

## **Which of J.S. Bach’s Two Cousins Did He See Home from the Castle on 4 August 1705?\***

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**Abstract.** Based on the findings of Arnstadt’s archivist Karl Müller, Kurt Hermann Frickel’s Bach genealogy, and other sources, the article clarifies the identities of Bach’s two cousins: Barbara Catharina Bach (1680–1709) and Barbara Katharina aka Catharina Barbara Bach (1679–1737). In Bach studies of the late twentieth century and on, the identities of these two cousins merged into one. This confusion led to two erroneous conclusions: 1) the misidentification of the girl Bach accompanied to her home and who witnessed Bach’s famous street brawl with the student Heinrich Geysersbach; and 2) the misidentification of this person as a sister of Maria Barbara, whom Bach eventually married. The author untangles this confusion and establishes the identity of Bach’s companion on 4 August 1705.

**Key words:** Johann Sebastian Bach, Barbara Catharina Bach, Barbara Katharina Bach, Catharina Barbara Bach, Maria Barbara Bach, Organist Bach case, Karl Müller.

From Bach studies, it seems that the identity of the cousin Bach saw home from the Castle on 4 August 1705 was established long ago, and does not need to be checked.<sup>1</sup> Not all, however, think so. The present article aims to highlight the forgotten or misinterpreted voices of archivist Karl Müller and genealogist Kurt Hermann Frickel, as well as to add some circumstantial evidence in accordance with their findings. Clarification of this colorful episode from Bach’s younger years in Arnstadt casts a new light on his early biography.

The “Organist Bach case” itself and the hearing at the Arnstadt consistory, which took place after the brawl between Johann Sebastian Bach and the student Heinrich Geysersbach, is well known.

From the interrogation protocol, it seems that Bach’s cousin Barbara Catharina Bach was summoned to the hearing as a witness, since he accompanied her home late in that evening, when he ran into Geysersbach.<sup>2</sup>

Almost everyone who writes about this story (with the exception of Karl Müller and the present author) confidently considers that person to be Barbara Catharina (b.

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\* Translated by **Marina Ritzarev**.

<sup>1</sup> The present article is based on the paper delivered at the XV International Symposium *Gnessin Organ Readings*. Gnessin Russian Academy of Music, Moscow, 23–29 November 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Müller & Fritz Wiegand (Eds.), *Arnstädter Bachbuch: Johann Sebastian Bach und seine Verwandten in Arnstadt*. Zweite, verb. und erw. Aufl. (Arnstadt: Gutenbergdruck, 1957), p. 17, Doc. 14.

1679, Gehren), the daughter of Bach's great uncle, Johann Michael Bach, and one of the two older sisters of Maria Barbara Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach's future wife.

For example, Christoph Wolff writes:

After hearing Bach's cousin Barbara Catharina, who accompanied him from the castle and who therefore could serve as a witness, the consistory concluded that Geysersbach "initiated the incident since he not only addressed Bach first but also was the first to strike out."<sup>3</sup>

Mentioning Sebastian's companion, the author, without any doubts or reservations, detailed in the commentaries that Barbara Catharina was the daughter of Bach's great uncle, Johann Michael Bach.<sup>4</sup>

The problem, however, is that J.S. Bach had another cousin with the identical name, Barbara Catharina Bach, who lived in Arnstadt in 1705. Born in 1680, she was the daughter of another of J.S. Bach's uncles, Johann Christoph Bach and the sister of Johann Ernst Bach, who is known as the person who temporarily replaced J.S. Bach in the service during his stay in Lubeck. For the following discussion, we will designate the two Barbara Catharinas as Barbara Catharina–M (for Michael's daughter) and Barbara Catharina–C (for Christoph's daughter).

Once, in 2001, I hypothesized that the cousin whom Bach accompanied home that evening was Barbara Catharina–C—the daughter of Johann Christoph, Ernst's sister.

My only argument was an analysis of the route taken, beginning from the vicinity of Castle Neideck (the corner of Schlosstrasse and Zimmerstrasse) to the house "At the Golden Crown" (*Zur güldenen Krone*) on the corner of Zimmerstrasse and Ledermarktstrasse, where Barbara Catharina–M lived with her sisters, and where J.S. Bach himself lived. The route is simple and quite short—one only needs to go via the Zimmerstrasse.

