

VOLUME ECCESSIVO DAL PRESTITO

Great Composers □ Great Artists
P O R T R A I T S

STEWART BUETTNER

and

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John Christian Bach

A glance at Gainsborough's portrait suffices to indicate that [John Christian] Bach moved with easy grace in a society to which his profession was ordinarily admitted on another footing. The elegant distinction of his dress, his confident pose, betoken a man accustomed to the drawing-rooms of the "Nobility and Gentry," the patrons of his enterprises.

CHARLES SANFORD TERRY

In the 1740s and '50s, mention of the name Bach was more likely to bring to mind one or the other of Johann Sebastian Bach's sons, especially Carl Philipp Emanuel or Johann (later John) Christian. They were indeed born at the end of an age in which their great father represented a late flourishing of baroque style. If his music was considered old-fashioned and "learned" by many contemporaries, that of the youngest son, John Christian, clearly points to the future, to the age of Mozart.

After his father's death, the fifteen-year-old John Christian Bach (1735–1782), already an aspiring musician, was sent to Berlin to live and study with his brother Emanuel, harpsichordist to King Frederick, "The Great." John's musical education was furthered by the active musical life at the Prussian court, at which the king's taste for Italian music set the style. By 1756 we find John in Milan and Bologna, studying with (Padre) Giovanni Battista Martini whose fame as composer and teacher attracted pupils from many countries. A friendship, based on mutual esteem, developed between the two musicians.

These years in Italy brought successes to the young composer, chiefly as a writer of Italian operas. He also was appointed organist at Milan cathedral. But like Handel before him (and Haydn after him), he was attracted to England, regarded as a country where foreign musicians, Germans and Italians in particular, could find ample opportunities.

He arrived in London in 1762 and soon became music master to Queen Sophie Charlotte, herself a German princess. Italian opera formed an important part of London's musical life; John Christian soon was able to bring out his own works in that genre. He also organized public concerts and composed and published works for the then-new fortepiano. When the boy wonder Mozart appeared in London in 1764 he was befriended by Bach; in time a warm friendship developed. Later their paths were to cross again on the Continent.

During Bach's years in England, Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788) was establishing

himself as a foremost painter of landscapes and portraits. He was an original member of the Royal Academy, founded in 1768. Commissions from the royal family testify to his reputation; he also is said to have given drawing lessons to the queen. Success is also reflected in the steadily rising fees his portraits (of which he did about 800) commanded, fees close to those charged by Sir Joshua Reynolds, his lifelong rival. But such success also had its drawbacks. Gainsborough, who was very fond of music and a capable performer on several instruments, wrote to his musician-friend William Jackson that he had to devote too much time to such commissions, and that he would rather

take my viol-da-gamba and walk off to some sweet village, where I can paint landscapes and enjoy the fag-end of life in quietness and ease. But these fine ladies and their tea drinkings, dancings, husband-huntings etc, will fob me out of the last ten years. . . . But we can say nothing. . . . only, d— it I hate . . . being confined in harness to follow the track whilst others ride in the waggon . . . gazing at green trees and blue skies without half my *Taste*. (Millar, 11)

At times, Bach would listen to Gainsborough's playing, and after interrupting him "with an occasional ironical 'Bravo!' would push the painter from his seat at the harpsichord, to deliver one of his own, more inspired improvisations" (Whitley, 120). Gainsborough's passionate love of music was noted by several of his friends and acquaintances. William Jackson thought that at times it exceeded his devotion to painting.

Gainsborough's portrait of Bach was painted at the request of Padre Martini—a request that surely honored the pupil. It must have come around 1776; apparently the portrait was to be hung at the Liceo Musicale in Bologna.

The portrait pleased the composer greatly. He must have asked Gainsborough to provide a replica, for the portrait, still in Bologna today, is virtually identical with one Bach kept for himself, which is now in the collection of Lord Hillingdon.

In this rather formal portrait Bach seems to listen to, or observe, someone to the viewer's left. The facial expression is firm, somewhat questioning, but not unfriendly. Many of Gainsborough's half portraits, such as this one, are formally posed, while his full-size portraits tend to be more relaxed, especially those he painted of his friends and acquaintances. Aristocratic patrons, one supposes, preferred a more traditional, formal rendering.

Gainsborough portrayed other musicians. His painting of Carl Friedrich Abel is of the more casual kind: Abel, a friend, was the last great player of the viola da gamba, an instrument that



soon was to disappear from general use. In Gainsborough's painting (1777) he is seated, writing music, smiling, with his gamba at his side. Another musician-friend, Johann Christian Fischer, was an oboist of international fame. He, too, is shown with his instrument, friendly and relaxed, leaning on a keyboard instrument by the London maker Joseph Merlin.

Joan Reis recently has called attention to a possible third portrait of Bach by Gainsborough, previously thought to represent David Middleton, surgeon-general to King George III.

John Christian Bach by Thomas Gainsborough (c. 1776), oil on canvas, 72 × 62 cm, Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale, Bologna