

A Bach Cult in Late-Eighteenth-Century Berlin: Sara Levy's Musical Salon

Christoph Wolff

This presentation was given at the 1886th Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on December 15, 2004. It was followed by a musical performance by Academy Fellow Malcolm Bilson (Cornell University), Christopher Krueger (University of Massachusetts at Amherst), Academy Fellow Robert Levin (Harvard University), and Daniel Stepner (Lydian String Quartet). The program consisted of works by Johann Sebastian, Wilhelm Friedemann, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach from the collection of Sara Levy, individually introduced by Christoph Wolff.

Christoph Wolff is Adams University Professor at Harvard University. He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1982.

A Problem of Musical Historiography

The rediscovery of Johann Sebastian Bach in the Romantic period long after the composer's death belongs among the most widespread misconceptions in the historiography of music. The following quote is symptomatic: "Bach and his works have met a strange fate at the hands of posterity. They were fairly well recognized in their day; practically forgotten by the generations following his; rediscovered and revived; and finally accorded an eminence far beyond the recognition they had originally achieved."¹

Scholarship of recent decades has found it necessary to turn away from a Bach image that resembles the metaphorical paradigm of "Death and Resurrection" – the characteristic heading of the pertinent chapter in Albert Schweitzer's *J. S. Bach* of 1908, arguably the most influential Bach book of all time. Today we differentiate between two complementary factors. First, the beginning of a broadly based public reception of Bach's music in the early nineteenth century, for which Mendelssohn's 1829 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* represents a decisive landmark. Second, the uninterrupted reception of a more private kind, primarily confined to professional musical circles where Bach's compositions

¹ *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 358.

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were regarded as a continuing challenge, a source of inspiration, and a yardstick for measuring quality.

My remarks today will focus on a third and largely unexplored aspect: the role played by a small circle of early bourgeois Bach devotees in an atmosphere of emerging musical historicism. The phenomenon of historicism, which first arose in eighteenth-century England, had a growing impact on the public taste. It contributed significantly to an increasing interest in music of the past and eventually led to an ostensibly irreversible paradigm shift. Up to the period of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, it was contemporary music that overwhelmingly dominated the scene. Today it is the music of the past that, in terms of classical performance statistics, practically marginalizes new music.

Musical historicism advanced in Germany and on the European continent during the early decades of the nineteenth century. A programmatic milestone was set in 1835 by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, who, in his



Sara Levy, drawing by Anton Graff, 1786

first season as music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, established so-called "Historische Concerte" specifically featuring compositions of the past. Works by J. S. Bach played an essential role in this respect. In his first such program, Mendelssohn performed, for instance, the solo part in Bach's keyboard Concerto in D Minor, BWV 1052. The work, unknown at the time, received great praise from the general public but especially from the music critic Robert Schumann. Nobody, however, including Mendelssohn himself, knew that this same concerto had actually been played in public almost thirty years earlier, before Mendelssohn was even born, by a certain Sara Levy at a concert of the Berlin Sing-Akademie.

Madame Levy, who stands at the center of my talk, was none other than Mendelssohn's great-aunt, the younger sister of his maternal grandmother. Young Mendelssohn is generally credited with bringing about one of the most seminal events in musical historicism, the aforementioned 1829 performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* by the Sing-Akademie in Berlin. He certainly deserves credit as the inspired musical leader of this most influential performance attended by Friedrich Wilhelm IV and the royal family, the Prussian nobility, and notably the intellectual elite of the capital, headed by the theologian Schleiermacher, the philosopher Hegel, and the historian Droysen. However, the true origins of that particular event must be sought in the remarkable musical traditions of Mendelssohn's extended family – a tradition underemphasized, underresearched, or neglected if not suppressed by earlier historical German scholarship for reasons of an apparent anti-Semitic bias.