The site of the incident, "The Long Stone," however, is not to be found on this route. The route that passes "The Long Stone" leads to another of J.S. Bach's cousins, Barbara Catharina–C, the daughter of Johann Christoph, who lived on Kohlstrasse 7. To reach that house, one would pass "At the Golden Crown" and then walk through Ledermarktstrasse, cross the Ledermarktplatz, and only then pass "The Long Stone" (situated between the Townhall and the New Church), which was already close to Christoph's house.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574.

<sup>5</sup> Anatoly Milka, Tatiana Shabalina, *Zanimatel'naya Bakhiana: O znamenitykh epizodakh iz zhizni Ioganna Sebastiana Bakha i nekotorykh zanyatnykh nedorazumeniakh* [*Intriguing Bachiana: On some Famous Episodes from Johann Sebastian Bach's Life and Some Intriguing Misunderstandings*]. Vol. 2, 2nd ed., revised and extended (Saint Petersburg: Compozitor, 2001), "Brawl at the Long Stone," pp. 99–136.

Thanks to Arnstadt archivist Karl Müller's research of 1935 (revised in the 1950s),<sup>6</sup> there are hard data on this subject. Not all, however, are convinced by Müller's findings. Malcolm Boyd, for example, refers to the data of the Arnstadt cemetery registration books and to the materials of the same K. Müller, but interprets them differently. Following the Arnstadt cemetery book, which gives an approximate calculation of the years when Barbara Catharina–C was ill, Boyd finds Müller's notion "unlikely" and identifies the person in question as

[...] probably the third daughter (b. 13 December 1679) of Johann Michael Bach of Gehren, and elder sister of Sebastian's future wife, Maria Barbara. Another slightly younger cousin, also called Barbara Catharina Bach (b. May 1680), was living in Arnstadt at the same time; she was the daughter of Sebastian's late uncle Johann Christoph. Karl Müller (*Arnstadter Bachbuch* [Arnstadt, 2nd ed., 1957], p. 105) stated that it was this younger cousin who was with Bach on the evening in question, but this seems unlikely in view of the fact that in the Arnstadt burial register (*ibid.*, 155) she is said to have been bedridden for over four years before her death in January 1709.<sup>7</sup>

All seems well-documented. The problem is only in regard to the reliability of documentation, whose shortcomings disclose themselves if this information is read contextually. First, we will consider the sources: Karl Müller's findings and Arnstadt cemetery books.

### **"Strange" Karl Müller**

Karl Müller warned the reader: "The maiden Barbara Katharina, Bach's cousin, Ernst Bach's sister, acted as a witness. Let's not confuse her with Maria Barbara, Bach's future wife."<sup>8</sup>

Isn't this a strange warning? How could one confuse these sisters, who share only one name, and even this name, "Barbara," is the first name in one case and the second in the other? Any confusion is more likely to have occurred between Barbara Catharina–C and Barbara Catharina–M—but Müller wrote unequivocally "Ernst Bach's sister," which indicates her Arnstadt origin.

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Müller, "Bach contra Geyersbach – Bach und der Chor." In *Johann Sebastian Bach und Arnstadt: Sonderbeilage des Arnstädter Anzeigers, Unsere Heimat*. (1935) 11, pp. 52 - 53; "Der junge Bach," in Karl Müller, *Arnstadt in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*. Hrsg. im Auftr. des Stadtrates der Stadt Arnstadt (Arnstadt: Thüringer Volksverlag, 1950 [1]), pp. 52–123.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Boyd, *Bach* (Master Musicians series), 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 8, 20.

<sup>8</sup> "Die als Zeugin auftretende Jungfrau Barbara Katharina war Bachs Base, die Schwester Ernst Bachs. Sie ist nicht zu verwechseln mit Maria Barbara Bach, die seine Frau wurde" (Karl Müller, "Der junge Bach," p. 105.)

