Anna Magdalena Bach

Birth name: Anna Magdalena Wilcke

* 22 September 1701 in Zeitz,
† 27 February 1760 in Leipzig,

Singer, member of the court orchestra in Köthen; harpsichordist; copyist

„...zumahln da meine itzige Frau gar einen sauberen Soprano singet...“ (especially since my current wife sings a quite flawless soprano)

Letter from Johann Sebastian Bach from 28 October 1730 to his friend from youth, Georg Erdmann, in Danzig. (Source: Central Historical State Archive in Moscow: Bach Documents I, No. 23).

Profile

Few facts have come down to us from the life of Anna Magdalena Bach. Her portrait, which was painted by the artist Cristofori and still extant in 1790, has been lost, as has the family correspondence. She was the first women ever employed by the court of Köthen as Princely Singer in the summer of 1721. Even after she married the widowed Hofkapellmeister Johann Sebastian Bach on 3 December 1721, thereby becoming mother to the four children from his first marriage, she continued to practise her career up until the move to Leipzig on 22 May 1723. In Leipzig, besides her duties as mother to four stepchildren and 13 of her own, which were born in the years 1723 to 1742 (of whom seven died directly after birth or in early childhood), she acted as the head of a large household and as copyist of her husband’s works. She performed as singer in private circles and travelled for guest performances. The fact that despite his duties as Thomaskantor (cantor at the St. Thomas Church) and teacher of private students, and numerous meetings with musicians passing through, Johann Sebastian Bach “still found the time and concentration for his compositional work” has often been praised and acknowledged. History and historians are silent, however, when it comes to the burdens that Anna Magdalena Bach was subject to." (Hans-Joachim Schulze, “Zumahln da meine itzige Frau gar einen sauberen Soprano singet...“ (Especially since my current wife sings a quite flawless soprano), quoted in: “Anna Magdalena Bach: Ein Leben in Dokumenten und Bildern” (Anna Magdalena Bach: A Life in Documents and Pictures), Leipzig 2004, p. 13). Both the „Clavier-Büchlein vor Anna Magdalena Bachin Anno 1722“ (Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bachin in the year of 1722) which has survived in fragments, and also the music book compiled in 1725 show – in addition to documenting the affection between Johann Sebastian and Anna Magdalena Bach – that Anna Magdalena was not unpractised in the playing of instruments. There are few testimonials to her personal life and experiences. However, Johann Elias Bach, nephew and private secretary to Johann Sebastian Bach, reports in a few letters that she “is a great enthusiast of gardening” and is especially fond of “yellow carnations”. She is also “a great friend of that kind of bird” (by which he means trained linnets) (quoted in Evlin Od- rich/Peter Wollny, “Die Briefentwürfe des Johann Elias Bach” (Letter drafts of Johann Elias Bach), Hildesheim 200, p. 92 and 140). After Bach’s death in 1750 she took care of the Sunday and feast day music in Leipzig’s main churches until his successor took up his post. As there was no testament, she also assigned a trustee with the legal representation of her person regarding the settlement of Johann Sebastian Bach’s estate, among other things. Anna Magdalena Bach spent her last years in the Hainstraße in Leipzig, together with her two youngest daughters and probably also her 42 year-old stepdaughter Catharina Dorothea. She died on 27 February 1760 as “alms woman”. The term implies impoverished circumstances, but this does not seem to be perfectly accurate. Anna Magdalena was possibly interred in Johann Sebastian Bach’s grave. The few memorabilia from her life – a ring, a thimble and a shoe buckle – were kept in the Johanniskirche, which was destroyed during the Second World War.

Cities an countries

Anna Magdalena Bach was active as a singer from 1721 to 1723 at the court of Köthen. In Leipzig, where she lived from 1723 to 1760, her singing was largely limited to private circles.

