

“O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort” BWV 60

Dialogus zwischen Furcht und Hoffnung

1. FURCHT

**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 erschrocknes Herz bebt,¹
Dass mir die Zung am Gaumen klebt.²**

HOFFNUNG

Herr, ich warte auf dein Heil.³

2. FURCHT

O schwerer Gang zum letzten Kampf und Streite!

HOFFNUNG

Mein Beistand ist schon da,
Mein Heiland steht mir ja
Mit Trost zur Seite.

FURCHT

Die Todesangst, der letzte Schmerz
Ereilt und überfällt mein Herz
Und martert diese Glieder.

Dialogue between Fear and Hope

1. FEAR

**Oh eternity, you word of thunder,⁴
Oh sword that bores through the soul,⁵
Oh beginning without end!
Oh eternity, time without time,⁶
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.**

HOPE

Lord, I wait for your salvation.⁷

2. FEAR

Oh difficult course⁸ toward [death,] the final struggle and strife!

HOPE

My aid is already here;
My savior stands
With consolation, indeed, at my side.

FEAR

The agony of death,⁹ the final pain,
Overtakes and assails my heart
And torments these [my] limbs.

¹Not “Herze bebt” (“heart quakes”) but “Herz erbebt” (also, “heart quakes”) in the hymnals of Bach’s day and in the opening chorus from “O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort” BWV 20.

²The first stanza of this hymn.

³Psalm 119:166; Genesis 49:18.

⁴“Donnerwort” connotes fearsomeness even more than loudness. A “word of thunder” strikes to the very heart.

⁵Hebrews 4:12 says that “das Wort Gottes” (“the word of God”) is a sword that pierces the soul.

⁶To 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”). The uses in this hymn stanza reflect senses C and D, the latter being a notion of eternity taken over from Greek philosophy into early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism.

⁷In Christian reading, Genesis 49:18 and Psalm 119:166 (see fn. 3, above) were interpreted as “I wait for your messiah, Jesus” (this is why movement 2 proclaims that “mein Beistand—mein Heiland—ist schon da” (“my aid—my savior [God’s messiah, Jesus]—is already here”).

⁸“Gang” here refers to one’s “Lebensgang” (whole way of life, “course of [earthly] life”).

⁹“Die Todesangst,” here, connotes not “the fear of death” in its sense of “the fear of becoming dead” but of “the anxiety/fear when dying,” or “the agony of death.” The leading eighteenth-century German dictionary defines “Todesangst” as “die Angst eines Sterbenden, besonders eines, der einen gewaltsamen Tod leidet” (“a dying person’s anxiety/fear, especially [as it experienced] of one who suffers an oppressive death”).

HOFFNUNG

Ich lege diesen Leib vor Gott zum Opfer nieder.
Ist gleich der Trübsal Feuer heiss,
Genung, es reinigt mich zu Gottes Preis.

FURCHT

Doch nun wird sich der Sünden grosse Schuld vor mein
Gesichte stellen.

HOFFNUNG

Gott wird deswegen doch kein Todesurteil fällen.
Er gibt ein Ende den Versuchungsplagen,
Dass man sie kann ertragen.

3. FURCHT

Mein letztes Lager will mich schrecken,

HOFFNUNG

Mich wird des Heilands Hand bedecken,

FURCHT

Des Glaubens Schwachheit sinket fast,

HOFFNUNG

Mein Jesus trägt mit mir die Last.

FURCHT

Das offne Grab sieht greulich aus.

HOFFNUNG

Es wird mir doch ein Friedenshaus.

4. FURCHT

Der Tod bleibt doch der menschlichen Natur verhasst
Und reisset fast

HOPE

I lay this [my] body down before God as an offering.
Even if the [refining] fire of tribulation¹⁰ is hot,
Enough!—it [fire] purifies me, to God's praise.

FEAR

But now sin's great guilt will place itself before my eyes.

HOPE

God will nonetheless¹¹ deliver no death sentence.

He sets a limit on the torments of temptation,
So that one can bear them.

3. FEAR

My deathbed¹² will terrify me;

HOPE

The savior's hand will shield¹³ me [from Satan's doubt-sowing].

FEAR

Faith's weakness almost drowns [as when the apostle Peter walked
on the water];¹⁴

HOPE

My Jesus bears the burden with me.

FEAR

The open grave looks horrifying.

HOPE

But for me it becomes a house of peace.

4. FEAR

But death indeed remains abhorrent to human nature
And almost drags

¹⁰A "Feuer der Trübsal" (a "[refining] fire of tribulation") is spoken of in Sirach 2:5 and 2 Maccabees 7:7.

¹¹"Deswegen doch" was often employed in the eighteenth century as a synonym for "dessenungeachtet"/"trotzdem" ("nonetheless").

¹²"Letztes Lager" is usually employed to refer to one's deathbed (e.g., "Er liegt auf seinem letzten Lager" would normally mean "Er liegt auf dem Sterbebette" ["He is lying on his deathbed"]), but "letztes Lager" could sometimes be employed to refer to one's coffin (i.e., in certain contexts, "Er liegt auf seinem letzten Lager" would mean "Er liegt im Sarge" ["He is lying in his coffin"]). The former sense of "letztes Lager" is apparently the one primarily intended here in the cantata (this because it was when people were on their deathbeds that they were held to need the greatest protection from the evil of doubt—see line 2 of this movement); but it is possible that the latter sense, "coffin," may be intended simultaneously (see the final lines of this movement).

