

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Mein Name ist Bach

Director: Dominique de Rivaz
Script: Dominique de Rivaz, Jean-Luc Bourgeois
Producer: Thanassis Karathanos, Karl Baumgartner
Production Year: 2003
Cinematography: Ciro Cappellari
Cast: Vadim Glowna (Bach), Jürgen Vogel (Frederick II), Anatole Taubman (Friedemann Bach), Paul Herwig (Emanuel Bach), Karoline Herfurth (Princess Amalie)

Bach – Wait! – Allen Krumm

We still have *das Musikalische Opfer*. So we can say that Bach's portion of this famous encounter has endured. And although Prussia was abolished in 1947, one could argue that something of Frederick the Great's legacy has endured as well. In any case, the music is still played and the story is still told and we continue to marvel at this meeting of these two geniuses.

The visit paid by the inimitable composer to the court of the enlightened absolutist monarch is an intriguing story. By the time they met, Bach had given the world St. Mathew's Passion and the Art of the Fugue and countless other masterpieces. Frederick's most recent notable accomplishment was the preemptive liberation of Silesia. Apparently that unfortunate province was seen as an existential threat, but that was six years in the past. He was currently engaged in the creation of his magnum opus, Prussia.

We are not entirely sure who nurtured and sparked the genius of Bach. Perhaps an older brother, perhaps a cousin. In any case, it is not crucial to know, since Bach was born to be a great musician, and it would have happened in any case. Frederick, on the other hand, was not born to be a consummate practitioner of statecraft, much less a great king. But he was molded into that role, and in the process almost broken. Frederick was the masterpiece of the Ur-Prussian.

Bach's father died when he was ten, and Frederick could only wish that he could have had such good fortune. Raised under the brutal tutelage and obsessive discipline of his crudely autocratic father Frederick William I, young Frederick had had enough by the time he reached age 18. Concocting a naive but desperate plan to flee to France with his close friend Hans Hermann von Katte, he was caught, imprisoned in the fortress of Küstrin, and then forced to watch as they dragged von Katte into the courtyard before Frederick's cell, beheaded him, and left

his body and head lying there for most of that dreadful day.

The traumatic episode seared Frederick's soul and changed his life. Whatever he thought of his father inwardly, from that point on, he became a dedicated and disciplined prince, obedient to his father's every wish and directive. Before Frederick William I died in 1740, he had once pointed at his son and said "There stands one who will avenge me."

And strangely, as many historians had noted, it seemed that Frederick eventually came to care more about his father's opinion than any other. When he was much older, Frederick often told of a recurrent dream he had, where his father would appear to him, and Frederick would ask "Have I done well?" and his father would reply "Yes."

Such is the background to Dominique de Rivaz's quirky yet charming version of this story. She gives us a supremely confident, occasionally irascible yet ultimately avuncular old Bach, and a supremely arrogant, consistently abrasive yet ultimately endearing young Frederick. Her screenplay is a playful yet insightful rendition of how it might have been between the artist and the King. We don't really know, but de Rivaz cheerfully adopts a Hemingwayesque "wouldn't it be pretty to think so" approach to the whole affair. And somehow, it works. While embracing the basic history we do know, Ms. de Rivaz gives free rein to the imagination concerning what transpired during the week Bach was at the court of the King.

Did Frederick briefly wonder what it would have been like to have a father like Bach? And did Bach's sons suffer from complexes induced by the immense shadow cast by their father? It is fun to consider the possibility that Bach had one son who was a veritable spiritual ancestor of Jim Morrison and another who would have been comfortable on the Lawrence Welk Show. We are privileged spectators as Bach and the King let their hair down in the ultimate jam session.

No one knows what Frederick's sexual orientation was, but Ms. de Rivaz certainly encourages us to consider the possibility that he was gay. All we know for certain is that Frederick had no children and that Bach had twenty. It is amusing to think that perhaps Bach really did just walk away from the King when he felt like it, and that Frederick responded by plaintively crying out "Bach, wait..." or that Princess Amalie was willing to moon the king if he irritated her enough. Who knows.

Yet we can be certain of several things intimated by the movie. We can be certain that great kings and great composers are victims of time and circumstance as much as the rest of us. We can be certain that geniuses may often suffer not only for what they have accomplished but for who they are. And we can be certain that Bach never allowed himself to be squeezed like a lemon, not by the King, not by anyone. It is very likely that Frederick the Great at once admired and resented this quality in Bach. In any event he had to wait until Voltaire showed up for a lemon that he could properly squeeze.

Finally, we can be certain that we will never know exactly what it would have been like to have been with Frederick and Bach that week. But such certainty is not the point of history anyway. Ms. de Rivaz seems to have read T.S. Eliot, who assured us that "what might have been and what has been point to one end, which is always present."