K. Müller was the city archivist of Arnstadt, and all his findings related to the Bach family were based on thorough research of Arnstadt historic material—which hardly anyone knew better than him. Neither of his publications, however, contained any trace of Barbara Catharina–M being in Arnstadt in August 1705. How is this possible? Could he have overlooked a mention of Barbara Catharina–M? We’ll take a pause now with these questions regarding Müller’s expertise, and consider such important sources as cemetery books.

### **Something about Cemetery Books**

Publication of extracts from various Arnstadt books of civil registration relating to the Bach clan in Arnstadt includes the cemetery register (*Sterberegister*). These data added important details, which, however, concomitantly clarify some facts, but blur others.<sup>9</sup> From this register, one may learn that the records of deceased people included the date of the funeral ceremony and brief information about the personality of the deceased. Typically, two- or three-sentence entries presented full name, civil status, and age. In singular cases, some details were mentioned, such as illness, a special activity, monetary contribution, or circumstances surrounding the ritual, etc.

Analysis of the records shows that they were compiled based on the words of those present, or from the memory of the clerk, since in small Arnstadt (3,800 inhabitants) the social circle was very close. No *documents* concerning the personal data of the deceased were noted.

How should we assess such records? Can they be equated to documents?

Yes, and no. On the one hand, they described precisely how the ceremony was performed. Usually, they register the date of the event, time, weather conditions, degree of bell ringing, a prayer read, etc. Entries were written immediately after funerals, and there was no reason for clerks to deliberately distort factual information.

On the other hand, the information that is recorded in the register from the words of those present or from the memory of the registering person, for the most part, contains unintentional inaccuracies. The reason for this is that such information generally relates to *the past*. Under these conditions, memory can play cruel jokes. Time passing is a tricky thing. It is like a magnifying glass: the further the distance, the greater the distortion.

It would suffice to bring as an example the story of Johann Sebastian’s improvisation in Potsdam with the Prussian King Frederick II on 7 May 1747. On that day, one improvisation took place: Bach improvised a three-part fugue on a theme proposed by the monarch. Twenty-seven years later, on 23 July 1774, Frederick II, in a conversation with Baron Gottfried van Swieten, recalled this event and reported that

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Lappé, “Die Bachfamilien im Spiegel der Arnstädter Kirchenbücher,” in Karl Müller & Fritz Wiegand (Eds.), *Arnstädter Bachbuch: Johann Sebastian Bach...*, pp. 140–56.

Bach had improvised “a fugue of 4, then 5, and finally, eight voices.”<sup>10</sup> As one can see, this is a significant exaggeration regarding not only the number of voices in the fugue, but also the number of improvisations.

Here is another example, this time from the same Arnstadt cemetery register, which is referred to by those who fully trust its records. The record in question concerns the age of the deceased, whom we still conditionally name as Barbara Catharina–M (12.13.1679–03.23.1737). It reads:

23. d. 23. Martius 1737.

Eine Jgfr. *Catharina Barbara Bachin*, ist frühe hinausgetragen, das Mittel Gel. aet: 52 Jahr.<sup>11</sup>

[23. 23 March 1737

The maiden Catharina Barbara Bach passed away prematurely, in middle age, 52 years.]

In fact, the said maiden died at the age of 58, as the record of her baptizing reads. A six-year error is a sufficient proof that it was recorded from memories, and certainly not from a documented medical history. It is likely that the insidious countdown effect was triggered in all such cases. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the person mentioned, the daughter of Johann Michael Bach, is registered here as *Catharina Barbara Bach*, and not *Barbara Catharina Bach*.

### **Barbara Catharina–C**

Now is the time to analyze the data on Barbara Catharina–C who died in January 1709 after being bedridden “for more than four years,” as recorded in the cemetery book. This is what prevented M. Boyd from agreeing with K. Müller. The entry reads:

19. den 25 Jan. 1709.

Eine Jungfer *Barbara Catharina Bachin*, so über 4 Jahr bett- lägerig gewesen, wurde mit dem großem geläute begraben, und wegen allzu strenger Kalte eine Sermon über die verba ex Sap: III. Die gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes: starb d. 22. eiusd: ec 7 abends, aetat: 29 Jahr weniger 3 Monate und 3 Tage.<sup>12</sup>

[19. Jan[uary] 25, 1709.

