-232. Percy M. Young, The Bachs 1500-1850 (Dent, London, 1970), p. 116, attributes Bernhard's death to typhoid fever. Young does not specify his source for this conclusion.

<sup>17</sup> J. S. Bach's letter to Herr Klemm in Sangerhausen, The Bach Reader, p. 160.

<sup>18</sup> See Footnote 16.

considerate of others. Even in the two surviving letters, he cannot resist arguing for his supposed rights while complimenting the Town Council in Muelhausen, admittedly in the formulaic language of the time.

In addition to the known facts listed above, Bernhard would appear not to have been involved in certain family projects where his participation would normally have been expected. J. S. Bach often relied on his two older sons to help out in preparing the parts for performances of his vocal music; on the other hand, he does not seem to call at any time on Bernhard for assistance. Nor does Bernhard appear to have participated in copying the parts of the 1733 Missa which were to be presented to the Saxon royal family. This was an exclusively in-house project, undertaken solely by Bach, his wife, his two older sons, and one unknown copyist.<sup>19</sup> In addition, unlike his brother Emanuel, Bernhard does not appear to have contributed anything to the second Notenbuechlein fuer Anna Maagdalenen Bach. Indeed, he seems to have been uninvolved with most family musical projects. To be sure, until recently, no example of Bernhard's handwriting had survived, much less a piece of music explicitly known to be written by him. Accordingly, he could possibly have been one of the countless and still anonymous copyists who were called on to prepare the weekly cantata parts. Or he could have been the 'Anon. 20' who participated in the B minor Mass project.<sup>20</sup> Comparison of the handwriting on the recently rediscovered letters to the Muelhausen Town Council seems to exclude these possibilities. On the other hand, the handwriting of the copyist of the flute parts in a manuscript of the Trio Sonata (BWV 1039), Mus. Ms. Bach St 431 in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturgeschicht mit Mendelssohn Archiv, seemed to bear a faint similarity with that on the letters, suggesting that they may have been copied by Bernhard himself.<sup>21</sup> That copyist's hand appears only once more in the corpus of Bach manuscripts: in the entry of a simple chorale arrangement (BWV 510) in the second Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach.<sup>22</sup> It does not appear in any of the surviving cantata manuscripts and is not identical with that of Anon. 20.<sup>23</sup> A more recent review of the handwriting in St 431 and BWV 510, when compared with that in the two letters of 1735 and 1737, has led to serious doubts about the identification of the copyist of those two manuscripts with Bernhard.<sup>24</sup> And it has raised again the problem of trying to identify Bernhard's musical hand.

At this point, things depart from the factual and enter the realm of speculation.

Bernhard was only five when his mother Maria Barbara died unexpectedly around 5 July, 1720. Her husband was away at the time accompanying his employer to Carlsbad, Bohemia, and got the news only when he returned home from the trip. The loss of his mother had to be a tremendous shock for Bernhard, one from which he perhaps never completely recovered. His brothers and older sister were certainly also impacted by the death of their mother. Friedemann was his Father's favourite child, a fact that may have cushioned the blow for him. Emanuel was apparently more even-tempered and probably more pragmatic about the loss of his mother. Bernhard was Maria Barbara's youngest surviving child, her baby, and there may well have been a close emotional bond between them which would have made her passing considerably more painful for him. He was suddenly cast adrift emotionally, left to fend for himself with no comfortable place in which to find solace and support. To be sure, his older sister Catherina Dorothea would have had to step in to help care for her brothers along with her aunt, Maria Barbara's older sister Friedelena, who had been living with

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<sup>19</sup> Hans-Joachim Schulze and Christoph Wolff, Bach Compendium, Part IV (Peters, Leipzig, 1989), p. 1186. The unknown copyist is given the nomenclature 'Anon. 20'.

<sup>20</sup> Current research suggests that this is unlikely.

<sup>21</sup> P. Wollny, 'Ueberlieferung...' in Bach-Jahrbuch 1996, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> See Footnote 19

<sup>23</sup> This does not rule out the possibility that Bernhard may have participated in copying the cantatas of the so-called 'Picander Jahrgang', the original sources and music for most of which are lost.