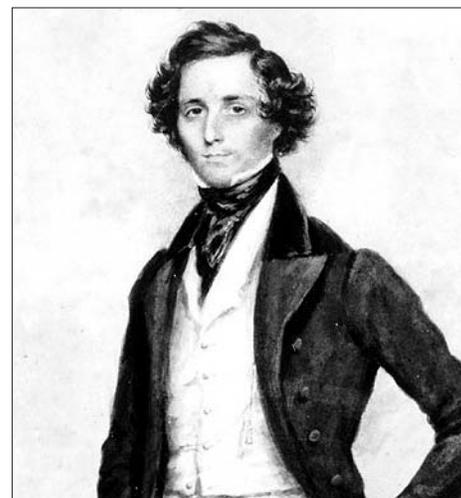
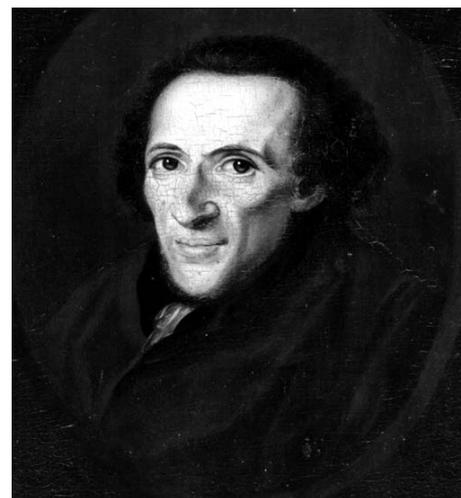
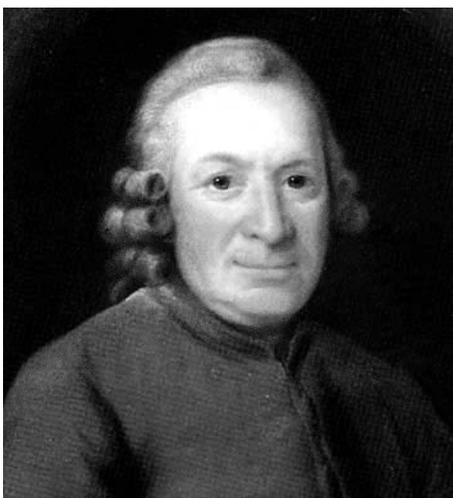
Early Bach Veneration in the Itzig and Mendelssohn Families

Johann Friedrich Reichardt, last Kapellmeister in the service of Prussia's Friedrich II ("the Great"), refers in his autobiography of 1813 to "a veritable Sebastian and Emanuel Bach cult" transpiring in the early 1770s at the house of Felix Mendelssohn's great-grandfather, Daniel Itzig of Berlin, banker of the king and the most privileged and highest-ranking Jew in all of Prussia. Bach esteem, in-

Madame Levy's music collection was quite comprehensive, consisting almost exclusively of instrumental music by all major composers active in the second half of the eighteenth century.

deed adoration, in professional music circles of the later eighteenth century was nothing special; one need only remember Beethoven's growing up with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Yet, neither Haydn, Mozart, nor Beethoven pursued anything like a Bach cult. Hence, this particular characterization of reverence and cultivation in the Itzig family is a most unusual phenomenon. Moreover, it indicates a surprising continuity of interest in the music of J. S. Bach after his death in 1750, not traceable elsewhere in private homes.

Daniel Itzig, born in 1723 in Berlin, began his banking career as the principal supplier of the Prussian mint to the court and the army and was instrumental in assisting the king in funding the Seven-Years War against Maria Theresa's Austria (1756 – 1763). While it is conceivable that Itzig heard J. S. Bach on the occasion of the latter's visit to the Prussian court in 1747, he certainly would have known Bach's second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, a prominent member of the king's capelle through 1768. Be that as it may, Itzig had great interest in music, found the best possible music instructors for his children, and paid them well. For his two oldest daughters, Hanna and Bella, he hired Johann Philipp Kirnberger, one of J. S. Bach's most prominent students and the one who codified Bach's teachings in a two-volume treatise on strict musical composition, published in 1772.



Top row, left to right: Daniel Itzig, anonymous painting, c. 1770; Moses Mendelssohn, painting by Johann Christoph Frisch, c. 1780. Bottom row, left to right: Abraham Mendelssohn Bartholdy, drawing by Wilhelm Hensel, 1834; Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, watercolor by James Warren Child, 1829.

