

## THE AUDITION

“Next!”

A rather odd-looking man got up from his chair and made his way over to the desk. He'd been sitting in the waiting room of Magnetic Records for over two hours and now that his turn had come he was stiff and bent half-double. He wore a long brown coat and a wig not unlike those worn by judges in British courts. He might or might not have been carrying a pomander, but either way he carried a strong perfume.

“Full name,” the woman behind the counter yelled, even though the man was only a foot or two away from her.

“Johann Sebastian Bach.”

“Could you spell that please?” The visitor patiently spelled out his full name and she wrote it down on a fresh form. On went the receptionist. “Well, Jo–Hann,” she said in a deep Tennessee accent. “What do *you* play? Do you sing? Lead guitar? Bass guitar? We could do with a nice bass – ever since the man that played with Johnny-Lee Williams And The Oklahoma boys passed away. ‘Lil unfortunate, that, but shoulda pointed the gun in the other direction, wouldn’t ya say?”

She looked at the strange man, expecting a reply, but he was too bemused to speak and she began to take pity on him.

“Why now, Mr Batch, my name’s Mary-Lee. Why don’t you just take your time and tell me all about it?”

The stranger took a deep breath, then began. “Three weeks ago I sent a couple of demo tapes in to your studio here, and yesterday I received a letter from your company Magnetic

Records asking me to come in for an audition.”

Bach waved the letter at her; Mary-Lee glanced at it and handed it back. “Why bless me, Jo-Hann, ain’t that just the thing? You must be *so* excited! Is this you-ah first aw-dition?”

“I’ve done auditions before, but this is the first I’ve done in Nashville,” Bach replied.

Mary-Lee stood for a moment, arms akimbo, then wiggled her hips and said, “Well, Jo-Hann, Ah-ma just *so* pleased for you. But I gotta do mah job and just take a little bitty detail first, is that all rightee?” Bach nodded, so she continued. “So, Jo-Hann, well ah need an address.”

So off they went, while Bach supplied a temporary address – a hotel in downtown Nashville – a mobile phone number and an email address, jsbach@brandenburg.com, his next of kin and some details of his education.

Then Mary-Lee moved on to the next part of the form.

“Well, now Jo-Hann. Just what do you do?” She smiled broadly and expectantly.

“Well, I sent a demo tape of some music I thought you might be interested in. Partitas, inventions, preludes and fugues, that sort of thing.”

“Are they in-stru-ments, Jo-Hann?”

“No, no, I played them on my clavichord,” he explained.

“Clavichord? What’s that – some sort of mouth music?”

“It’s a keyboard. Like a harpsichord, I suppose.”

Mary-Lee suddenly became excited. “You play keyboards? Well bless me, Jo-Hann, this I must hear. Have you brought it with you, this keyboard?”

“The letter from Mr Weinberg said I wouldn’t need to today.”

Mary-Lee sat back, content. “Well then, Jo-Hann, if Mr Weinberg says you won’t need your in-stru-ment, then you won’t need it. Here in Nashville, Mr Weinberg decides what’s goin’ down, ya know?”

Bach didn’t, but said nothing.

Mary-Lee pointed over to a glass door on the other side of the corridor. “Why don’t you go and sit you-ah self down in the waiting room, Jo-Hann? Mr Weinberg will be out to see you in just a little bitty minute.”

Bach simply nodded and did as requested.

It was to be a full forty-five minutes before Bach was attended to. The waiting room was full of other hopefuls of all shapes and sizes, some carrying guitars or sheet music, and one or two were quietly rehearsing their acts in corners of the room. Bach had all but given up hope of his turn ever coming round, and was on to the fifth cookery magazine on the waiting-room table, when suddenly the door burst open and two men looked part-way into the room, the way doctors do when your turn has come to be seen.

“Which of you is Jo-Hann Seb-as-tian Bach?” the smaller man asked. He wore a conservative grey suit, while his younger and taller colleague wore a brown suit. Bach raised his hand slightly sheepishly. He was beginning to wonder if this recording contract was a good idea after all.

The smaller man extended his hand. “Well my, Jo-Hann – can we call you Jo-Hann? – we’re real sorry to keep you waiting. Pressure of work, of course. Say, I’m Sam Weinberg and this gentleman is Max Golding, one of our rising stars at Magnetic.” Bach shook hands with each in turn. “Say Jo–Hann, you just call us Max and Sam. Let’s keep it all informal.”

Bach nodded. “You said I should come for an audition... Sam. In your letter. Did you get my demo tapes?”

“Tapes? Demo tapes? Oh we probably won’t need those,” Weinberg said. “Tell me what you do.”

“I write music. I sent you some examples, a lot in fact. Did you like them?”

“Oh we ain’t got time to listen to all the tapes we get sent in. Why don’t you just tell Max and me what you do?”

Bach sighed, realising that once again he was going to have to tell them everything. “I play organ, harpsichord, clavichord – ”

“What’s that?” scowled the taller Golding guy.

“It’s a type of keyboard,” Bach explained.

Weinberg suddenly sounded ecstatic. “Ah, so you play keyboards, Jo-Hann! Excellent! We can always use a keyboard player.” Then he dropped his voice and added, conspiratorially, “You any good, Jo-Hann?”

Bach cleared his throat. “I’m considered quite good in my home town of Leipzig.”

