

“O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort” BWV 20

Erster Teil

1. **O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort,  
O Schwert, das durch die Seele bohrt,  
O Anfang sonder Ende!  
O Ewigkeit, Zeit ohne Zeit,  
Ich weiss vor grosser Traurigkeit  
Nicht, wo ich mich hinwende.  
Mein ganz erschrocken Herz erbebt,  
Dass mir die Zung am Gaumen klebt.**

2. **Kein Unglück ist in aller Welt zu finden,  
Das ewig dauernd sei:  
Es muss doch endlich mit der Zeit einmal verschwinden.  
Ach! aber ach! die Pein der Ewigkeit hat nur kein Ziel;  
Sie treibet fort und fort ihr Marterspiel,  
Ja, wie selbst Jesus spricht,  
Aus ihr ist kein Erlösung nicht.**

3. **Ewigkeit, du machst mir bange,  
Ewig, ewig ist zu lange!  
Ach, hier gilt fürwahr kein Scherz.  
Flammen, die auf ewig brennen,  
Ist kein Feuer gleich zu nennen;  
Es erschrickt und bebt mein Herz,  
Wenn ich diese Pein bedenke  
Und den Sinn zur Höllen lenke.**

4. **Gesetzt, es dauerte der Verdammten Qual  
So viele Jahr, als an der Zahl  
Auf Erden Gras, am Himmel Sterne wären;  
Gesetzt, es sei die Pein so weit hinausgestellt,**

Part 1

1. **Oh eternity, you word of thunder;<sup>1</sup>  
Oh sword that bores through the soul;<sup>2</sup>  
Oh beginning without end!  
Oh eternity, time without time,<sup>3</sup>  
I do not know, in the face of great sorrow,  
Where I might turn.  
My completely terrified heart quakes,  
So that my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.**

2. **No misfortune is to be found in all the world  
That is eternally lasting;  
With time, it must indeed finally disappear some day.  
Ah, but ah, the pain of eternity simply has no finish;  
On and on, it [eternity] is at its business of torment;  
Yes, as Jesus himself says,  
There is no redemption from it.<sup>4</sup>**

3. **Eternity, you make me afraid;  
Eternal, eternal is too long!  
Ah, this is truly no joking matter.  
Flames that burn for eternity—  
No fire can be called its like;  
My heart is terrified and trembles  
When I consider this pain  
And direct my thoughts to hell.**

4. **Assuming the agony of the damned lasted  
As many years as the number  
Of blades of grass on earth, of stars in heaven;  
Assuming this pain is spread as widely**

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1, 7, and 11 take their texts verbatim from three stanzas of the hymn “O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort.” The remaining movements paraphrase the content from other stanzas, but are sometimes partly verbatim (something that is not fully and properly captured in most other modern printings of this libretto and its translation).

<sup>1</sup>“Donnerwort” connotes fearsomeness even more than loudness. A “word of thunder” strikes to the very heart.

<sup>2</sup>Hebrews 4:12 says that “das Wort Gottes” (“the word of God”) is a sword that pierces the soul.

<sup>3</sup>To Lutherans of Bach’s day, “Ewigkeit” (“eternity”) had several meanings: (A) no beginning or end; (B) very long; (C) with a beginning but no end; (D) timeless/atemporal (sometimes explained as past, present and future all being experienced as “a permanent now”). Nearly all uses in this cantata reflect sense C, which is the most common understanding of the biblical words that are translated as “ewig” in the Luther Bibles. The fourth line 4 of movement 1 and the last line of movement 7, however, reflect sense D, a notion of eternity taken over from Greek philosophy into early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism.

<sup>4</sup>That is, even “der Erlöser” (“the redeemer”), Jesus, says this. These lines are possibly a partly garbled adaptation of the sentiments in Matthew 5:25-26, where Jesus speaks of nigh impossible redemption from prison.

Als Menschen in der Welt  
Von Anbeginn gewesen,  
So wäre doch zuletzt  
Derselben Ziel und Mass gesetzt:  
Sie müsste doch einmal aufhören.  
**Nun aber, wenn du die Gefahr,**  
Verdammt! tausend Millionen Jahr  
Mit allen Teufeln ausgestanden,  
So ist doch nie der Schluss vorhanden;  
**Die Zeit, so niemand zählen kann,**  
Fängt jeden Augenblick  
Zu deiner Seelen ewgem Ungelück  
Sich stets von neuem an.