The maiden Barbara Catharina Bach, who was bedridden for more than 4 years, was buried with a large bell ringing, and, despite the severe frost, the service was performed with the reading of Chapter III from Book of Wisdoms: The righteous souls are with

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<sup>10</sup> “...Une Fuge à 4 puis à 5, puis enfin à huit voix obligés” (Baron Gottfried van Swieten’s letter to Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz from 26 July 1774, Berlin). See *Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs 1685–1750*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Vorgelegt und erl. von W. Neumann und H.-J. Schulze (Bach-Dokumente). Hrsg. vom Bach-Archiv Leipzig. Kassel; Leipzig u. a.: Bärenreiter; Deutsche Verlag für Musik, 1969. v. II, p. 276.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Müller & Fritz Wiegand (Eds.), *Arnstädter Bachbuch*, p. 156. The first number 23 in this entry is the record registration number.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

God. Passed away on the 22nd of the same [month]: at 7 pm, at the tender age of less than 29 years by 3 months and 3 days.]

The contents of the entry are detailed. At the moment, the principal question for us with regard to this entry is what is reliable and what is not. Clearly, the date of death and such details as the big bell and the sermon are factual. What is less reliable, as we saw in the case of her cousin Catharina Barbara–**M**, relates to retrospective assessments. If there was an error of six years in the age of one, can we fully believe that the other was bedridden for “over 4 years”? This period of illness, as we remember, is what contradicts Müller’s statement about Barbara Catharina–**C**’s being a witness to the brawl “At the Long Stone.” Indeed, the period “over 4 years” back from 25 January 1709 would have been at the very beginning of 1705 at the latest, and the event of 4 August 1705 does not fit this timing. If it had been “over 3 years,” illness could have struck the maiden between August 1705 and January 1706.

As it turns out, we can neither believe nor doubt the “over 4 years” notion. What we have so far toward identifying Barbara Catharina–**C** as the person J.S. Bach saw home, are four points:

1. The location of “The Long Stone” along the route to her home.
2. Müller’s lack of evidence that Barbara Catharina–**M** lived in Arnstadt in 1705.
3. We now know that Barbara Catharina–**M** was in fact Catharina Barbara, consequently the 1705 protocol of the interrogation in the consistory mentioned not her, but the genuine Barbara Catharina, the daughter of Johann Christoph Bach.
4. We know that the cemetery book was not a reliable document regarding retrospective assessments of age and periods of time.

There are, however, other directions to explore, and they will add circumstantial proof to Müller’s and our view.

### **Barbara Catharina–**M****

While the Arnstadt sources present no evidence that Johann Michael’s daughter lived there in 1705, Bach family genealogy researched by Kurt Hermann Frickel offers a credible outline of her biography that explains her *not* being there. Following from Frickel’s findings, she resided in another town, Gehren, where her father Johann Michael served as organist and raised his family. When she was baptized on 13 December 1679, she was registered as Barbara Katharina, and it is not by chance that she is mentioned in Bach studies on the basis of this document.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kurt Hermann Frickel, *Genealogie der Musikerfamilie Bach: Daten – Fakten – Hypothesen* (Niederwerrn: Benedict Press, 1994), p. 144.

The confusions do not end here. As we saw above, the 1737 cemetery book registered the very same person as “Eine Jgfr. *Catharina Barbara Bachin.*” We can only surmise the reason for this. The fact that it happened when she moved to Arnstadt, where one Barbara Catharina–C Bach had already lived, could point to a desire to distinguish between two cousins who were very close in age and name. As for **C** and **K** for Catharina and Katharina, the use of equally accepted variants was normal, and the difference was meaningless.

## Strangers

Arnstadt is a small provincial and cozy town in Thuringia. In such places, almost everyone knows one another. Strangers are noticed immediately and regarded with wary suspicion— especially if there are several of them. Whether or not they merge into the community depends on their behavior.

On one occasion, three sisters appeared in Arnstadt. They were Friedelena Margaretha (26), Barbara Catharina (25), and Marina Barbara (20). Related to the extensive Bach family, they arrived with the intention of settling down there. They were the orphaned daughters of Gehren organist Johann Michael Bach (1648–94). What brought them there?

