

III - THE MUSIC

The namesake of its title naturally determined the type of music that the Denton Bach Society would perform and promote. But the name "Bach" is a rich and complex musical concept.

Most obviously the word refers to the man: Johann Sebastian Bach, composer, who was born in Germany in 1685 and who died sixty-five years later in 1750. Even to the lay musician, or to any literate citizen, the name conjures up a singularly important figure in the world's musical history--unfamiliar, perhaps, to many, but truly a superstar. To classical music lovers and performers, his supremacy is taken for granted.

Or, the name may refer to the Bach family of musicians and composers, extending over several generations, and numbering by some persons' count to around twenty! Johann Sebastian Bach was prolific both as father and as composer. He sired twenty children in two marriages. Several of his sons gained prominence as composers in their own right, thereby introducing a happy but substantial complexity into the nomenclature of the world of classical music.

The name Bach can also be associated with a type of music which defines a period of musical tradition. This is known as the Baroque style, or era, which has counterparts in architecture, furniture, and painting.

The Denton Bach Society incorporated all three of these meanings for establishing its musical fare. It was understood from the outset that its repertoire would not be limited to J. S. Bach, or to the Bach family, but it would also include Bach's contemporaries, and some of his antecedents and successors.

Early on, the Society adopted a programming schedule that was to include three types of music in its regular season. The first concert, usually in October, would feature an all-Bach program. This would be followed by a Christmas program, of various possible traditions, and the season would close with a major, Baroque-style work in the late Spring. Works of various composers could be woven into the latter two concerts, or added to the seasonal offerings.

And this has generally been the pattern the Society has followed.

During the first two seasons, 1976-77 and 1977-78, the Denton Bach Society restricted itself entirely to Johann Sebastian Bach in its selections. The next season, however, it included several of Bach's predecessors. In the program notes for the April 29, 1979, concert we read as follows: "Bach's debt to the music of Buxtehude, Couperin, and Vivaldi, and his interaction with the life and work of Telemann...[are] well documented. In today's program we present several of these models together with Bach works having a more or less precise

connection with them." From that point, the intent clearly was to branch out and to sample the vast, and often unfamiliar, works of the early classical period.

Altogether, over its twenty-year history, the Denton Bach Society has performed approximately 400 works by perhaps a hundred composers. While it is impossible to be precise, since program notes for several concerts were unavailable, 377 works by 86 different composers can specifically be identified.

One hundred forty-four of these 377 pieces were works by J. S. Bach (38 percent, for the statistically minded). Twelve works were written by seven other members of the Bach family, including two each by three sons--Karl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christoph Frederick, and Wilhelm Friedmann--and one by a fourth son, Johann Christian. One was written by Heinrich Bach, brother of J. S. Bach's grandfather, and three were by Johann Michael Bach, Heinrich's son. One was composed by yet another Bach, distinguished in part by being listed simply as Johann. He was born in 1604 and died in 1673, twelve years prior to J. S. Bach's birth.

Some J. S. Bach music has been sung every season. The number of Bach pieces performed declined significantly after the Society's first eight seasons, but it has held steady thereafter. One hundred five (73 percent) of the 144 J. S. Bach compositions were performed during the first ten years, as against 39 (27 percent) in the second ten.

Allowing that several program notes from the first years are missing (when more emphasis was given to singing Bach compositions than in later years), it nevertheless is evident that more than one-half of the choir's offerings have actually been by composers other than Johann Sebastian Bach, or by other members of the Bach family. Of the 377 pieces identified in the programs, 221, about 59 percent, were composed by seventy-eight persons other than Bach family members.

Even so, the Denton Bach Choir has sung over forty Bach Cantatas, and, according to a recent publicity brochure, "all of the major choral works of Bach except the *Mass in B Minor*..."

Obviously, a numerical approach does not lend itself well to musical description or analysis, given the great variety of types of works that fall under the rubric of "musical composition." A few concrete examples can provide a better, even if inadequate, sense of the sweep of musical offerings and accomplishments by the Denton Bach Choir and Bach Orchestra. Three paragraphs from a recent note about the Denton Bach Society, anonymous and undated, will illustrate the point:

"In the past the Christmas programs have consisted of such pieces as Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* performed in a three year cycle, the traditional

German Christmas program, an unusual but extremely successful Hispanic Christmas featuring...Dave Brubeck's *La Fiesta de la Posada* in December of 1991. A French Christmas program was offered in December of 1993.

"The May concerts have featured such works as Mozart's *Coronation Mass* (May 2, 1982), Bach's *The Passion According to St. John* in 1983, followed two years later by Bach's masterwork *The Passion According to Matthew* in 1985. Other notable May concerts have been George Frederic Handel's *Jephtha* in May of 1986, and in 1987 the Society performed Mozart's *Requiem* for their May concert. Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde* was performed in May of 1993...

"The traditional October concert of Bach Cantatas was sometimes alternated with other programs, such as in 1986 when the Chorus and Soloists performed Giacomo Carissimi's *Historia Divitis* and Johannes Brahms' *Liebeslieder Walzer, OP. 52.*"

But the name of the game is still Bach. The musical universe of Johann Sebastian Bach is vast, and that of his era inexhaustible. The Denton Bach Society in its first twenty years has already offered a significant slice of this musical heritage to Denton and the North Texas area. According to Henry Gibbons, current Musical Director, we can expect the Society to continue to expand the variety of its offerings, perhaps even to include some works from the more recent Romantic period. But we can also be assured of a continued flow of works by the Master.