

“Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende?” BWV 27

1. Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende?

Das weiss der liebe Gott allein,
Ob meine Wallfahrt auf der Erden
Kurz oder länger möge sein.
Hin geht die Zeit, her kommt der Tod,
Und endlich kommt es doch so weit,
Dass sie zusammentreffen werden.
**Ach, wie geschwinde und behände
Kann kommen meine Todesnot!**
Wer weiss, ob heute nicht
Mein Mund¹ die letzten Worte spricht.
Drum bet ich alle Zeit:
**Mein Gott, ich bitt durch Christi Blut,
Machs nur mit meinem Ende gut!**²

2. Mein Leben hat kein ander Ziel,
Als dass ich möge selig sterben
Und meines Glaubens Anteil erben;
Drum leb ich allezeit
Zum Grabe fertig und bereit,
Und was das Werk der Hände tut,
Ist gleichsam, ob ich sicher wüsste,
Dass ich noch heute sterben müsste:
Denn Ende gut, macht alles gut!

1. Who knows how near my end [is]?

Dear God alone knows this,
Whether my pilgrimage on earth
Might be short or longer.
There goes time, here comes death,
And ultimately it comes, indeed, to the point
That they will meet up.
**Ah, how swiftly and briskly
My death throes³ can come.**
Who knows whether [or] not today
My mouth utters its last words.
Thus I pray always:
**My God, I ask by Christ's blood:
Of my end, only make it [go] well.**

2. My life has no other goal
Than that I might die blessed [in salvation]
And inherit the portion [promised] of my faith;⁴
Thus at all times I live
Ready and prepared for the grave;
And as for⁵ “the [daily-life] work of my hands,”⁶
[It] is just as⁷ if I knew for sure
That I must die this very day:
For all's well that ends well.⁸

¹Bach's original performing part reads “*der Mund*” (literally, “*the mouth*”), but this too would in any event be properly rendered in English as “my mouth.”

²The first stanza of this chorale.

³Technically, this should be the singular, “death *thro*e,” but in current English, the plural is typically employed.

⁴ Peter 1:4-5 promises “*einem Erbe, das behalten wird im Himmel euch, die ihr aus Gottes Macht durch den Glauben bewahrt werdet zur Seligkeit, welche zubereitet ist, dass sie offenbar werde zu der letzten Zeit*” (“an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you who out of the power of God through faith [in Christ] are preserved for [eternal] blessedness/salvation, which is prepared such that it might be manifest at the end time”).

⁵“Was tut, ist” is apparently used here as a synonym for “was betrifft, ist” (“as for [something], [it] is”). “Was das ... tut” facilitates a rhyme with “Ende ... gut” in the proverb at the closing line of the movement.

⁶“Die Werke deiner Hände” (“the works of your hands”) is a characteristic phrase in the book of Deuteronomy. It refers to the ordinary undertakings of daily life, not necessarily to any particular enterprise or line of work (e.g., manual labor). The expression also appears, most famously for Lutherans of Bach's day, in Psalm 90:17, “Und der HERR, unser Gott ... fördere das Werk unsrer Hände bei uns” (“And may the LORD our God ... encourage the work of our hands among us”). The Calov Study Bible, owned by Bach, explains that “*der HERR fördere das Werk unsrer Hände*” means “*der HERR ordne es zu einem guten Ende*” (“may the LORD arrange it [that we come to a] to a good end”).

⁷“Gleichsam” is apparently used here as a synonym for “ebenso” (“just as”).

⁸Literally, “Because a good end, makes everything good.”

3. Willkommen! will ich sagen,
Wenn der Tod ans Bette tritt.
Fröhlich will ich folgen, wenn er ruft,
/ Fröhlich folg ich, wenn er ruft,⁹
In die Gruft;
Alle meine Plagen
Nehm ich mit.

4. Ach, wer doch schon im Himmel wär!
Ich habe Lust zu scheiden
Und mit dem Lamm,
Das aller Frommen Bräutigam,
Mich in der Seligkeit zu weiden.
Flügel her!
Ach, wer doch schon im Himmel wär!

5. Gute Nacht, du Weltgetümmel!
Jetzt mach ich mit dir Beschluss;
Ich steh schon mit einem Fuss
Bei dem lieben Gott im Himmel.

