

Bach's Long Walk

Characters:

Anna Magdalena Bach

Bach

A flexible number of Bach family children including the speaking roles:

Johann Christianity

William Freidman

Carl

Councillors 1, 2 and 3

Clerk

Scene 1 The Bach family Household.

Anna Magdalena is seated at a table copying music. The children are playing quietly on the floor, board games, knitting, drawing etc. Johann Christian has some wood and a few tools and is making a toy cart.

Johann Christian Bach: Father is late home from choir practice tonight mother. If he doesn't come soon I won't be able to show him the cart I'm making for William Friedman and the little ones before bedtime.

Anna Magdalena: It's quite dark now, I'm sure he will soon be here, run to the gate William and see if you can see him coming.

William Freidman Bach: Yes mother. Oh! wait! here he is now! [As he gets up to go Bach enters singing to himself as he comes. He is pleased and excited. He picks up the youngest child and sits down with it on his knee while he speaks. The children are very excited and pleased to see him and they all want him to look at what they have been doing.]

Bach: Hush all of you for a moment! I have some very good news. I have been given a holiday...

All the children at once: Hooray!
 Daddy home all day!
 When! When!
 Can we go out for a picnic?

Anna Magdalena: Now it really is bed time!

Bach: Yes, off you go.

[The children line up youngest first and go out one by one. As each child reaches the door he turns round and says: Good night Mother, Good night, Father. The parents reply "Good night sleep well" to each one. Johann Christian is last and he pauses by the door before going.]

Johann Christian: Tomorrow you can see the cart I'm making, Father. I'm sure it will go really well.

Bach: I shall look forward to that. And I must hear you play some of the pieces out of the little book your mother has made for you as well.

Johann Christian: Oh, William and I can play most of them already father, the only problem is Carl spends so much time playing the clavichord these days we have to queue up for turns in the day time and mother will not let us play after dark.

Bach: Well, you must be patient then – no child is to study music after dark in this household.

Johann Christian: But why Father? I can see perfectly well with candles if the music is close.

Bach: My own eyes are somewhat weak Johann, and the reason is that when I was your age I spent many hours studying and copying music after dark because I was not allowed to do so by day. You must use the daylight and spare your eyes. The night is for sleep – so – off to bed with you!

Johann Christian: Yes Father. Good night Mother, Good night Father.

Bach and Anna Magdalena: Good night, sleep well Johann.

Scene Two: Later that evening

Anna Magdalena and Bach are sitting at the table where there are candles. Bach is writing music and Anna Magdalena is copying music into a little notebook.

[Bach puts down his pen and stretches.]

Bach: Good, finished. Another cantata, all ready for rehearsal on Wednesday and performance in the service on Sunday. We will need the four string parts and the choir parts for Wednesday and there are some wind instruments too. Will you be able to copy them out in time? [He hands her the score.]

Anna Magdalena: Yes, I can do it easily, your own writing is so clear that it is no trouble to make the parts. I love singing the melodies over in my head as I write them down. I sometimes think I get all the blessing and joy of your music twice over. Once when I copy the parts and then again when I hear it all fitted together in Church on Sunday.

Bach: Your handwriting is very clear my dear, plain and easy to read and your copies are always so accurate. How could I do my job without you?

Anna Magdalena: The children are looking forward to your holiday. Weren't they excited when you told them? How kind of the Municipal Counsellors to give you four whole weeks.

Bach: Very. kind It will be a relief not to have to teach those naughty singing boys for four weeks and to be able to sit in the congregation in church myself will be grand ... Anna?

Anna M: Yes?

Bach: There is something...

Anna M: What my dear?

Bach: You know how I've always wanted to...

Anna M: What my dear?

Bach: That is I've always felt it would be helpful if ...

Anna Magdalena: What my dear?

Bach: I've always wanted to hear Deitrich Buxtehude play and have some lessons from him. He is such a great composer and his playing must be an inspiration to hear.

Anna Magdalena: I know that my dear but he is in Lubeck two hundred and fifty miles away!

Bach: I was just thinking that with four weeks holiday I could perhaps go and see him - hear him play.

Anna M: How ever would you get to Lubeck, my dear?

Bach: Well, I could walk there!

Scene Three Outside the Bach family home. Bach has a knapsack on his back and a stout stick in his hand. The children are grouped together beside Anna Magdalena.

Anna M: Are you sure you have everything now?

Bach: Yes, I have some clean clothes, some scores to show to Buxtehude, and my lunch and my money safe in my pocket. Now let us sing together before I go.

[All sing chorale]¹

Bach: You look after Mother while I am away.