Fritz Wiegand, K. Müller’s co-editor of the Arnstadt Bach Book, explains the situation as follows:

He [Johann Michael Bach – A.M.] died on 17 May 1694 at the age of 46 from typhus in Gehren. Ten years later he was followed by his wife, who was buried in Gehren on 19 October 1704. After the death of her mother, the supposedly 20-year-old Maria Barbara, and possibly also her sisters Barbara Katharina and Friedelena Margaretha, were received by their relatives in Arnstadt.<sup>14</sup>

The situation is understandable. After the death of their parents, three unmarried sisters remained in Gehren. Having no family support, they took the practical decision to move to Arnstadt, where relatives could help them continue their lives.

How long could it have taken for the orphaned girls to complete all their affairs with the family property, and prepare for the move to another city? It is hard to say. But it is clear that such endeavors take time. How long? When is it likely that they appeared in Arnstadt?

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<sup>14</sup> “Im Alter vom 46 Jahren verstarb er [Johann Michael Bach. – A.M.] am 17. Mai 1694 an Fleckfieber in Gehren. Zehn Jahre später folgte ihm seine Frau, die am 19. Oktober in Gehren begraben wurde. Nach dem Tode der Mutter haben vermutlich die 20jährige Maria Barbara, vielleicht auch ihre Schwestern Barbara Katharina und Friedelena Margaretha Aufnahme bei ihren Verwandten in Arnstadt gefunden” (Karl Müller & Fritz Wiegand [Eds.], *Arnstädter Bachbuch*, p. 40).

Wiegand points to the fact that all three are recorded as having received the sacrament in the Arnstadt church registration books (*Abendmahlsregister*) for 1706/7.<sup>15</sup> If the strangers who came in groups did not intend to annoy the local community, they would have received the sacrament soon after arrival. In eighteenth-century Germany, the sacrament was normally received within a period of a week to two months. Otherwise, they were considered punishable by deprivation of the sacrament for a certain period. For instance, Johann Sebastian, after a long stay in Lubeck, returned to Arnstadt at the very beginning of February 1706,<sup>16</sup> and received the sacrament almost immediately, on 7 February.<sup>17</sup> This gives us reason to believe that Barbara Katharina–**M** (who in Arnstadt became Catharina Barbara), as well as Friedelena Margaretha and Maria Barbara, appeared in the city no earlier than 1706. Yet, they must have been settled in Arnstadt no later than the beginning of November of that year. The protocol of a subsequent hearing in the consistory (no relation to Geyersbach scandal), of 11 November 1706, features a mention of a “strange maiden” (*frembde Jungfer*), whom Johann Sebastian guided to the cathedral choir-loft. She could have been one of three sisters, who at that time were still perceived in Arnstadt as strangers.<sup>18</sup>

If this is the case, we may conclude that Catharina Barbara–**M** could not have taken a walk with Johann Sebastian and acted as a witness to the clash between Bach and Geyersbach during the hearing at the consistory on 21 August 1705.

Finally, even if we ignore this timeline and all the other arguments, there is no reason for the Arnstadt consistory clerk to have reversed her first and second names and write Barbara Catharina instead of Catharina Barbara.

The combination of the above facts and arguments suggests that it was the local, Barbara Catharina–**C**, daughter of Johann Christoph Bach and sister of Johann Ernst. True, the data of the cemetery books make some researchers doubt this, but an analysis of the information contained in these records shows that they are a very unreliable source, especially in terms of the time countdown.

Establishing the identity of Barbara Catharina Bach in relation to a small episode in Bach’s early life may not seem of great importance. Life is more complex, however, and small episodes often contribute to understanding certain actions and turns in Johann Sebastian’s future life.

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<sup>15</sup> “...Die drei Schwestern gemeinsam im Abendmahlsregister von 1706/07 erscheinen” (ibid.).

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Glöckner, *Kalendarium zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs*. Erw. Neuausg. Bach-Archiv Leipzig (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt; Stuttgart: Carus-Verlag, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Fremdschriftliche und Gedruckte Dokumente*, Bd. II, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 20.