

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach  
Symphony in G, Wq. 183:4

CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH (the second surviving son of J.S. Bach) was born in Weimar, Germany, on March 8, 1714, and died in Hamburg on December 14, 1788. The Symphony in G was completed in Hamburg on June 12, 1776, and was first performed on August 16 or 17 that year, under the composer's direction, in Hamburg's Konzertsaal auf dem Kamp. It was published in Leipzig in 1780.

THE SCORE OF THIS SYMPHONY IN G calls for two flutes, two oboes, one bassoon, two horns, strings, and continuo. Mark Kroll is the continuo harpsichordist at these performances.

In his lifetime, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was far more famous than his father had ever been. Those who mentioned "Bach" in the middle of the eighteenth century were usually referring to the son, not the father. Musician Bachs had been prominent for several generations, and three of Emanuel Bach's brothers enjoyed respectable, even prominent positions as Kapellmeisters and composers. He must have known that his father was an incomparable musician and he took good care of his legacy; yet he never displayed the anxiety of influence that such a giant shadow might have caused him to suffer, and for a couple of generations he played the role of north Germany's leading composer with confidence and distinction.

For a man who lived to be seventy-four he composed very few symphonies. Keyboard sonatas, fantasias, variations, concertos, choral music, and chamber music poured from his pen, but symphonies were rarer, partly because the form was more assiduously cultivated in the south of Germany and in the Austrian territories than in the north, and because as a prominent keyboard player and pedagogue, he preferred to feature himself as soloist in a concerto than to lead a symphony from the keyboard.

There were eight modest symphonies composed during the thirty years that Bach was in the service of Frederick the Great in Berlin. After his move to Hamburg in 1768, he composed a set of six symphonies (for strings alone) in 1773 for Baron Gottfried van Swieten, the Austrian ambassador to Prussia, who was later to play an important part in the lives of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven (all three!). Then in 1775 he was commissioned by an unknown patron to write four symphonies for the full orchestral complement of the day, including flutes, oboes, and horns. (It is the fourth of these that is being heard here this week.) In the remaining dozen years of his life, at a time when both Haydn and Mozart were composing some of their best-known symphonies, Emanuel Bach showed no interest in the form.

In a letter to his father's first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach wrote on May 14, 1776: "I am working on orchestral symphonies, on commission, as one must." He did not reveal the source of the commission, but it may have been the Prussian Crown Prince, later to be Friedrich Wilhelm II, an enlightened monarch who preferred playing the cello to playing politics, and in whose honor both Mozart and Beethoven devised especially rewarding cello parts in their chamber music.

The four symphonies were finished in June 1776 and first performed two months later. Hamburg's newspaper reported: "The day before yesterday in the Konzertsaal auf dem Kamp, Bach rehearsed four grand symphonies that he had recently composed. The orchestra was perhaps the largest Hamburg has seen in some time. It consisted of some forty of our professional musicians with a few amateurs, who performed these incomparable, unique symphonies with such precision and spirit that Herr Bach publicly commended their skill and the audience gave the liveliest expressions of their approval."

The symphonies were published in Leipzig in 1780 under the title "Orchestra Symphonies in twelve obligato parts," drawing attention to their rich scoring for seven winds, four string parts, and continuo. The cellos and basses are generally doubled by the continuo keyboard's left hand, but the cellos occasionally find themselves on an independent line, as at the end of the slow movement in the present work.

Although Viennese symphonies at this time had mostly expanded to four movements by inserting a minuet between the Andante and the finale, Bach felt no inclination to enlarge the standard three-movement plan; indeed, he consolidated these symphonies by running on without a break from one movement to the next. Both the first and second movements close with a cadence that prepares for the start of the next. There is also, in this G major symphony, a consolidation in the first movement by devoting most of the musical argument to a single forceful theme:



The second of these two measures is often singled out for special treatment on its own. In the middle of the movement there is a dramatic pause, followed by a strong entry of the full orchestra in a distant key, a reminder of Bach's celebrity as an improviser at the keyboard and of his Fantasias that take the listener constantly unawares, with sudden changes of key and tempo.

The Andante is in the parallel minor key (E minor), and only the two flutes support the strings. Here Bach shows his preeminence in strong expressive gestures, typically described as "*Empfindsamkeit*" ("sentimentality," or "sensitivity") in the age of sensibility. The close of the movement is particularly poignant as the strings and flutes reach up higher to the point where they begin the descent down to a cadence inviting an immediate start to the finale. With horns prominent, the refrain of this last movement suggests the chase, and with no arbitrary digressions the piece is bluntly compact.

Bach's music was widely circulated in his lifetime and continued to be published and played in the nineteenth century. Beethoven was certainly influenced by his keyboard music, and everyone knew his treatise on keyboard playing, the *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, published in 1753. This was the most influential treatise of the eighteenth century and is invaluable to modern players as a guide to the performance practice of the time. It discusses every aspect of keyboard playing, including ornamentation, continuo playing, and improvisation, and warns against empty virtuosity. If this warning was not always heeded, it nonetheless laid the foundations of modern piano playing. Like his father, Bach laid emphasis on good fingering, especially the use of the thumb.

Bach's celebrity drew the English historian Charles Burney to visit him in Hamburg in October 1772. Burney greatly enjoyed Bach's hospitality and reported: "Complaints have been made against his pieces, for being *long, difficult, fantastic, and far-fetched*. In the first particular, he is less defensible than in the rest; yet the fault will admit of some extenuation; for *length*, in a musical composition, is so much expected in Germany, that an author is thought barren of ideas, who leaves off till every thing has been said which the subject suggests."

Length is certainly not a fault of the present symphony, it may be noted. Burney goes on:

As to their being fantastical, and far-fetched, the accusation, if it be just, may be softened, by alledging, that his boldest strokes, both of melody and modulation, are always consonant to rule, and supported by learning; and that his flights are not the wild ravings of ignorance or madness, but the effusions of cultivated genius. His pieces, therefore, will be found, upon a close examination, to be so rich in invention, taste, and learning, that, with all the faults laid to their charge, each line of them, if wire-drawn, would furnish more new ideas than can be discovered in a whole page of many other compositions that have been well received by the public.

After dinner Bach entertained his guest until eleven o'clock playing the clavichord and harpsichord. Burney concluded: "His performance today convinced me of what I had suggested before from his works: that he is...one of the greatest composers that ever existed."

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THESE ARE THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of C.P.E. Bach's *Symphony in G, Wq. 183:4*. The most recent BSO performance of any music by C.P.E. Bach was of his *Cello Concerto in A, Wq. 172*, in February 2004, with soloist Pieter Wispelwey under the direction of Ton Koopman (that work having been given one previous BSO performance, at Tanglewood in July 1985 with Lynn Harrell under the direction of Kent Nagano). The only other orchestral work by C.P.E. Bach to have been played by the BSO in the past forty years was the *Symphony in D, Wq. 183:1*, programmed by Jorge Mester at Tanglewood in 1970, by Seiji Ozawa at Tanglewood in 1975, and by Raymond Leppard at Symphony Hall in January 1978.