Children: Goodbye Father. Come home soon.

[Bach waves and walks off. The children all wave handkerchiefs until he is out of sight.]

Anna M: Well now dears, I think a picnic would be good fun. Go and pack up some baskets and we will go off to the woods.

[The children rush off in excitement to fetch the picnic things but Johann Christian and William Friedman remain behind.]

William Friedman: I don't feel like picnicking, mother.

Anna M: Yes, but we must try and be cheerful for the sake of the little ones. While Father is away we will have plenty of picnics and games out of doors and the time will soon pass.

Johann Christian: How long will he be away, Mother? *Anna Magdalena:* Well he has four weeks leave but walking to Lubeck will take a long time. When he gets there he will want to spend as long with the great Master Buxtehude as he can.

William Friedman: I wish my legs were longer I would love to have gone with him.

1 A suitable chorale to sing would be the one learned in the lesson for July 8th.

Scene 3: The Municipal Council Chamber

The Counsellors are seated round a table with pens and papers

Counsellor 1: Now we have dealt sufficiently with the matter of the town crier and the nightwatchman I think. What is next on the agenda?

Clerk [consults a sheaf of papers]: The absence of the Organist and Choir Master, Sir.

Counsellor 1: Ah yes, a bad business, very bad. Can't have this going on you know. Four weeks holiday should have been quite enough. Quite enough. Very generous in fact. How long has he been away now?

Counsellor 2: Nearly twelve weeks! What does he say in his letter?

Clerk [reading] Honoured Sirs, I am writing to explain the reasons for my delay in returning to my duties as Organist and Choirmaster. Here in Lubeck I have been able to hear and study with the great Dietrich Buxtehude and learn thoroughly many things connected with my art. I hope you will excuse my absence and that my studies will enable me to serve my God better and to perform my duties in Arnstadt better also. I am setting out for home now and, if God wills, will return to you with all speed. Your servant Johann Sebastian Bach

Counsellor 1: Hmm. Doesn't say when he will be back does he? All highly irregular this – going off for weeks at a time. Who is this Buxtehude fellow he's so keen to hear?

Counsellor 2: He is very highly regarded I believe. Now that I have heard Organist Bach's explanation I feel that perhaps the situation is not so grave as we first thought. After all he has not been idling away his time. Presumably he will be better able to discharge his duties when he returns, we could certainly do with some improvements in the choir boys' performances!

Counsellor 1: Yes, but what do we do with Bach when he comes home?

Counsellor 3: I think under the circumstances, he hardly deserves to be dismissed. He is very good at his job.

Counsellor 1: Too good if you ask me. All that fancy twiddly stuff! I can't make out what the tune is supposed to be half the time. How am I supposed to know that I'm to sing "Sleepers Wake" when he starts off [sings] dum diddle dee dum dee dum dee dum? And I expect he will be worse after all this Buxtehude business! Can't we replace him with someone a bit more plain and workman like who won't go gadding off for weeks at a time?

Counsellor 2: I agree his music does get a little out of hand at times but you must agree its wonderful stuff. I think perhaps if someone just had a tactful word with him...

Counsellor 1 [rubbing his chin thoughtfully]: Tactful - hmm. Well I'm very good at being tactful when its needed. Leave it with me. I'll speak to him... when he gets back. All agreed?

Counsellors 2 and 3: Agreed.

Counsellor 1: Good lets move on then, its getting on for supper time. What's next?

Scene 4 The Bach family children are playing as in scene one except Carl who is off stage.

Anna Magdalena is sitting at the table copying music

Anna M.: Here is another pretty minuet for your little book Johann and William, I have just finished copying it in. Come and see. You can practice it for when your Father comes home.

[The two boys come across to the table to look at the music when Carl suddenly runs in in great excitement]

Carl [breathlessly]: Father's home, Father's home here he is now!

[The children jump up in great excitement as the weary Bach walks in with his stick and knapsack. The little children jump up and down in excitement, Johann and William take his knapsack and he sits down in a chair, exhausted. The youngest child climbs up onto his lap. Anna Magdalena goes and stands behind his chair. She is smiling radiantly.]

Anna Magdalena: How good to have you home at last. How we have missed you!

Bach: I have missed you all too. And what a long weary walk! Oh but it was worth it. The music I shall write now I have talked to Buxtehude and seen what he is doing!

Anna M.: The girls had better go and find you a meal at once you must be hungry and so tired.

Bach: Yes I am but let us all praise God together again first, how I have missed your cheerful singing all of you. Stand up all of you!

[The children stand and they sing the same chorale together as before]