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Johann Sebastian Bach 1685–1750

*J*ohann Sebastian Bach was one of the greatest German musicians of the early eighteenth century. He came from a musical family, which had been important in Germany for nearly two hundred years before his birth. Four of Bach's sons—Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christian, Johann Christoph, and Wilhelm Friedemann—also became composers and maintained the family's fame well into the eighteenth century.

The years in which Bach wrote have come to be known as the Baroque period in music. The term *baroque* comes from an old Italian word, *barocco*, which means “imperfect pearl.” The people who lived after Bach did not at first understand or appreciate the music of his period and scornfully called it imperfect—*barocco*. Today, when the whole world loves and honors this great music, the term *baroque* has come to mean the years 1600–1750 and simply refers to the kind of music written in that period.

Composers of the Baroque era originated many of the kinds of music still written today. Large vocal forms such as the opera, the oratorio, and the cantata were invented during this period. Also, for the first time in history, instrumental music became as important as vocal music; keyboard sonatas and suites, chamber music, the concerto, and the overture all originated in the Baroque era. Each European country emphasized certain kinds of music and musical styles. The Italians were primarily singers and string-instrument players; their composers developed a kind of lyric vocal melody, which has been called the *bel canto* style (“beautiful singing” style); they also were the first to develop the energetic, powerful qualities of a string orchestra (no one has ever made better violins than Italian makers such as Stradivarius). The French excelled in harpsichord music of an elegant, decorative sort, full of ornaments such as trills, turns, mordents, and appoggiaturas. The Germans were famous for keyboard music of spectacular brilliance, especially for the organ; they also contributed a highly developed contrapuntal style, of which the fugue was a favorite form.

The Prelude in E Minor comes from *Twelve Little Preludes*. The Allemande and Gigue come from a fragmentary suite in the music book, which Bach prepared for his son Wilhelm Friedemann.

Gigue

From *Suite in A Major*, S. 824

Johann Sebastian Bach

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