5. Gott ist gerecht in seinen Werken:  
**Auf kurze Sünden dieser Welt**  
Hat er **so lange Pein bestellt;**  
Ach wollte doch die Welt dies merken!  
**Kurz ist die Zeit, der Tod geschwind,**  
Bedenke dies, o Menschenkind!

6. O Mensch, errette deine Seele,  
Entfliehe Satans Sklaverei  
Und mache dich von Sünden frei,  
Damit in jener Schwefelhöhle  
Der Tod, so die Verdammten plagt,  
Nicht deine Seele ewig nagt.  
O Mensch, errette deine Seele!

7. **Solang ein Gott im Himmel lebt**

As there have been people in the world  
From the beginning [of creation]<sup>5</sup>—  
In this way, its [pain's] extent and measure  
Would indeed, in the end, be set:  
It would indeed some day have to cease.  
**But, now then, when you have endured the distress,**  
Damned one, of a thousand million years  
With all the demons,<sup>6</sup>  
Then the endpoint will still never be at hand;  
**Time, which nobody can count up,**  
At every moment,  
To your soul's eternal misfortune,  
Ever begins anew.

5. God is just-minded in his [commanded] works:<sup>7</sup>  
**For short-lasting sins of this world**  
He has **appointed such enduring pain;**  
Ah, if the world would only take note of this!  
**Time is short, death quick;**  
Consider this, oh child of humankind.

6. O humankind, rescue your soul;  
Escape Satan's slavery  
And disengage yourself from sin,<sup>8</sup>  
So that in that sulfurous pit,<sup>9</sup>  
The figure of death, who plagues the damned,  
Does not eternally gnaw upon your soul.<sup>10</sup>  
O humankind, rescue your soul.

7. **All the while that a God in heaven lives,**

<sup>5</sup>“Von Anbeginn der Welt” (“from the beginning of the world,” i.e., of God's creation) is a biblical expression, found e.g. in Matthew 25:34 and Hebrews 4:3.

<sup>6</sup>The Luther Bibles used the singular “der Teufel” (“the devil”) to refer to Satan, and the plural “die Teufel” (literally, “the devils”) to refer to the “demons” (or, “evil spirits”) whose leader is the devil.

<sup>7</sup>This line is often taken to mean that “the Lord is righteous in all his [own] works” or “the Lord is fair in all his dealings.” But the true sense depends on knowing its derivation from Baruch 2:9, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Der HERR ist gerecht in allen seinen Werken, die er uns hat geboten” (“The LORD is just-minded in all his works that he has commanded us”). That is, in light of this allusion, the cantata poetry would be saying that God makes reasonable demands, and that when people do not follow God's demands, he punishes thoroughly.

<sup>8</sup>The notion here is not that people become sinless, but that they become no longer entirely governed by sin, as proclaimed in Romans 8:2, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “das Gesetz des Geistes ... hat mich frei gemacht von dem Gesetz der Sünden und des Todes” (“the law of the spirit ... has disengaged/freed me from the law of sin and of death”).

<sup>9</sup>In Revelation 19:20, 20:10, and 21:8, the Luther Bibles refer to a “Pfuhl” (“pool”) of “Schwefel” (“brimstone/sulfur”) into which Satan is thrown. This place has been traditionally associated with hell.

<sup>10</sup>The notion that death feeds/gnaws upon souls in hell comes from Luther's rendering of Psalm 49:15, “Sie liegen in der Hölle wie Schafe, der Tod naget sie” (“They [the foolish] lie in hell like sheep, [where the figure of] death will gnaw upon them”).

Und über alle Wolken schwebt,  
Wird solche Marter währen:  
Es wird sie plagen Kält und Hitz,  
Angst, Hunger, Schrecken, Feur und Blitz  
Und sie doch nicht verzehren.  
Denn wird sich enden diese Pein,  
Wenn Gott nicht mehr wird ewig sein.

And hovers over all the clouds,  
Such torment will continue;  
Cold and heat will plague it [your soul],  
Fear, hunger, terror, fire, and lightning,  
And yet not consume it.  
For this pain will draw itself to a close  
When [Jesus returns, and thus] God will be no longer  
eternal.<sup>11</sup>

## Zweiter Teil

## Part 2

8. Wacht auf, wacht auf, verlornen<sup>12</sup> Schafe,  
Ermuntert euch vom Sündenschlafe  
Und bessert euer Leben bald!  
Wacht auf, eh die Posaune schallt,  
Die euch mit Schrecken aus der Gruft  
Zum Richter aller Welt vor das Gerichte<sup>13</sup> ruft!

