

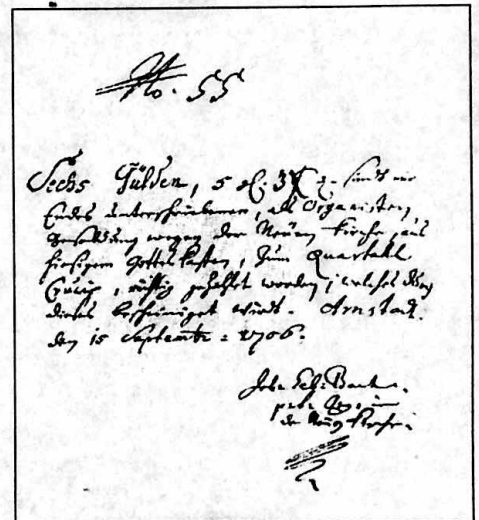
Bach, the church musician

One church granted him a month's vacation to go to a town 200 miles away to hear Dietrich Buxtehude, one of the most famous organists of the time. He walked for days to get there, and he did not return to his job for three months. The church committee was upset because they had to hire a replacement organist until Bach turned up.

Many towns in Germany had important churches, and Bach began his career at the age of 18 with a series of jobs as a church musician, playing the organ and composing music for church services. He was not always happy, because he was generally at loggerheads with the church committees. Some parishioners did not like his innovative music, and sometimes Bach did not like the duties he was expected to perform.



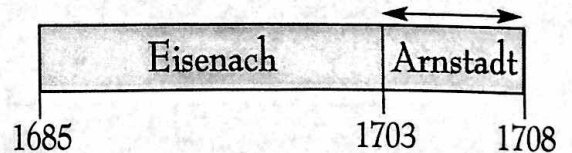
Bach was a great organ player, which served him well during his first jobs as a church musician



A page of the Arnstadt church registry dated September 15, 1706

This is a copy of one of Bach's contracts as a church organist

Various jobs as a church musician



Bach, the court musician

Germany in those days was not a united country as it is now, but a collection of small independent states called principalities. Each principality was governed by a prince, or duke, or some other nobleman. Each of these noblemen was surrounded by his court and each wanted his own court musicians. Bach's first job as a court musician was with the Duke of Weimar in 1708. He worked at Weimar for nine years, but he became angry when the Duke hired someone else to be the Kapellmeister, or music director for the court. So he began looking for another position and found a new job as Kapellmeister at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen.

Prince Leopold was fond of chamber music, and while Bach remained at Cöthen he wrote a great deal of music for keyboard and small ensembles. He also wrote the music that became known as the Brandenburg Concertos because he dedicated them to the Margrave of Brandenburg.

Chamber music originally meant music to be played in a room in a house. Nowadays the term refers to music written for a very small number of instruments, like duets, trios, or quartets, for example.



J. S. Bach, by Johann Ernst Reusch

This is Bach at the age of 30, when he was director of the orchestra at Weimar.

The Margrave of Brandenburg

The Margrave was not very interested in the six concertos Bach wrote for him, and the score was lost until he died and his library was sold. One of Bach's students found the music and bought it very cheaply. Today the Brandenburg Concertos are considered some of Bach's best work.



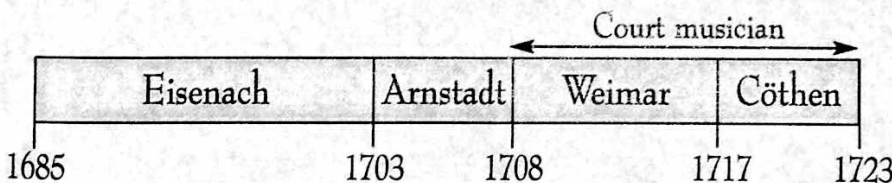
The Duke of Weimar, Bach's employer for nine years

When Bach told the Duke he was leaving, the Duke was so angry that he imprisoned him for a month.



Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen

The Prince encouraged Bach to write a lot of chamber music.



Leipzig: St. Thomas's School and the Collegium Musicum



J. S. Bach, by Haussmann

Bach was 62 years old in this painting.