Biography

Anna Magdalena Bach was born on 22 September 1701 as Anna Magdalena Wilcke in Zeitz. She was the youngest daughter of Johann Kaspar Wilcke (about 1660-1731) and his wife Margarethe Elisabeth, née Liebe (about 1666-1746), and belonged to a dynasty of musicians: her maternal grandfather, Andreas Liebe, was organist and schoolmaster; her paternal grandfather, Stephan Wilcke, was also a musician; her uncle, Johann Siegmund Liebe, held the office of court trumpeter as well as that of court
and city organist in Zeitz; her father, Johann Kaspar Wilcke, acted as court and field trumpeter in Zeitz. After the Wilcke family’s move to Weißenfels, Anna Magdalena received an education in singing from the singer Christiane Pauline Kellner, which had possibly already begun in Zeitz. In 1720 or the first half of 1721 she visited the court in Zerbst together with her father. In the summer of 1721 Anna Magdalena Bach was employed as Princely Singer by the court in Köthen. On 3 December 1721 she married the widowed Johann Sebastian Bach and became mother to his four children from his first marriage: Catharina Dorothea (13 years old), Wilhelm Friedemann (11 years old), Carl Philipp Emanuel (7 years old) and Johann Gottfried Bernhard (6 years old). She continued to practice her profession of court singer. For example, she took part in the performance of J.S. Bach’s “Serenata” on 10 December 1722 in the Palace of Köthen for the birthday of Prince Leopold, “Durchlauchster Leopold” BWV 173a. She also seems to have been a well-versed harpsichord player, for soon after their wedding, Johann Sebastian Bach compiled the “Clavier-Büchlein von Anna Magdalena Bachin Anno 1722”, which has only survived in fragments. In 1725 he dedicated a second notebook to her. Their first child was born in the spring of 1723 while they were still in Köthen, but it died in 1726. Twelve additional children were born in Leipzig. Of these, only six reached adulthood. On 22 May 1723 the family moved to Leipzig, where Bach had taken on the post of Thomaskan- tor. They lived in the south wing of the Thomasschule (St. Thoma School), directly next to the Thomaskirche (St. Thomas Church), which was thoroughly reconstructed in 1731. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach reported in 1775 that the apartment, in which not only private students came and went but where numerous musicians passed through, resembled “a pigeon house and its liveliness perfectly”. (quoted in Bach Doc. III, No. 803). In addition to her duties as mother and housekeeper of the very large household, Anna Magdalena Bach only performed as singer in domestic settings and on private occasions. She did return to Köthen with her husband for guest performances in July 1724, December 1725 and in January 1728. She also accompanied her husband to test an organ in Kassel in September 1732. She stayed several times in Weißenfels to visit relatives (7 and 14 November 1739 are documented).

She actively supported her husband by copying manuscripts of his works. She had a close circle of friends in Leipzig, one of whom was her “bosom friend” and neighbour Christiana Sybilla Bose. Anna Magdalena Bach’s godchildren are a reflection of her personal contacts, but also of her social connections. She is documented as godmother to Johann Christian Han, the son of the princely cellar master in Köthen on 25 September 1721; to the daughter (first name unknown) of the princely servant Andreas Palmarius in Köthen on 29 September 1721: to Anna Christina Birkenhahn, the daughter of the city soldier Johann Tobias Birkenhahn in Leipzig on 11 November 1731; to the son (first name unknown) of the Leipzig field trumpeter Johann George Berlich in Leipzig on 9 August 1739; to the daughter (first name unknown) of the Leipzig bell founder Georg Leonhardt in Leipzig on 18 August 1739: to a daughter (first name unknown) of the Leipzig damask knitter Johann David Lauterwafer in Leipzig on 16 March 1740; to her granddaughter Anna Carolina Philippina, the daughter of Carl Philipp Emanuel, who was baptized in Berlin on 11 September 1747 (Anna Magdalena was possibly present for this); to Johann Jacob Kleinpaul as proxy for the wife of the Leipzig mayor, Christina Elisabeth Küstner, in Leipzig on 3 November 1752.

Beginning in April 1738 Johann Elias Bach, the nephew and private secretary of Johann Sebastian Bach, sought to acquire “yellow carnations” for Anna Magdalena Bach, whom he called “a great enthusiast of gardening” (quoted in: see above). On 14 June 1740 he attempted to acquire a trained linen for her, for she was “a great friend of this kind of bird” (quoted in: see above). In August 1741 Anna Magdalena Bach fell so ill, that “we believed nothing other than that to our great sorrow we would even lose her,” wrote Johann Elias Bach to Johann Sebastian Bach who was staying in Berlin (quoted in Old-rich/Wollny, op. cit., p. 165).