Bella Itzig, incidentally, became Felix Mendelssohn's maternal grandmother. She shared the same keyboard instructor with Felix's paternal grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, who also took lessons in music theory from Kirnberger. Mendelssohn, a faithfully practicing Jew, successful businessman, eminent philosopher of the German Enlightenment, along with Daniel Itzig and David Friedländer (Itzig's son-in-law), "devoted himself to the emancipation, both civil and intellectual, of Europe's ghettoized Jewish community."² Abraham Mendelssohn, his second son, received no particular musical training, but he joined in 1793 the newly established Sing-Akademie, a bourgeois choral society modeled after the Academy of Ancient Music in London and founded in 1791 by Carl Fasch, C. P. E. Bach's assistant and later successor as harpsichordist to the Prussian court. In 1796,

2. Steven P. Meyer, "Moses Mendelssohn and the Bach Tradition," *Fidelio Magazine* 8 (2) (1999): 27.

Abraham Mendelssohn's future wife, Lea Salomon, joined the same organization. He probably knew her from earlier family connections, for she was the daughter of Bella Itzig, now married to the Berlin banker Jacob Salomon. An accomplished pianist, Lea is known to have played the *Well-Tempered Clavier* regularly.

The newly-wed Mendelssohns moved to Hamburg in 1804, the year in which C. P. E. Bach's daughter Anna Carolina, last custodian of the Bach family estate, died. When the estate came up for auction in 1805, the Mendelssohns quickly decided to buy the bulk of the music in order to donate it to the Sing-Akademie in Berlin, now under the direction of Carl Friedrich Zelter with whom they had developed a warm relationship. Mendelssohn's acquisition of the Bach estate, which included not only the complete works of C. P. E. Bach but also a significant portion of the surviving works of J. S. Bach, represented a genuine rescue operation with respect to

the latter's music. Its importance for the survival of J. S. Bach's music, contained in more than a hundred unique autograph scores, must not be underestimated and it is safe to say that, without Abraham Mendelssohn's efforts, the losses of Bach's music would be significantly greater than what we have to deplore already.

The acquisition of the Bach estate for the Berlin Sing-Akademie forms the immediate salient background for the later performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* under the baton of nineteen-year-old Felix Mendelssohn. This background, however, is even more directly and concretely connected with the Mendelssohn family. Shortly after Abraham Mendelssohn had donated the Bach manuscript scores of unpublished works to the Sing-Akademie in 1811, Carl Friedrich Zelter began to perform excerpts from the Passions, Masses, and cantatas of J. S. Bach based on the materials saved by Mendelssohn. Meanwhile, Abraham Mendelssohn's family relocated to Berlin. At age ten, Felix joined the Sing-Akademie and, more

Within Levy's music library, the works of J. S. Bach and his four sons – Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christoph Friedrich, and Johann Christian – represent a significant section of a scope and character without parallel elsewhere.

another five years to persuade his teacher Zelter to agree to a complete performance.

Christmas 1823 was special, for it followed the year in which Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn converted to Protestant Christianity and

Daniel Itzig, was seriously opposed to what was happening to the younger generation. We don't know the details of the internal family disputes, but seen in this context, the Christmas present to her grandson Felix in the year of his baptism seems a particularly remarkable gesture, perhaps a sign of reconciliation: a work of undeniably Christian art handed down by a faithful Jewess, with Bach's music standing above doctrinal and confessional traditions. She came to tolerate, if not accept, the notion expressed by Abraham Mendelssohn that true Christianity "contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good."⁴

