

THE FAMILY REUNION

THE BACH FAMILY: Seven Generations of Creative Genius, by Karl Geiringer; George Allen and Unwin, English price 45/-.

(Reviewed by O.J.)

"IF my name were Bach I could find work anywhere."

Heinrich Graser, town musician of Arnstadt in the 1670's was only one of the many musicians of his time, and for decades before and after, who must have felt more than a little envious of the tremendous prestige of the Bach family. Erfurt, Arnstadt, Eisenach, Leipzig, Ohrdruf and fourteen other towns; Johann Christoph, Johann Ambrosius, Johann Sebastian, Johann this and Johann that—such was the confusion of genealogy which distributed the Bachs throughout Thuringia. Seven generations of genius or near genius. It would seem almost impossible to keep track of them all.

Karl Geiringer, in *The Bach Family*, not only rediscovers them, but brings them together in his pages for a gigantic family reunion. They become living figures again, craftsmen creating music against a backcloth of 17th and 18th Century Germany. The Bachs would welcome this after-gathering, for they were a clan who loved to get together. "As it was impossible for them all to

live in one place," wrote the biographer Forkel, "they resolved at least to see each other once a year and fixed a certain day upon which they had all to appear at an appointed place. Even after the family had become more numerous and first one and then another of the members had been obliged to settle outside Thuringia . . . they continued their annual meetings. Their amusement during the time of their meeting was entirely musical."

What a "ceilidh" such a meeting must have been! Chorales and popular songs, some of them "partly comic and partly naughty," extemporisations—the Bachs made music when they met, less seriously, but as exuberantly as they did every week of the year. Music for all of them was their life.

Johann Sebastian is the Bach we know best, and, next to him, Carl Philipp Emanuel perhaps. But these were only two among many, all of whom enjoyed reputations as leaders in their field of music. Cantors, organists, town musicians, men of diverse character, some strong, some of them finding life itself a tough proposition; but all bound by the two loyalties of music and the family tradition.

They were a stubborn lot these Bachs. They asked everything of themselves in the craft of music; but none



Johann Sebastian Bach.

Russell Clark

"The Bachs were solid burghers as well as first-rate musicians"

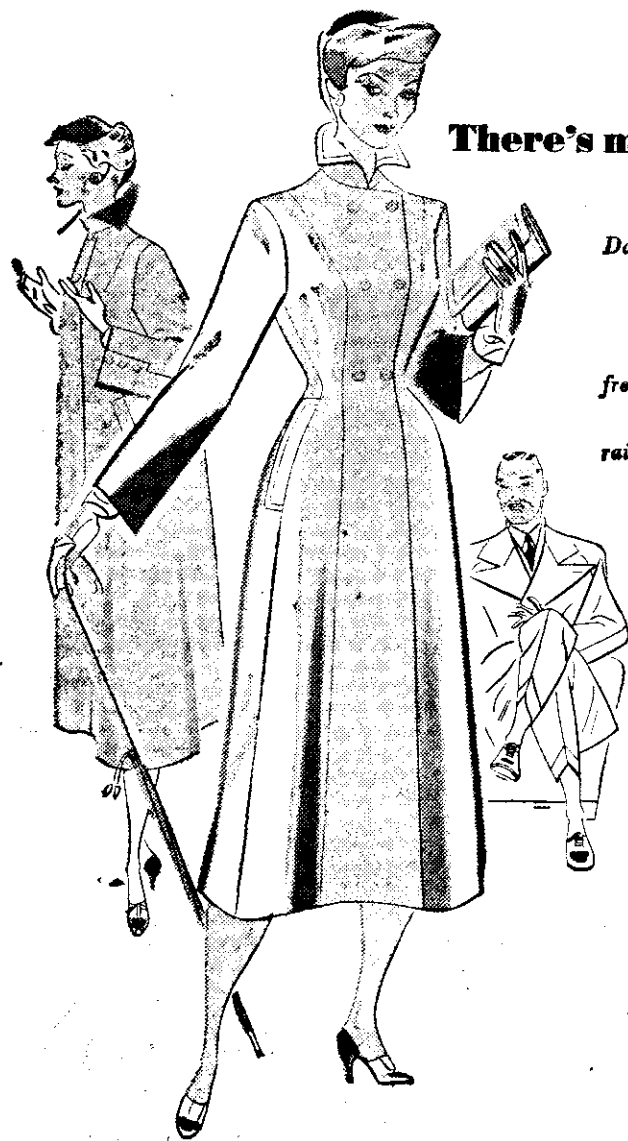
of them were backward in getting their due from those for whom they made music. Most of the Bachs could drive a good bargain with as masterly a skill as they turned out a piece of music. Part of the charm of Geiringer's book is the ease with which he takes us into the homes of the Bachs, sharing a little of the lives behind the music.

Johann Christoph, uncle of Johann Sebastian, needed a house. He could not afford one out of his meagre salary, and there being no State Advances Corporation he had to find other means of acquiring a home. He solved his problem by contracting with an aged wealthy baker's widow to "lodge her, take care of her and supply her with warm food and two quarts of beer daily," in return for which she would "leave him her house with its entire furnishings, a garden and six acres of land." Johann Christoph came rather well out of it for the widow died a few months later. One way and another, by marriage, by a little shrewd business dealing, by being firm with their employers, most of the Bachs prospered. They were solid burghers as well as first-rate musicians.

In a book covering this vast canvas of life in a mere five hundred pages, it would be impossible, of course, to give a detailed account of all the music. Much of that by the lesser Bachs exists, where it still does exist, in manuscript and is not always easily available. Nevertheless, Karl Geiringer discusses quite extensively the work of all the better-known Bachs with an outline of the lesser ones, and includes numerous illustrations from the music. In this way the music becomes one with the lives.

Starting with the legendary Hans Bach of the 16th Century, and Veit Bach, the white-bread baker of Hungary

(continued on next page)



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