<sup>24</sup> The writer extends sincere thanks to Dr. Peter Wollny who communicated his most recent thoughts on this question to him both in a conversation in June 2014 and in a communication of 27 March, 2015.

the Bachs since 1709.<sup>25</sup> Johann Sebastian himself would have been very busy with his duties while consoling himself in his grief at the same time. He most likely had little time for his youngest son.

A bit more than a year later, Bernhard was subjected to a second shock: the arrival of a new mistress in the household, Johann Sebastian took a second wife, Anna Magdalena Wilcken. Once again, the household routine would have been turned upside down. And, although Friedelena Bach was still there, it was Anna Magdalena who now ruled the household. There is nothing to suggest that Anna Magdalena was at all comparable to the wicked stepmother of fairy tales. In fact, she seems to have got along quite well with Emanuel. It seems likely that she tried to build bridges to Bernhard, and just as likely that Bernhard probably resisted. And all too soon, Anna Magdalena became pregnant and began producing children of her own. Bernhard was no longer the baby of the family. Furthermore, her oldest surviving child, Gottfried Heinrich, born in 1724, was not entirely normal mentally, and needed extra attention. Johann Sebastian does not seem to have stepped into the breach: he provided guidance by dictum and example rather than by involving himself directly in the upbringing of his children. In this respect, he was being a normal eighteenth-century father. Emotionally, Bernhard would appear to have been left increasingly to his own devices. In such a climate, it should hardly be a surprise that he grew up somewhat hedonistic, thoughtless, and lacking in consideration for others.

None of that would appear to have had any bearing on his school work. He attended the Thomasschule, and there is no surviving suggestion that his work was not at the very least adequate. He completed the course work and matriculated. But unlike his older brothers, he did not proceed immediately afterwards to University. It is possible that, being headstrong, he might have told his Father that he did not want to go on with school, leading his Father to try and find a suitable position for him. He was obviously already a competent musician. As part of his curriculum, he undoubtedly participated in one of the choruses of the Thomasschule. Perhaps he also played the flute in the school orchestra as well. In that context, he would undoubtedly have taken part in performances of his Father's music, and, especially after 1730, he may even have played the flute solos in cantatas which his Father composed or performed in Leipzig at that time. He was of course an expert performer on the keyboard and organ; he could not have otherwise qualified for and won the competition for an organist's position. There is no 'Klavierbuechlein fuer Bernhard' that would document his progress as a performer. Like his brother Emanuel, he undoubtedly learned from materials like the Inventions and Book One of the 'Wohltemperiertes Klavier' which Johann Sebastian had written with Friedemann's instruction in mind. In this respect, Johann Sebastian himself was undoubtedly Bernhard's teacher, the one aspect of his children's upbringing in which he participated actively.

Nonetheless, it is puzzling that Bernhard does not appear to have participated in the preparation of performance parts for any of his Father's music. It is also odd that, unlike his brother Emanuel, he wrote nothing which his step-mother could incorporate in her notebooks.<sup>26</sup> And it is especially curious that he did not attend University in Leipzig upon completing his studies at the Thomasschule. One suspects that Bernhard was not an easy child. He may not have been particularly fond of his step-mother, and probably resented the attention being given to all the various half-siblings that followed throughout the decade of the 1720s. He was probably hard-to-handle and un-cooperative at home, if not outright disobedient, especially as he reached puberty. In his desire to keep himself amused on his own terms, he was probably also unreliable. In that context, it would not be surprising that his Father did not trust him with the copying out of cantata parts, often a high-pressure and time-consuming job with a short deadline. And while the absence of any of his compositions in Anna Magdalena's Notebooks allows for the possibility that there was little love lost between Bernhard and his step-mother, the explanation may be a great deal simpler. There is no suggestion

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<sup>25</sup> Bach-Dokumente II, p. 127

<sup>26</sup> P. Wollny, 'Ueberlieferung' in Bach-Jahrbuch 1996, p. 11 suggests that the chorale BWV 510 might be in Bernhard's hand. Dr. Wollny presently considers this suggestion both unlikely and unsubstantiated.

or evidence that Bernhard actually composed anything while he was at Leipzig, so there would have been nothing to copy into the Notebooks. The University question is less easily answered. It has been suggested above that perhaps Bernhard had no interest in attending university while he was still in Leipzig. It is also possible that Johann Sebastian may have thought that his son's interest, character, scholastic accomplishments, and capabilities did not qualify him for university and therefore justify the effort and expense that would have been involved. Still, in the context of the last known step in Bernhard's life, his enrollment in the University of Jena, the fact that he was the only one of the three sons from Johann Sebastian's first marriage who did not attend the University of Leipzig upon completing his studies at the Thomasschule remains curious.