Sara Levy's Salon and Music Collection

Bella's younger sister Sara held similar, probably even stronger, views about conversion. When she died at age ninety-four, childless, she left her considerable fortune to charity by establishing a foundation for a Jewish orphanage in Berlin. Otherwise, like the rest of the Itzigs, Mendelssohns, Salomons, Ephraims, Friedländers, and others in her extended family, she fit perfectly into the environment of intellectual, cultural, and to some extent political liberalism in a period quite unique in German history: the quarter century from 1780 to 1806, when Napoleon conquered Prussia. This was also a period in which a group of wealthy Jewish women in Berlin "achieved social glory by entertaining the cream of gentile society."⁵ The literary and philosophical salons of Rahel Varnhagen, Henriette Herz, Rebecca Friedländer, and Dorothea Schlegel were among the most prominent and best known, and the success of these Jewish salonnières "was based on defiance of the traditional boundaries separating noble from commoner, gentile from Jew, man from woman. The public happiness achieved in these salons was a real-life enactment of the ideal of *Bildung*, encompassing education, refinement, and the development of character."⁶

ITZIG

Daniel Itzig, 1722 – 1799
 ∞ Miriam Wulff, 1727 – 1788
 → 15 children, among them:

Sara, 1761 – 1854
 ∞ Samuel Levy
 → no children

Bella, 1749 – 1824
 ∞ Jacob Salomon
 → 4 children,
 among them:

Lea, 1777 – 1842

MENDELSSOHN

Moses Mendelssohn, 1729 – 1786
 ∞ Fromet Guggenheim, 1737 – 1812
 → 6 children, among them:

∞ Abraham M. (Bartholdy), 1776 – 1835
 → 4 children, among them:

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, 1809 – 1847

importantly, was put under Zelter's private tutelage. He could have had no better teacher who, among other things, exposed him to Bach's vocal works, including the *St. Matthew Passion* – but almost exclusively in the form of excerpts. Zelter did not consider the large-scale work performable, for musical-technical reasons as much as for its "wretched texts," referring to the baroque-style poetry. But young Felix eagerly wanted to see and study the whole piece. Finally, grandmother Bella Salomon fulfilled his wish, had a professional copy made from the manuscript of the unpublished work in the collection of the Sing-Akademie, and gave it to Felix for Christmas in 1823. He was fourteen then and it took him

added "Bartholdy" to their name in order to be distinguished from the Jewish Mendelssohns. The baptism took place in Frankfurt because Abraham wanted to avoid a public rift with his in-laws, especially since Bella Salomon had disowned her son Jacob upon his conversion.³ Inter-marriage and conversion had become a major trend among Jews in Prussia because it opened up new social, commercial, political, and educational opportunities. Bella Salomon, like her father

³ Jacob Salomon, who, after his conversion, adopted the name "Bartholdy," provided the model for Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn's name change.

⁴ For Abraham Mendelssohn's views on conversion see Wulf Konold, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und seine Zeit* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1984), 69 – 80.

⁵ Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 – 4.



Sara Levy, photograph, c. 1850

Sara Itzig, after her marriage in 1783 to the banker Samuel Levy, established a weekly salon with a strong focus on music at her stately home in old Berlin's poshest neighborhood. For about ten years, from 1774 to 1784, she had studied with Friedemann Bach, J. S. Bach's oldest, and became a keyboard virtuoso in her own right. The silverpoint portrait by Anton Graff of 1786 (see page 26) shows a very attractive young woman at age twenty-five, who regularly performed at the weekly afternoon gatherings in her house but also elsewhere. After the death of her husband in 1806,

she became more engaged in the public concerts of the Sing-Akademie where she regularly appeared as a soloist with the orchestra, performing concertos by Bach and his sons but also by other composers. Sometime after 1815, however, in her mid-fifties, she stopped performing in public (grand-nephew Felix most likely never heard her play).

An undated early photograph from around 1850 depicts Sara Levy in her old age; she survived her grand-nephew by almost seven years. The silverpoint and the photograph in juxtaposition show very dramatically the contrast of two different centuries, not just as reflected in the different age, changed face, body, clothing, and habit of one and the same woman, but also reflected in the technique of portraiture: drawing versus photography. More than that, the new industrial age left no room for the salon culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sara Levy observed and experienced this first hand.