6. **Welt, ade! ich bin dein müde,**

3. I intend to say “welcome”
When [the figure of] death approaches my bed.
I intend to joyfully follow, when it summons,
/ I follow joyfully, when it summons,
Into the tomb;¹⁰
I take along [for burial]
All my torments.¹¹

4. Ah, but to be already in heaven!
I have a desire to part [from this life]¹²
And to revel¹³ with [Jesus,] the lamb [of God],
The bridegroom of all the pious,¹⁴
In blessedness/salvation.
Come, wings [to ascend to heaven].¹⁵
Ah, but to be already in heaven!

5. Good night, you worldly tumult!
Now I am done¹⁶ with you;
I already have one foot
With dear God in heaven.

6. **Adieu, world; I am weary of you;**

⁹In mm. 42-44 the wording in the original Bach sources goes back and forth between “Fröhlich will ich folgen” and “Fröhlich folg ich.”

¹⁰It is not clear whether the line “Into the tomb” belongs grammatically with the line before or the two lines after. The text underlay in Bach’s original materials (the only source for the text of this cantata) aria does not include any punctuation that could help resolve this ambiguity. Either way, the concluding lines project the sense that the “I” of the text takes his torments along with him into the tomb. With different editorial punctuation, though (as in some modern renderings of the libretto), the sense is “I intend to joyfully follow/obey the figure of death, when it summons me; I take all my torments with me into the tomb, for burial.” The way Bach’s musical setting is structured projects the sense as “I intend to joyfully follow the figure of death, when it summons, into the tomb; I take along, for burial, all my torments.”

¹¹The first two lines of this movement closely resemble the lines “Willkommen! will ich sagen, / So bald der Tod ans Bette tritt” (“I intend to say ‘welcome’ / As soon as [the figure of] death approaches my bed”) that open the final movement in Erdmann Neumeister’s cantata libretto “Ich bin vergnügt im Unvergnügen” (“I am pleased in displeasure”), first published in 1705.

¹²This line derives its language from Philippians 1:23, “Ich habe Lust abzuschneiden und bei Christo zu sein” (“I [the apostle Paul] have the desire to depart [this earthly life] and to be with Christ [in heaven]”).

¹³“Mich weiden” (i.e., using the reflexive form, ‘*sich weiden*,’ rather than the non-reflexive, “weiden”) here means “to revel,” not “to graze/pasture.”

¹⁴The heavenly church—what the cantata libretto has styled “all the pious”—is called the “bride of the lamb [of God]” (i.e., the bride of Jesus) in Revelation 21:9.

¹⁵This line relies for its sense on the language in Isaiah 40:31, “die auf den Herrn harren, kriegen neue Kraft, dass sie auffahren mit Flügeln wie Adler” (“they who wait for the Lord acquire new strength, that they ascend [to heaven] with wings like eagles”).

¹⁶“Beschluss” is here an old-fashioned synonym for “Abschluss” (“ending”).

**Ich will nach dem Himmel zu,
Da wird sein der rechte Friede
Und die ewge, stolze¹⁷ Ruh.
Welt, bei dir ist Krieg und Streit,
Nichts denn lauter Eitelkeit,
In dem Himmel allezeit
Friede, Freud und Seligkeit.¹⁸**

**I want [to proceed] toward heaven,
Where there will be true peace
And eternal, honorable¹⁹ rest.
World, with you there is war and strife,
Nothing but pure vanity;
In heaven at all times [there is]
Peace, joy, and blessedness.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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¹⁷The original performing part for soprano, copied out by a student assistant, here reads “selge Ruh” (“blessed rest”), presumably in simple error. To a momentarily inattentive scribe the somewhat strange expression “*stolze* Ruh” might incorrectly register as the more normal-sounding “*selge* Ruh” (see also fn. 19, below).

¹⁸The first stanza of this chorale.

¹⁹“Stolze” here does not mean “proud.” It is being used as a synonym for “ehrenvolle” (“full of honor,” “honorable”). The puzzling expression “*stolze* Ruh” is derived from the phrase “in stolzer Ruhe” in Luther’s translation of Isaiah 32:18. Regarding this usage of “*stolze*,” Luther wrote: “Das Wörtlein ‘stolz,’ auf ebreisch ‘[shaanan],’ kann ich auf Deutsch nicht gnugsam geben; denn es heisst ‘sicher, gewiss, frei, ohne Sorge und Furcht sein,’ als wenn die grossen Herren sich so gar hoch auf ihr Gut und Gewalt verlassen” (“The little word ‘stolz’, in Hebrew, ‘[shaanan],’ I cannot give competently in German; for it means ‘to be safe, certain, free, without worries and fear,’ as [for example] when great gentlemen/lords [are able to] have confidence in their property and power so altogether highly”).