



RARE FINDS

BACH'S FAVORITE SON

What Went Wrong?

JOSEPH SMITH

Scholars agree that Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–84), Johann Sebastian's eldest and favorite son, led a strangely disordered life, failing to fulfill his great abilities. Some of his actions seem perversely self-destructive.

Here are a few examples. During Friedemann's long tenure as "music director" (primarily church organist and composer) for the city of Halle, occupying armies extorted a "protection" tax from its citizens. (This meant, of course, protection from themselves—otherwise they burn the city down.) During a temporary lull in the hostilities, Friedemann not only asked the church board to exempt him from the tax, he also chose this unpropitious moment



The Church at Halle

to request a raise that had once been promised him "should the conditions of the church improve." The church, like all of Halle, was in terrible want. The church elders, outraged by his presumption, granted neither exemption nor raise—and instead threatened to fire him! He almost escaped his Halle position when Darmstadt offered him the desirable appointment of court Kapellmeister. However, Darmstadt's policy was to present the official decree upon the conductor's arrival, and Friedemann kept delaying

his appearance, protesting that he had not received the decree in advance. Sometimes, too much prudence can be imprudent, and the job slipped through his fingers. Eventually, he simply quit the Halle job without notice, this time with nothing lined up to replace it. He stayed on as a free-lance for six years. At the age of sixty, however, he started to travel, presumably seeking some stable position. After trying Braunschweig, he suddenly decided to move to Berlin. (In his haste, he left behind most of his collection of J. S. Bach's autograph scores to be auctioned. It seems shocking that he could have allowed the collection to be thus dispersed.) In Berlin, the musical Princess Amalia was deeply impressed by his abilities, and her court composer, Kirnberger, who had been a student of Johann Sebastian, befriended him. Friedemann repaid this by badmouthing him to the Princess, hoping to get him fired and gain the position of court composer for himself. Naturally, he ended up alienating not only Kirnberger, but the Princess as well. Remaining in Berlin, in pecuniary distress, he continued

to be revered for his brilliant organ improvisations, proving that his musical inspiration was intact, but he seems to have lost the sustained discipline needed for actual composition.

What was his problem? Was Friedemann damaged by his father's high expectations? Traumatized by his father's remarriage, so soon after the death of his mother? (His stepmother was the Anna Magdalena Bach of the famous little notebook—the source for much popular teaching material.) These may have



Wilhelm Friedemann Bach

been contributing factors, but still, they seem insufficient. In his celebrated 1954 study *The Bach Family*, Karl Geiringer writes, "For some of his decisive actions it has—in the absence of clear evidence—been impossible to find a real clue." But I believe that we find the clue in one of Dr. Geiringer's own statements: "He did not learn from his failures; they threw him into a deep depression which was suddenly succeeded by a bout of unfounded optimism leading him to highly irresponsible actions." The process of defining bipolar disorder (formerly known as manic-depressive illness) has been long, complicated, and extremely contentious. There is no reason to suppose that Geiringer was even aware of the condition, but his remarks about Friedemann virtually define it. If my hunch is correct (a hunch based on my close association with more than one bipolar individual), this disorder might be the key to the strangest aspects of Friedemann's behavior. For instance, his demand for a raise at Halle and later his fantasy that he somehow deserved to seize Kirnberger's post in Berlin would be consistent with the grandiosity of mania. On the other hand, his failure to get himself to Darmstadt when so much depended on it would be consistent with depression, in which case, his qualms about the decree would supply a convenient rationalization.

Friedemann's *12 Polonaises* for keyboard have a special fascination. They do not seem to belong to the baroque or the classical era. Rather, in the absence of overtly contrapuntal texture, they reveal the kinship between the chromatic harmonies of J. S. Bach and the chromatic harmonies of the romantic era—still many years in the future. ■