8. Wake up, wake up, lost sheep,  
Rouse yourselves from your complacency of sin<sup>14</sup>  
And improve your life immediately.<sup>15</sup>  
Wake up, before the trumpet sounds,<sup>16</sup>  
Which summons you with terror out of the grave  
To the judge of all the world, at the Tribunal [of Christ].<sup>17</sup>

9. Verlass, o Mensch, die Wollust dieser Welt,  
**Pracht, Hoffart, Reichtum, Ehr und Geld;**  
Bedenke doch  
In dieser Zeit annoch,  
Da dir der Baum des Lebens grünet,

9. Forsake, oh humankind, the pleasure of this world,<sup>18</sup>  
**Splendor, arrogance, riches, honor, and money;**  
Consider indeed  
As yet in this present time,  
While the tree of life<sup>19</sup> flourishes for you,

<sup>11</sup>The idea here, apparently, is that the Godly, too, experience continual misery on earth, but their souls will not be consumed by this. At the end of the world, God in the form of the transformed body of Jesus will physically come out of eternity back into time, and according to Revelation 21:4, “Gott wird abwischen alle Tränen von ihren Augen, und der Tod wird nicht mehr sein, noch Leid” (“God will wipe away all tears from their [the people of God’s] eyes, and death will be no longer, nor suffering”). That is, the hymn text of this movement takes the “God” of Revelation 21 to mean specifically “Jesus.”

<sup>12</sup>Bach’s own score and performing parts read “verlornen”; some modern editions correct this to “verlorne.”

<sup>13</sup>“Das Gerichte” is an older spelling of “das Gericht,” found in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, e.g., in John 5:24.

<sup>14</sup>“Sündenschlafe” (literally, “sleep of sin”) is a semi-technical early Lutheran theological term that refers to the complacency of the person who is corrupted in essence by sin but is obliviously “asleep” to this problem and needs to “wake up.”

<sup>15</sup>“Bald,” usually understood in English as “soon,” is here being used as a synonym for the archaic English expression “anon” (i.e., “immeditately”).

<sup>16</sup>This moment is described in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “wir werden aber alle verwandelt werden; und dasselbige plötzlich in einem Augenblick, zur Zeit der letzten Posaune. Denn es wird die Posaune schallen” (“but we shall all be transformed [out of the grave, at the end time], and the selfsame suddenly, in an instant, at the time of the last trumpet [literally, “trombone”]. For the trumpet will sound”).

<sup>17</sup>Being brought before the “judgment seat of Christ” is announced in Romans 14:10, “Wir werden alle vor den Richtstuhl Christi dargestellt werden” (“We will all be brought [at the end time] before the judgment seat of Christ”). “Das Jüngste Gericht” or “das Letzte Gericht” (in English, usually, “the Last Judgment”; sometimes rendered as “the Tribunal of Christ”) is the traditional term for the biblically predicted trial of nations and persons before God or Christ at the end time.

<sup>18</sup>The Lutheranism of Bach’s day made a distinction between a “vernünfftige Wollust” (“reasonable pleasure”) that is of God and a “verderbte Wollust” (“corrupted pleasure”) that is of the world.

Was dir zu deinem Friede dienet!  
**Vielleicht ist dies der letzte Tag,**  
Kein Mensch **weiss**, wenn er **sterben mag**.  
Wie leicht, wie bald  
Ist mancher tot und kalt!  
Man kann noch diese Nacht  
Den Sarg vor deine Türe bringen.  
Drum sei vor allen Dingen  
Auf deiner Seelen Heil bedacht!

10. O Menschenkind,  
Hör auf geschwind,  
Die Sünd und Welt zu lieben,  
Dass nicht die Pein,  
Wo Heulen und Zähnkappen sein,  
Dich ewig mag betrüben!  
Ach spiegle dich am reichen Mann,  
Der in der Qual  
Auch nicht einmal  
Ein Tröpflein Wasser haben kann!

What serves you for your peace [in salvation].<sup>20</sup>  
**Perhaps this is the last day;**<sup>21</sup>  
No person **knows** when he **may die**.  
How easily, how quickly  
Is many a person dead and cold!  
Your coffin could this very night  
Be brought to your door.  
So, above all things,  
Be mindful of your soul's salvation.