After giving up public performance Sara Levy donated the bulk of her very large music collection to the library of the Berlin Sing-Akademie. Her substantial gift, never inventoried and evaluated in the past, was not accessible for more than half a century after the end of World War II. The Red Army had confiscated the musical archive of the Sing-Akademie together with numerous other trophy materials. Fortunately, since the archive of the Sing-Akademie was recently repatriated from Kiev



W. F. Bach, Trio Sonata in B-flat Major, title page

to Berlin, the materials can now be examined and the extent of the Levy collection assessed. Only now it becomes clear how prominently this extraordinary woman figures in the early reception of the music of the Bach family.

Madame Levy's music collection was quite comprehensive, consisting almost exclusively of instrumental music by all major composers active in the second half of the eighteenth century. The repertoire extended from solo keyboard works and chamber music of different kinds to concertos and symphonies – the music room in her house could easily accommodate an orchestra of eighteenth-century proportions. She owned many keyboard instruments of various kinds and was particularly fond of the fortepianos by Friedrich Silbermann of Strasbourg.

Within Levy's music library, the works of J. S. Bach and his four sons – Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christoph Friedrich, and Johann Christian – represent a significant section of a scope and character without parallel elsewhere. Moreover, her collection formed a library for practical use, that is, the collection contained not only scores but also performing parts. The title wrapper for a set of parts usually provides an incipit of the work for easy identification and usually shows Sara Levy's characteristic round ownership stamp.

Namen der Pränumeranten:	
Die Frau Hauptmannin Johanna Maria v. Abercass in Breslau.	Herr Hartnoch in Riga, auf 12 Exemplare.
Herr Agricola, Königl. Preuss. Hof-Componist in Berlin.	— Dr. Hinrich Wilhelm Sasperg, Domherr in Hamburg.
— Ludolph Ahlers, Kaufmann in Hamburg.	Ihro Durchlaucht, die Fürstin v. Sarsfeld in Breslau.
— Eberhard Andreas Alfften, J. U. L. in Hamburg.	Herr v. Hedemann, Erbherr zu Dorste bey Nordheim.
— Charles Amsink, Kaufmann in Hamburg.	— Hein, Juge d'Attribution in Breslau.
— Will. Avison in Liffland.	— Cantor Geiser in Altona.
— Cantor Ay in Wartenberg.	— Heinrich Carl Senneberg, Kaufmann in Queblinsburg.
— Cappellmeister Bach in Eisenach.	— Zerling, Musikus in Berlin, auf 2 Exemplare.
— Concertmeister Bach in Wiedeburg.	Se. Hochwürden, der Herr Probst Sermes zum Heiligen Geiste in Breslau.
— Dörge, J. U. L. in Hamburg.	Herr Johann Christian Hinrichs in Hamburg.
— Johann Gottlieb Baum, Kaufmann in Hirschberg.	— Hof, Commissarius und Buchhändler in Warschau, auf 2 Exemplare.
— Kammer-Commissionsrath Beck in Sorau.	— Hoff in Berlin.
— Organist Beckmann in Celle.	— Obergorganist J. G. Hoffmann in Breslau.
— Organist Bertuch in Berlin.	— Kammermusikus Horn in Dresden, auf 5 Exemplare.
— Oberamtsrath Beyer in Wrieg.	— Johann David Jentsch, Kaufmann in Schweidnitz.
— Daniel Böckelmeier in Liffland.	Mlle. Feig in Berlin.
Frau v. Böttcher in Celle.	Herr Conrad Christoph Jung in Uffenheim.
Herr Buchdrucker Beck in Hamburg.	— Kannengießer, Königl. Preuss. Kammermusikus in Berlin.
— Borchmüller, Vicarius und Organist am Dom in Magdeburg.	
— Dreitkopf und Sohn in Leipzig, auf 2 Exemplare.	
— Kanzler-Advocat v. Brinken in Wolfenbüttel.	
— Carl Burney, Doctor musices in London, auf 6	

The names on the list of subscribers to C. P. E. Bach, Six Concertos for Harpsichord (Hamburg, 1772) includes Mademoiselle Itzig.