Nothing is known about Bernhard's whereabouts between the time he abruptly left Sangerhausen in late Spring 1738 and his appearance at the University of Jena in January of 1739. He undoubtedly knew where he was going when he left Sangerhausen, but there is no indication where he went, with whom he was staying, or how he made his living. Did he survive on remnants of the funds he had borrowed in Sangerhausen until he could find gainful employment of some sort? Did he stay with friends, or was he living on his own? Did he go and hide in a small village or in a larger town? Did he perhaps even make a liaison with a woman somewhere in south central or southeastern Germany? Did he perhaps go to Frankfurt a. O. and stay for a while with his older brother, with the understanding that Emanuel would say nothing to his Father? Did he perhaps go directly to Jena, a town in a different jurisdiction just over the border in Thuringia, and remain in hiding there until he resurfaced in January of the following year? There is no evidence and no answer to any of these questions. It is hard to believe that once he got to Jena, he did not come into some contact with the family of Johann Nikolaus Bach, a distant relative, who had been established in Jena for a number of years. Jena is a town of some significance in central Germany beyond the borders of the kingdom of Saxony. Nonetheless, Jena was not so large a place that his cousins would not have learned in some way of his presence there, if he did not in fact make direct contact and even stay with them. To the extent that may have been the case, it is very likely that Johann Sebastian would have learned of his son's whereabouts. But perhaps things had reached a point where both Bernhard and his Father wanted a reconciliation. One also wonders who, if anyone, may have sponsored him at the University of Jena and how Bernhard proposed to pay his tuition. And who took care of him in his final illness. There is certainly a strong suggestion that he may have returned into the family fold. In any case, whatever the circumstances, it appears that throughout this period up to his untimely death, Bernhard appears to have stayed out of trouble and to have turned his life around, deciding to enroll in University, a major step toward a normal life; and there is no record of his having accumulated further debts. He must indeed have been working in some capacity in order to survive both before and after he arrived in Jena. What sort of employment he may have found and whether it may have involved music—obviously what he was most suited for by training—remains a mystery. No document of any sort has turned up that might give a clue.

Nothing that Bernhard may have composed appears to have survived. In fact, we do not even know if he composed anything at all. Nor is there any information about his performance on the organ or the sort of music that he played. He would certainly have received lessons in the basics of composition from his Father and would undoubtedly have been able to create a melody from a pre-existing bass line much like his older brothers. He was probably able to improvise a fugue—that would appear to have been a basic necessity for an organist in early eighteenth-century Germany and undoubtedly one aspect of the auditions in Muelhausen and Sangerhausen. But whether he improvised chorale preludes or played existing music by his father and other important north German composers is unknown. The only musical manuscripts that were thought at one time to be in Bernhard's hand are the flute parts for BWV 1039 in D- B St 431 and the chorale (BWV 510) in Anna Magdalena's second Notebook. Peter Wollny associated St 431 with the flute duets Bernhard used to

play with Jacob von Staehlin;<sup>27</sup> he also suggested that Bernhard may even have been responsible for arranging the flute version from the unspecified original.<sup>28</sup> But all this is now suspect. It is, of course, not impossible that Bernhard may have composed some of the Bach *incerta* in German libraries, particularly among those works and manuscripts datable to the period around 1740. There is, however, no supporting evidence for such a conclusion. In the end, we simply do not know anything concrete about Bernhard's musical personality.