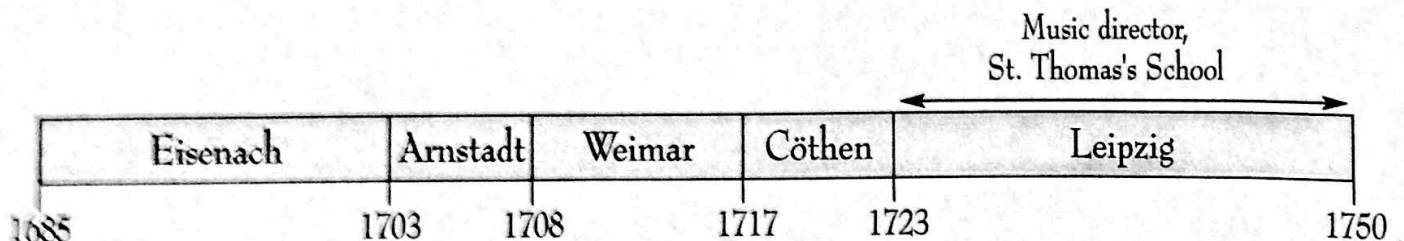
Much of Bach's *Mass in B minor*, one of his most important works, is composed of movements from earlier cantatas. Most of his harpsichord concertos are reworkings of Vivaldi's violin concertos.

In 1723, when he was 38 years old, Bach moved to Leipzig, where he remained until his death. He became the city's Director of Music, and Cantor at St. Thomas's School. The School had trained choirboys for centuries, and the Cantor, or choirmaster, was responsible for the boys' education in both music and Latin. Bach had to supply the four major churches in Leipzig with choirs and music for Sunday services, as well as other services like weddings and funerals, so of course he wrote a great deal of **sacred music**. Often he wrote a different cantata for every Sunday. He also composed special music for important religious holidays. Bach was also the director of the Collegium Musicum, an orchestra made up of students and professional musicians that gave weekly performances in a Leipzig coffee house. He composed a great deal of **secular music** for these concerts.

Bach was very busy during these years and he sometimes rewrote compositions, his own and other composers' too, in order to save himself some time. This might seem like cheating, but it was a fairly common practice in those days. It has been suggested that Bach's technique of imitating, adapting and adding new bits to a previous composition is nearly as creative as original composition.

Sacred music is religious in nature and is usually written to be used in church services.

Secular music is music written for worldly situations, rather than for the church.

