Sebastian Bach
The Boy from Thuringia
Study Guide

By Judy Wilcox
Map of the major cities Bach visited

Bach’s World and Place in Musical History

Middle Ages 450 – 1450
Renaissance 1450 – 1600
Baroque (J.S. Bach 1685 – 1750) 1600 – 1750
Classical 1750 – 1820
Romantic 1820 – 1900
20th Century or New Music 1900 – Present
Bach is born in Eisenach, Germany (March 21, the first day of spring). He is christened two days later on March 23. George Frideric Handel of Germany and Domenico Scarlatti of Italy are also born this year.

Peter the Great becomes Czar of Russia.

Massachusetts absorbs Plymouth Colony and is given a new charter.

Bach’s mother, Elisabeth Lämmerhirt, dies.

Bach’s father, Johann Ambrosius, dies, and Sebastian moves in with Christoph (his brother) in Ohrdruff.

Bach attends the Lyceum, a school in Ohrdruff.

The Court of Versailles in France becomes the model for other European courts.

A crown treaty is established between the Emperor Leopold I and Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg. Unmarried women are taxed in Berlin. John Wesley, the preacher, is born.

Paper manufacturing begins in North America.
Chapter I – In the Thuringian Village of Eisenach

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What talent did nearly all members of the Bach family seem to share?
   • A talent for music, or musical ability, p. 11.

2. Sebastian’s father taught him about his great-great-grandfather, Veit Bach, who took his lute with him to work. Do you remember what his occupation was?
   • A miller, p. 13.

3. The Bach family did something annually. What was it, and why did the whole village of Eisenach enjoy it?
   • They had a family reunion, and it was a musical feast for the village as well as the family, pp. 14, 18.

4. Sebastian sang in a scholars’ choir that sang the same songs as an important Reformation leader in church history. Can you think of his name?
   • Martin Luther, p. 20.

5. What sad events changed Sebastian’s life when he was a young boy?
   • His parents died, p. 20.

6. Sebastian went to live with his brother Christoph, but Christoph was very strict about something. What were his rules, and how did Sebastian respond to them?
   • His rules were to not practice on the clavier for more than an hour a day, and to not use the music books from his library. Sebastian responded by sneaking into the library, taking the book to his room, and copying the music for himself at night, pp. 21–24.

7. In spite of Christoph’s confiscation of Sebastian’s copy of the music, Sebastian had done something remarkable in the six-month process. What was it?
   • He had memorized the music of the masters he was copying, p. 28.

8. As the chapter ends, where is Sebastian preparing to go?
   • Choir school at St. Michael’s in Lüneburg, p. 29.
Character Qualities

*Hospitality (pp. 14–15)* – The Bach family was known as a hospitable family. Hospitality means being friendly and generous in entertaining guests and visitors. The family reunion was just one example of the Bach hospitality in action. It was a quality that Sebastian maintained throughout his life (p. 126).

*Family-Oriented (pp. 12, 14–15)* – Again, the reunion attests to the importance of family in the Bach household. The very fact that Ambrosius took time to teach Sebastian how to play the violin also shows the significance of family unity and activity. This trait is something that Sebastian learned well from his father because he acted in the same manner with his own family (p. 105).

*Sense of Humor and Wit* – Sebastian himself was known as “a merry and companionable fellow.” In this chapter, the portion about the quodlibet of the fat cow that would not go to pasture and the quiet flowing river (pp. 15–16) hints at Sebastian’s love for laughter and merry songs.

*Industriousness (pp. 23–24)* – Sebastian was not afraid of being constantly or regularly occupied, of keeping busy. In this chapter, we see that busyness at an early age when Sebastian was willing to sacrifice sleep for the sake of copying Christoph’s manuscripts by moonlight. Sebastian was also unafraid of a two-
hundred mile hike to St. Michael’s in Lüneburg in order to attend choir school. Now if that’s not industriousness, then it is at least a fantastic exercise routine!

**Tidbits of Interest**

*Pages 9, 11 –* Eisenach (pronounced \eye-zen-ahk\), the village, nestles on the edge of the Thuringian forest. It is also the location of Wartburg Castle, where Martin Luther (1483–1546) once sought refuge from Pope Leo X and other critics from the Roman Catholic Church. Wartburg Castle is where Luther translated the New Testament into German, making it available to the common man for study and meditation. Remember that Luther emphasized having a personal, living, Bible-based faith in Jesus Christ. He was himself a musician, declaring that music was second unto the Gospel itself, so that many of the hymns from the Lutheran hymnal became a source of stimulation for Bach’s works. In Eisenach, Bach sang in the scholars’ choir, which was an all-boy choir in which boys sang even the soprano parts. Often, they sang chorales, which were German Lutheran hymn-tunes, many composed or arranged by Luther himself.

*Page 9 –* Thuringia (pronounced \th(y)u-rin-jeeh\) is the most westerly of the old East German states. It includes wooded heights and slate mountains. It remained Sebastian’s favorite region to visit (p. 114).

*Page 11 –* St. George’s Church in Eisenach is a Lutheran church where, at each christening, families are still informed that Johann Sebastian Bach was once christened in the same sanctuary. Christening is the ceremony of baptizing and naming a baby.

*Page 11 –* Sebastian is the name Bach is called most frequently in Wheeler and Deucher’s book. There were 53 individuals in the Bach family who were named Johann. Oh, and five of his own sons were named Johann, and two of his daughters were named Johanna! So you can see why children were often called by their middle names to eliminate some confusion.