There is also little evidence about Bernhard's relationship with his siblings. No personal correspondence between any of the brothers has survived. He certainly played with Emanuel when they were children— but a year between them, they would undoubtedly have been close companions, whether playing games or simply exploring around Koethen and Leipzig. A close relationship with Friedemann appears to have been unlikely: Friedemann was aloof both as a child and as a grown up. There was undoubtedly some degree of closeness with Catherina Dorothea inasmuch as she had to step in and help look after her siblings when her mother died. Bernhard was probably not close with his half-siblings. Indeed, he may have resented them. Gottfried Heinrich was nine years his junior and not of sound mind. And when he left home for Muelhausen in 1735, it was too soon for Bernhard to have developed any kind of relationship with his brother Friedrich and his younger sisters. Elisabeth Juliana was seven, Friedrich only three at the time, and Christian was only born in 1735. It would seem that Bernhard's closest friend in the family was his brother Emanuel. And, notwithstanding their obvious differences in character, Emanuel seems always to have had a soft spot for his younger brother.<sup>29</sup> Peter Wollny suggests that Emanuel kept St 431 in his library throughout his life as an explicit remembrance of his brother, perhaps the only concrete memento that he had of Bernhard.

Bernhard's relationship with his Father appears to have been unsettled. He profited from his Father's teaching and undoubtedly had great respect for him both as a musician and as an authority figure. But his behavior around the house and his thoughtlessness and unreliability may well have incurred his Father's displeasure. One is not sure to what extent he may have enjoyed his Father's trust, but one suspects it was not wholehearted. Nonetheless, in the context of the relationship between a parent and his child in the eighteenth century, and in spite of all of Bernhard's character flaws, one suspects that, deep down, Johann Sebastian loved Bernhard. He didn't hesitate to call upon his friends for a favour on two separate occasions when he was trying to find a suitable position for his son. He took the trouble to travel to Muelhausen with Bernhard to perform there and consult with the authorities about improvements to the organ. He paid his son's debts willingly—if perhaps grudgingly—in Muelhausen, and he was prepared to do likewise in Sangerhausen as long as his son confirmed the validity of the claims. He was certainly disappointed and ashamed of Bernhard's poor judgment in Sangerhausen; but he was also anxious when his son disappeared without leaving any trace of his whereabouts.<sup>30</sup> And perhaps, as Percy Young speculates, he may even have journeyed to Jena to collect Bernhard's belongings after his son's untimely death in 1739.<sup>31</sup> Johann Sebastian seemed always ready to stand by the son he described as 'misguided'.<sup>32</sup> In part, his actions may have been motivated by a sense of duty and responsibility. But there was certainly an element of affection for his most likely difficult and troubled child.

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<sup>27</sup> This conclusion is not necessarily negated by Dr. Wollny's current belief that Bernhard was not likely the copyist of St. 431.

<sup>28</sup> P. Wollny, 'Ueberlieferung', *Bach-Jahrbuch 1996*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> He was very careful to insert his brother's time and place of death into the genealogy.

<sup>30</sup> See Footnotes 6 and 12 above. Also Percy Young, *Bach Family*, p. 137. There is no information surviving to indicate whether or not J. S. Bach finally paid his son's debts in Sangerhausen.

<sup>31</sup> P. Young, *Bach Family*, p. 137

<sup>32</sup> *Bach Reader*, p. 160



Bernhard appears to have been strong-willed, impetuous, thoughtless, self-indulgent, and probably even selfish. He was eminently talented musically, as would have been expected of any member of the Bach family. Most anything else that can be said about him—and that has been suggested above—is speculation: speculation in an effort to understand and connect the few facts about his life that are known without question. It is unfortunate that no eye-witness reports survive about his organ playing, about the kind of music he performed, about his ability as an improviser. It is unfortunate that no music he may have written has survived, allowing the historian to ascertain whether he was a conservative like his Father and oldest brother, or forward-looking like his brother Emanuel. It is unfortunate that there is no concrete information available as to where he disappeared in 1738, what he did and how he lived during that time, and how he set out to turn his life around. It is also unfortunate that there is no concrete evidence regarding a possible reconciliation with his Father during that time. It is sad to think that, based on the little surviving evidence, he died alone, detached from his family and still at odds with them. It is sad to think that his short life was so deeply troubled. And it is sad to think that historians and musicologists gloss over him and his life as if it were but a footnote in the biography of his Father and his siblings. It is proper that, on this, his three-hundredth birthday, one pauses to try and come to an understanding of his complex character and to imagine what might have been had he not been carried away by a fever so young, or how he might have turned out had he not lost his mother at such an early age. For a brief moment, let us hope that, no matter how little we know about his life and no matter how uncomplimentary that little might be, we can pause and celebrate Johann Gottfried Bernhard Bach as the worthy son of his Father that he might have been.