C. P. E. Bach, Quartet in G Major, Wq 95; autograph manuscript

Sara Levy not only arranged musical performances, both with and without her participation, but she also occasionally commissioned new works and became a major patron for the two elder Bach brothers. Her teacher W. F. Bach wrote a song for her wedding in 1783 – probably his last composition, for he died a year later. Sara Levy had supported him financially for the last ten years of his life; he in turn provided her with music. It was probably only after Friedemann’s death that she established direct contact with his younger brother Emanuel (who had left Berlin for Hamburg when she was only seven) and maintained relations with him and, after his death in 1788, with his widow. Her collection already contained 16 keyboard concertos by C. P. E. Bach when she commissioned him to write another concerto, this time for harpsichord, fortepiano, and orchestra, which turned out to be C. P. E. Bach’s last composition. Levy’s collection contains the autograph score of this most special piece that deliberately juxtaposes two different types, or if you will generations, of keyboard solo instruments: the traditional harpsichord and the modern fortepiano.

Just prior to this commission she apparently ordered from C. P. E. Bach a set of three quartets, also with an unusual combination of instruments: fortepiano, flute, and viola. Again, the autograph score of 1788 and sole surviv-

ing source of the work forms part of her collection. This score also shows the unstable and trembly hand of the seventy-four-year-old composer who suffered from gout and wrote with considerable difficulty. All three pieces are headed “*Quartet fürs Clavier, Flöte u. Bratsche*” (quartet for clavier, flute, and viola) and the layout of the score indicates Bach’s definition of quartet: rather than referring to four different instruments he stresses four independent contrapuntal lines of music, one each for flute, viola, fortepiano right hand, and fortepiano left hand. Haydn or Mozart would have called it a piano trio, but their standard scoring would be for violin, cello, and piano.

The unusual and innovative approach that C. P. E. Bach takes here in the last year of his life focuses on a well-adjusted distribution of the four instrumental voices and the clear distinctions between them. The integration of a woodwind and a string instrument adds different colors to the homogeneous keyboard parts. Moreover, using a viola instead of a violin puts emphasis on the middle ground of the score, that is, on the center of the sound spectrum. The result constitutes an evenly balanced instrumental discourse that permits the composer to engage in a lively, intense, and witty musical dialogue – in all likelihood a fitting interlude to the verbal conversations invariably conducted among the guests of

Sara Levy’s literary-musical salon, which included the Humboldt brothers and other members of Berlin’s intellectual elite.

Their discussions are not recorded, of course, but their listening to the music of two different generations of Bachs, the father and his sons, would have invited them to compare stylistic dialects of the past with the best of what was new in the contemporary scene of music – like the works of Mozart, who performed in Berlin in the spring of 1789. This experience undoubtedly would have given them a clear sense of a historical dimension in music together with a sense of urgency in preserving the musical past for the future. That was eventually realized when in 1809 Wilhelm von Humboldt expanded the Prussian Academy of Arts by adding a music division. Its first head was Carl Friedrich Zelter, director of the Berlin Sing-Akademie, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s principal teacher, and the one who consciously started an archive of music that eventually came to incorporate Sara Levy’s collection. ■

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Sara Levy, drawing by Anton Graff, 1786; Daniel Itzig, anonymous painting, c. 1770; Moses Mendelssohn, painting by Johann Christoph Frisch, c. 1780; Abraham Mendelssohn Bartholdy, drawing by Wilhelm Hensel, 1834; Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, watercolor by James Warren Child, 1829
Photo credit: Mendelssohn-Archiv, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz

Sara Levy, photograph, c. 1850
Photo credit: Bach-Archiv Leipzig

W. F. Bach, Trio Sonata in B-flat Major, title page
Photo credit: Sing-Akademie zu Berlin

C. P. E. Bach, Quartet in G Major, Wq 95; autograph manuscript
Photo credit: Sing-Akademie zu Berlin



Christoph Wolff speaking on A Bach Cult in Late-Eighteenth-Century Berlin.



Robert Levin (Harvard University), Christopher Krueger (University of Massachusetts at Amherst), Daniel Stepner (Lydian String Quartet), and Malcolm Bilson, seated (Cornell University) performed works by Johann Sebastian, Wilhelm Friedemann, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.