Bach died on 28 July 1750. By February 1751 at the latest, Anna Magdalena Bach had moved to Hainstrasse with her two youngest daughters Johanna Carolina (13 years old) and Regina Susanna (8 years old), as well as possibly with her stepdaughter Catharina Dorothea. On 15 August 1750 she asked the Leipzig councilman for the half-year grace period, during which the cantor salary would continue to be paid for half a year. The councilman expressed reservations. Bach had already received an advance before he took office, which would have to be deducted. She nonetheless received two quarters. In addition, she was provided for by a subsidy from the city of Leipzig and from the university; furthermore through numerous bequests, in particular the Graff bequest, and by various occasional donations. As she had declined to remarry, the guardianship of her four children who were
still minors (Johann Christoph Friedrich, 18 years old; Johann Christian, 15 years old; Johanna Carolina, 12 years old; Regina Susanna (9 years old) was transferred to her on 21 October 1750. Before the official distribution of Bach's estate on 11 November 1750, his musical estate was distributed. Anna Magdalena received the voices of the yearly cycle of choral cantatas, along with other music manuscripts. From the distribution of the estate she received a third of the estate. On 19 February 1752 "Frau Capellmeisterin Bachin" was named as collector for Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s “Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen” (An Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments) (Berlin 1753) (cited in Bach Doc. III, addendum to no. 654, p. 622). On 27 February 1760 Anna Magdalena Bach died at the age of 58 in Leipzig. She was buried on 29 February in the Johannis Cemetery, probably in her husband’s grave.

Appreciation

Not until recent decades has Anna Magdalena Bach’s image taken on realistic contours. Thanks to a number of publications she has stepped out of her husband’s shadow. An extraordinary woman has become recognisable: an artist, companion and assistant to her husband, and in addition a mother of many children and head of a large household.

Reception

When in 1903 Richard Batka published the “Notenbüchlein der Anna Magdalena Bach” in an edition approximating the handwritten original with the Münchner Kunstwart-Verlag, the musically-interested German public took note of Anna Magdalena, Bach’s second wife, for the first time. In 1930 the German edition of the “Kleiner Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach” (The Little Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach) followed, without, however, mentioning the name of the English author, Esther Meynell, or the original title of the book which had already been published in London in 1925. German readers believed, therefore, that they were reading an authentic rather than a fictitious biography. And they read it with enthusiasm and internalised a thoroughly sentimentalised image of Anna Magdalena Bach. A counter-image to this was supplied by the 1967 German-Italian movie “Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach” (Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach) (Director: Danielle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub) with Christine Lang-Drewanz as Anna Magdalena and Gustav Leonhardt as Johann Sebastian Bach. Since then, musicologists have concerned themselves with Bach’s second wife on and off – primarily in connection with other subjects. The occasion of Anna Magdalena Bach’s 300th birthday in 2001 first sparked public and scientific interest visibly and distinctly. Thus the city of Leipzig, acting on the initiation of a Leipzig women’s group, attached a commemorative plaque to the wall of the house at Thomaskirchhof 18: “This is where Anna Magdalena Bach lived from 1723 to 1750. The former princely court singer was the second wife of Johann Sebastian Bach und mother to a great number of children. Her handwriting is found in a large number of manuscripts of Bach’s compositions. Johann Sebastian Bach dedicated the notebooks from 1722 and 1725 to his wife.” At the same time an exhibit of documents and pictures from Anna Magdalena Bach’s life could be viewed at the Bach Museum in the Bose House (Thomaskirchhof 16), assembled and commented on by Maria Hübner. In her book “Anna Magdalena Bach. Ein Leben in Dokumenten und Bildern” (Anna Magdalena Bach: A life in documents and pictures) (Anna Magdalena Bach: A life in documents and pictures) (see citations) all documented biographical material (documents, other sources, etc.) was assembled and published for the first time. “With this,” writes Christoph Wolff in the foreword, “an unusual and greatly underappreciated woman from music history has finally received her due.”

Research

In connection with research on Johann Sebastian Bach, the life and work of Anna Magdalena Bach has also received increased attention. Existing sources have essentially been analysed.

Need for Research

Not until recently has Anna Magdalena Bach stepped out of her husband’s shadow. The image of an extraordinary woman and mother of many children, artist, and active assistant to her husband has taken on clear contours through intensive work with source material.

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