

the last of their 12 children when he was 57 years old.

All of these aspects of his life are reflected in his music, which is inexhaustible in its technical perfection, emotional power and intellectual strength. I had expected that listening only to Bach's music for a week and a half would become repetitive. Not a bit of it. I was astonished at its variety, exuberance and daring. One would hear perhaps a small group of the Two Part Inventions — slight, but ingenious, student pieces. Then perhaps would be one of the endlessly fascinating solo violin sonatas and partitas, each capable of inspiring different artists to ever more profound feats of interpretation and virtuosity. There is the brilliance of the Brandenburg Concertos, the grandeur of the organ works, the magnificence of the B minor Mass, the intellectual teasing of the Goldberg Variations. And that is just dipping a toe in the ocean.

What does Bach mean to me? If humanity and all our works were to be destroyed but just one thing saved to represent us, I would save the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Intelligent beings across the galaxy would say of us: 'they must have been a great and noble race'.

Toby Lipman

I remember the first time I ever played Bach seriously, when at school we performed the fifth Brandenburg Concerto. I was revelling in the experience of playing in a small chamber group for the first time and loving the baroque cleanness of it all, when I was overwhelmed by the harpsichord cadenza to the first movement. It still never fails to astonish, the way it starts simply and then builds through rhythmic and harmonic complexity, exploiting the instrument's versatility to the full (again something not

previously heard). Around the same time I was also introduced to the B minor Mass, when the Sanctus bowled me over with its majestic power, and which also amazes by its light-footed handling of the Nicene creed's linguistic difficulties.

All of which illustrates Bach's qualities. He probably never thought of himself as an artist, but as a master craftsman. John Eliot Gardiner's exploration of the sacred cantatas has reminded us of the sheer routine discipline of it: one new piece a week, with the parts written to suit whoever was going to be available that Sunday. Yet when we hear them now, Bach's own faith shines through with every note, in a way that is hard for modern listeners to share. The musicologists tell us of the mathematical patterns in the music, such as the structure of the Goldberg Variations (written, I always appreciate when I am listening to them late at night, for an insomniac), but that in turn never clouds the emotional impact, the ability to speak absolutely directly to our souls. Think of the transcendent bass aria 'Mache dich, mein Herze rein' ['Purify yourself, my heart'] that, at the end of the St Matthew Passion, always moves me to tears, or the television image of Maxim Vengerov walking through Auschwitz in the snow, playing the Chaconne from the D minor partita for violin in memorial to the victims of the Nazi holocaust.

Mozart, the 250th anniversary of whose birth arrives in 2006, will become the focus for much listening and debate this year. One reason put forward for his popularity is that he is very much a composer for our age, representing the moral relativism of post-enlightenment Europe in tune with the moral relativism of the late 20th century. The music of Bach, born nearly 70 years earlier, conveys a world of less doubt, a high point of order and certainty. We may not envy the certainty, but as a route to understanding it the music is without equal.

David Jewell