10. O child of humankind,  
Quickly cease  
To love sin and the world,  
Lest<sup>22</sup> the pain [of hell],<sup>23</sup>  
Where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth,<sup>24</sup>  
May eternally aggrieve you.  
Ah, behold yourself mirrored in [the parable of] the rich  
man,<sup>25</sup>  
Who, in his agony,  
Cannot have even  
A droplet of water.

<sup>19</sup>The “tree of life” here is a metaphor for “wisdom” associated with “peace,” as proclaimed in Proverbs 13:7-8, “Ihre Wege sind liebliche Wege, und alle ihre Steige sind Friede. Sie ist ein Baum des Lebens allen, die sie ergreifen; und selig sind, die sie halten” (“Her [Wisdom’s] ways are lovely ways, and all her byways are peace. She is a tree of life to all who grasp her; and blessed are [they] who hold her”).

<sup>20</sup>These lines derive much of their language from Luke 19:42, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Wenn du es wütest, so würdest du auch bedenken zu dieser deiner Zeit, was zu deinem Friede dienet” (“If you knew [what] it [was], then even you [Jerusalem] would consider, at this time of yours, what serves for your peace”). Lutheran commentary of Bach’s day on this passage taught that “what serves for your peace” means “[what] serve[s] for your temporal and eternal salvation” (“zu deinem zeitlichen und ewigen Heil gedienet”).

<sup>21</sup>2 Peter 3:3 refers to the future period just before the end time, when eternity and the day of God’s judgment draws near, as “die letzten Tagen” (“the last days”).

<sup>22</sup>In older German, the “dass ... nicht” construction is sometimes used where modern German would use “damit ... nicht” (in English, “lest”).

<sup>23</sup>The eternal pain spoken of here comes from Matthew 25:46 with 25:41, “Und sie werden in die ewige Pein gehen; ... in das ewige Feuer, das bereitet ist dem Teufel und seinen Engeln” (“And they [the cursed] will go into the eternal pain [of hell]; ... into the eternal fire that is prepared for the devil and his angels”). “Pein” (“pain”) is said to be suffered specifically “in der Hölle (“in hell”) in the Luther Bible’s rendering of Luke 16:23-24.

<sup>24</sup>The “there/place” in the expression “da wird sein Heulen und Zähnkappen” (“there [i.e., over there, in that place] will be wailing and gnashing of teeth”) has traditionally been understood as “hell.” The entire expression appears in Luke 13:28 and in Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, and 25:30.

<sup>25</sup>“The rich man” refers to “The parable of the rich man [in hell] and Lazarus [in heaven]” in Luke 16:19-31. The command “spiegle dich” here apparently means not “reflect upon” but “behold yourself mirrored in.” The verb is used in this way, e.g., in 2 Corinthians 3:18, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Nun aber spiegelt sich in uns allen des HERRN Klarheit” (“But now the radiance of the LORD beholds itself mirrored in us all”).

11. O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort,  
O Schwert, das durch die Seele bohrt,  
O Anfang sonder Ende!  
O Ewigkeit, Zeit ohne Zeit,  
Ich weiss vor grosser Traurigkeit  
Nicht, wo ich mich hinwende.  
Nimm du mich, wenn es dir gefällt,  
Herr Jesu, in dein Freudenzelt!

11. Oh eternity, you word of thunder;<sup>26</sup>  
Oh sword that bores through the soul;<sup>27</sup>  
Oh beginning without end.  
Oh eternity, time without time,  
I do not know, in the face of great sorrow,  
Where to turn.  
Take me, if /when it pleases you,  
Lord Jesus, into your tabernacle of joy.<sup>28</sup>

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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<sup>26</sup>See fn. 1, above.

<sup>27</sup>See fn. 2, above.

<sup>28</sup>The “Freudenzelt” (literally, “tent of joy”) is apparently the tabernacle of heaven, based on Hebrews 8:1-2, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Wir haben einen solchen Hohenpriester, der da sitzt ... im Himmel und ist ein Pfleger ... der wahrhaftigen Hütten, welche Gott aufgerichtet hat, und kein Mensch” (“We have such a high priest [Jesus] who there, in heaven, sits ... and is a keeper ... of the true tabernacle [the one in heaven], which God, and no human being, has erected”). Note that “der wahrhaften Hütten” in this older German is genitive feminine singular, not plural.