“As in Leipzig, North Dakota? Well, my, Jo-Hann, ain’t that just the thing?” Before Bach could correct him, he was off again. “So you’re a frontiersman, Mr Bach?”

“Leipzig is in Germany,” Bach said, patiently.

Weinberg scowled. “You ain’t one of them Nazis are you? I got issues with Nazis.”

“I’m not a Nazi, Mr Weinberg,” Bach replied. “To be honest, I’m not quite sure what a Nazi is, but I’ve heard they aren’t very nice.”

“They sure ain’t, Mr Back,” Weinberg growled, mispronouncing his name.

Golding tried to lighten the mood. “What are you going to play for us, Mr Bach?”

“I was going to play my *Theme and Variations in G*.”

“Theme and Variations?”

“Yes, I play a simple tune and then variations of it.”

“You can make that last for a three-minute single?” Golding said disbelievingly.

“Well over half an hour,” Bach replied.

Golding and Weinberg looked across at each other.

“Look Mr Bach,” Golding said, “I don’t wanna offend you but could we keep it to our standard length of three minutes? Can you leave out a couple of verses?”

“Naturally. I can tailor the piece however you wish.”

“Now you’re talking my language, Mr Bach,” Weinberg chipped in. “And if it’s good, we could release the long version as an album – say, but we haven’t heard you play yet. Where’s your keyboard, Jo-Hann?”

“I didn’t bring one, remember? I was rather hoping I could borrow one of yours.”

“One of our ‘whats’? We don’t have no clavichord here.”

“I can play it for you on an organ or even on that piano over

there,” Bach said, pointing to the upright in the middle of the floor. “It sounds different on each instrument of course.”

Weinberg stroked his chin.

“OK, Jo-Hann. Let’s go to the party!” and ushered Bach to the piano while he himself and Golding took a chair.

Bach began to play, play such a beautiful melody that the notes soared to the ceiling and resonated all around the room. The theme – in two parts – was slow but tuneful, each glorious phrase quietly in turn simultaneously exploring the most inaccessible corners of the studio, and of the listener’s soul. Only the most hardened individual could not be moved by its sweetness.

Unfortunately, two such individuals were seated before Bach.

“Say Jo-Hann,” Weinberg said, “care to speed it up a bit?”

At that moment, Bach moved on to the first of the variations, which was much quicker.

“Hey, that’s more like it!” Weinberg called, then after a moment said, “But not too fast. That needs rhythm and bass, Jo-Hann.”

Bach stopped playing. “Rhythm and bass? For a keyboard piece?”

“Sure, and a brass section, too. Jazz it up a bit.”

Golding suddenly sat up. “How about making a hip-hop version, Johann? Could you try that for us? Or could we line you up to accompany Dolly Parton?”

Bach shook his head. “I don’t think this is working, gentlemen,” and with that he stood up at the piano and turned for the door.

“Hey, Jo-Hann, don’t go!” Weinberg cried out. “Don’t be downhearted, please. We might be able to adapt your music somehow, after all this is Nashville! Anyway, what’s this song of yours called? Does it have a name?”

“Not yet,” Bach replied. “Any suggestions? I don’t care, really. You could call it the ‘Weinberg and Golding Variations’ for all I care.”

“Nice try, Jo-Hann,” Weinberg replied, smiling, “but we should keep our names out of it, I think.”

Bach sensed an opportunity. “Or combine your names in some way? How about ‘The Wining Variations’?”

The two laughed uproariously. “Now that is real funny, Jo-Hann. I almost like that,” said Weinberg. “Just not quite funny enough. Perhaps you’ll come up with another title some day.”

“OK, gentlemen, I think that means we’re done. Thank you for listening.”

“Unless you have anything else to let us hear?”

“Most of it’s in the same style,” Bach said. Returning to the piano, he said, “How about this? Like the other tune, it’s in the key of G,” and with that he played a few lines.

“Sounds not too bad, Jo-Hann. Does it have words?”

Bach shook his head. “Not at the moment. Nobody listens to the words anyway, they’re often in foreign languages. For all I care you could just make it up as you went along.”

“Show us,” Golding suggested.

Bach played the new tune and sang along with it, using the first words that came into his head – stuff about ‘fandangos’, ‘middles’, ‘cartwheels on the floor’ and so on – just to fill the

space. When he couldn't think of anything else, Bach simply sang 'a whiter shade of pale'. Golding and Weinberg listened politely to the end.

"Well," said Weinberg. "That was some song, Jo-Hann. But you'll understand that it'll never catch on. Who'd buy a three-minute single about 'fandangos', for goodness sake? I'm not sure even our own lyricists could ever come with anything for your melodies, Jo-Hann."

Bach sighed. "You're probably right," he said. He stood up, this time for good, and made his way across to the studio exit, wondering at the same time how he could ever persuade recording studios to take his music. Perhaps one day.

But in the meantime he faced yet another day of auditions tomorrow, somewhere else, in yet another studio.

Bach's *Goldberg Variations* were published in 1741 and have gone on to become one of the great pieces in keyboard repertoire. His *Air On A G String* – actually in the key of D – was probably written earlier, around 1720, and was later to form the core of the 1967 Procul Harum No 1 hit *A Whiter Shade Of Pale*.