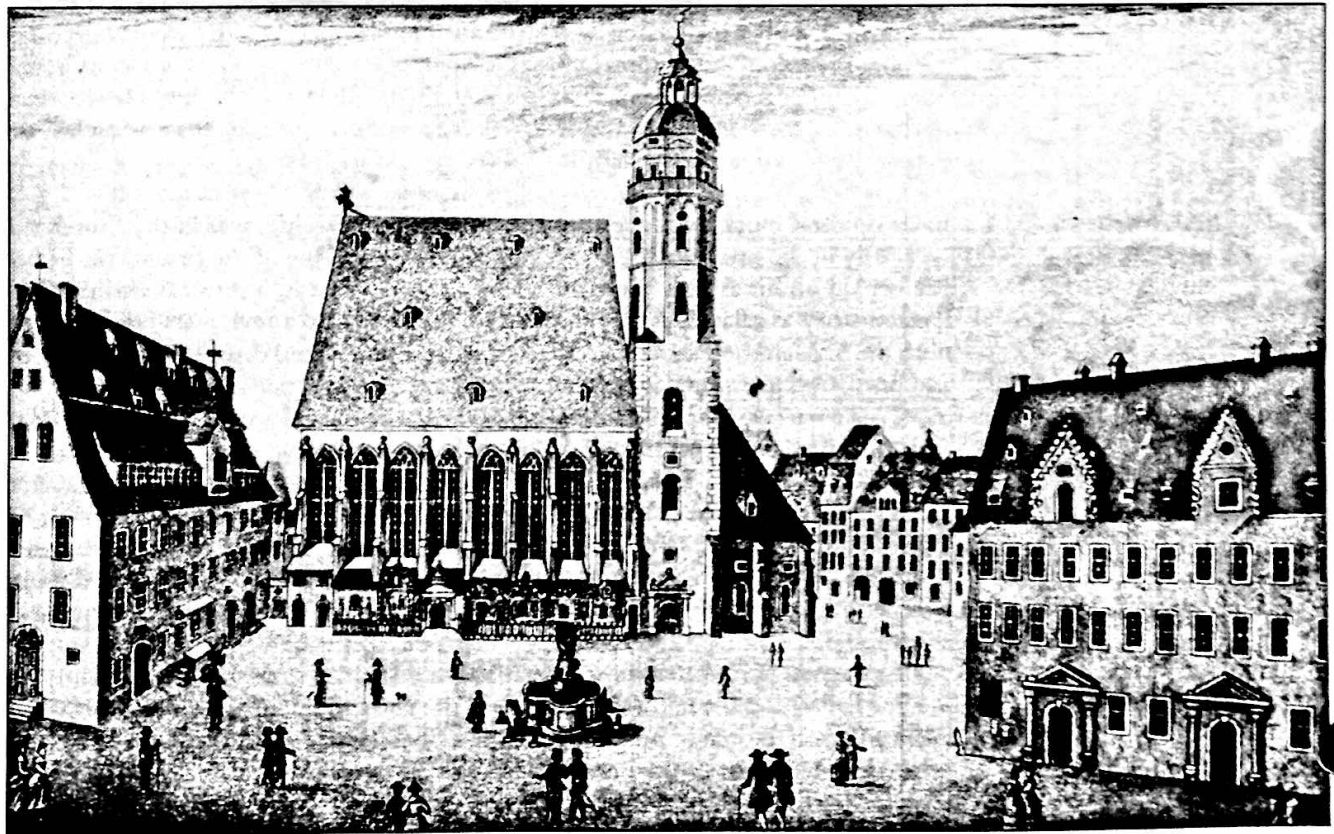


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These two engravings show St. Thomas's Church and its school in Leipzig. The school is the smaller building behind and right next to the church.



Major works

Oddly enough, Bach himself never gave the *French* and *English Suites* those names. A suite is a French form anyway, and the *English Suites* got their name because one copy that dates from Bach's time has "Made for the English" written on it.

It is useful to think about Bach's music in terms of the places where he worked. For instance, Bach's years at the court of the Duke of Weimar produced a great deal of organ music. The organ at the court was the best instrument that Bach had ever played on, and in the ten years he spent there, he composed some of the most beautiful organ music ever written. During his time at Weimar, Bach also wrote the series of keyboard suites now called the *French Suites*.

When Bach moved to Cöthen, he had an orchestra to conduct, and the Prince was not interested in elaborate sacred music. A great deal of chamber music, including the violin concertos, the sonatas for flute and for violin, and the *Brandenburg Concertos*, were all written while Bach was in Cöthen. He also composed the *Cello Suites* and keyboard concertos, as well as the sonatas and partitas for solo violin.

Bach's years in Leipzig are remarkable for his output of religious works. He wrote five complete sets of cantatas, 295 of them, each containing a cantata for every Sunday in the church year. About 200 still exist. He also wrote oratorios and passions for special days in the religious calendar.

The Coffee Cantata, one of Bach's secular cantatas, contains an aria that tells about a girl addicted to coffee and her father's intention of curing her by finding her



When Bach became director of the Collegium Musicum, his interests began to turn more towards secular music. He composed a number of chamber cantatas, as well as a great deal of harpsichord music for their weekly concerts.

A passion is an oratorio that tells the story of Jesus Christ's sufferings on the cross.

The manuscript of the *Coffee Cantata*

Bach's "theoretical" music

Bach wrote *The Well-Tempered Music Clavier* as an argument for the idea of equal temperament, a notion that was not new, but which became fully developed during Bach's time.

Equal temperament is a way of getting around the fact that F# and Gb, or B and Cb for instance, even though they are close in pitch, are not really, scientifically, the same note. If pianos were really accurate, they would need twice as many strings and keys, and a pianist would never be able to play all the notes in an octave with one hand. What a piano tuner does is to set the sound of the string that is struck for F# and Gb somewhere in between the correct sound for each note, so that it will sound just about right for both. This effectively divides an octave into 12 equal semi-tones.

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* contains a series of preludes and a series of fugues in all 12 major keys and all 12 minor keys, or 48 pieces in all. In fact, "The 48" has become a kind of nickname for the music in the two books. Others refer to the books as the "Old Testament" for keyboard players. The pieces were originally played on the clavichord or harpsichord. Nowadays they are also played on the piano and every advanced pianist learns some of them.

Bach's last major work was *The Art of the Fugue*, another theoretical study. It is believed that Bach intended it to show how one simple musical subject could be expressed in all the different ways of writing fugues and canons. No one is sure whether he ever intended the movements to be performed, or for which instrument they were intended. The work was still unfinished when he died in 1750.

The concept of equal temperament may be easier to understand if you are sitting at the piano. If you are having trouble visualizing how it works, ask your music teacher to explain the idea to you.

Bach also invented a new way of playing the keyboard. Instead of using the three middle fingers held straight, he used all the fingers including the thumb, and insisted that they be in a curved position. This allowed the music to be played legato, or with a smooth transition between the notes.



This is the original manuscript for the *Prelude and Fugue*. Notice the corrections at the bottom of the first page.

Important pieces to remember

Organ: *The Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, and over 150 choral preludes

Keyboard dance suites: *The French Suites*, *The English Suites*, and the *Partitas*

Chamber Music: *The Brandenburg Concertos*, violin concertos, sonatas for flute, the sonatas and partitas for solo violin, the *Cello Suites*, and keyboard concertos

Oratorios and Passions: *The Easter Oratorio*, *The Christmas Oratorio*, *St. John Passion*, *St. Matthew Passion*

Other music: Books I and II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, *The Art of the Fugue*, and other compositions, like *The Goldberg Variations*, that were primarily intended as intellectual exercises to work out Bach's musical theories