¹³The verb "bedecken" in older German was sometimes used as a synonym for "bewahren" or "behüten" in the senses of "to protect" or "to shield." For example, Isaiah 51:16, in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, reads "Ich lege mein Wort in deinen Mund und bedecke dich unter dem Schatten meiner Hände" ("I [the LORD your (Israel's) God] will put my word into your mouth and shield you under the shadow [i.e., protection] of my hands").

¹⁴A more literal rendering of this line would be "faith's weakness almost sinks," a wording that might, however, too easily be taken to mean "faith's weakness almost subsides," where "subsides" is understood in its sense of "becomes less intense." Given that the wording and sense of the cantata line are probably derived from the narrative of Matthew 14:22-33 in which Jesus's disciple Peter is depicted as almost sinking into sea and drowning on account of his weak faith, we have opted for rendering "sinket fast" as "almost drowns."

Die Hoffnung ganz zu Boden.
 [VOX DEI/CHRISTI]¹⁵
Selig sind die Toten.
 FURCHT
 Ach! aber ach, wieviel Gefahr
 Stellt sich der Seele dar,
 Den Sterbeweg zu gehen!
 Vielleicht wird ihr der Höllenrachen
 Den Tod erschrecklich machen,
 Wenn er sie zu verschlingen sucht;
 Vielleicht ist sie bereits verflucht
 Zum ewigen Verderben.
 [VOX DEI/CHRISTI]
Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herren sterben.
 FURCHT
 Wenn ich im Herren sterbe,
 Ist denn die Seligkeit mein Teil und Erbe?
 Der Leib wird ja der Würmer Speise!
 Ja, werden meine Glieder
 Zu Staub und Erde wieder,
 Da ich ein Kind des Todes heisse,
 So schein ich ja im Grabe zu verderben.
 [VOX DEI/CHRISTI]
*Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herren sterben, von nun an.*¹⁶
 FURCHT
 Wohlan! soll ich von nun an selig sein:
 So stelle dich, o Hoffnung, wieder ein!
 Mein Leib mag ohne Furcht im Schlafe ruhn,
 Der Geist kann einen Blick in jene Freude tun.

Hope completely to the ground.
 [VOICE OF GOD/CHRIST]
Blessed are the dead.
 FEAR
 Ah, but ah! How much peril
 Presents itself to the soul,
 In going [along] its path to death!
 Perhaps the hellmouth¹⁷ will make
 Death terrifying to it [the soul]
 When it [the hellmouth] seeks to swallow it [the soul] up;
 Perhaps it [the soul] is already damned
 To eternal ruin.
 [VOICE OF GOD/CHRIST]
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.
 FEAR
 If I die in the Lord,
 Is then the blessedness [of salvation] my portion and inheritance?
 The body becomes, indeed, the food of worms!
 Indeed, if my limbs should turn
 Into dust and earth again,
 Given that I am called a “child [deserving] of death,”¹⁸
 Then [in decaying] in the grave I might, indeed, appear to [utterly] perish.
 [VOICE OF GOD/CHRIST]
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, from this time onward.
 FEAR
 Well then, if I am to be blessed from this time onward,
 Then make your appearance again, oh Hope!

¹⁵The speaker of these words is not identified in the original source for the cantata. But the words are drawn from the book of Revelation (see fn. 16, below), whose narrator hears them from a “voice in heaven,” meaning that they are understood as divine. This impression is reinforced by Bach’s choice to set them for bass, the vocal range conventionally associated with the Vox Dei/Christi.

¹⁶Revelation 14:13.

¹⁷The “hellmouth” is the entrance of hell, often depicted in art as a giant monster’s mouth swallowing up the damned (i.e., “der Höllenrachen” [literally, “the maw/mouth of hell”] does not mean “the raging of hell”).

¹⁸“Child of death” is a technical biblical term (Hebrew, “ben mawet” [literal meaning: “son of death”; sense: “person who deserves to die”), employed in 2 Samuel 12:5, where King David, in Luther’s rendering, declares of a rich man who stole a poor man’s sheep: “der Mann ist ein Kind des Todes, der das getan hat” (“the man who has done that is a child of death”). The King James Bible, like most English bibles, renders this passage according to the sense: “the man that hath done this thing shall surely die.” The Calov study Bible, which Bach owned, glosses Luther’s “Kind des Todes” as “des Todes schuldig” (“[i.e.,] guilty [deserving] of death”).

My body may rest in [death's] sleep¹⁹ without fear [of eternal ruin];²⁰
The spirit can [then] cast a glance into that [coming] joy [of the resurrection].

**5. Es ist genug;²¹
Herr, wenn es dir gefällt,
So spanne mich doch aus!
Mein Jesus kömmt;
Nun gute Nacht, o Welt!
Ich fahr ins Himmelshaus.**

**5. It is enough;²³
Lord, if it is your will,²⁴
Then do unharness me [from the yoke of this life's burdens].²⁵
My Jesus is coming;²⁶
Good night, now, oh world!
I am going into the house of heaven.²⁷**

¹⁹That is (in Lutheran teaching), on earth the human body, the “natural body,” is animated by the soul; but at death “this [natural] body” is separated from the soul, and believers are said to be in their “Todesschlaf” (the “sleep of death”) while their earthly bodies decay and their souls, now in some sort of intermediate state of proleptic blessedness, await the end time of the world; and at the end time, the believer’s body is resurrected as a transformed, heavenly “spiritual body” that is joined eternally to the soul, in which state, after the final judgment, the person, animated by God’s spirit, enjoys the full blessedness of heaven, eternally.

²⁰The sense of this line is derived from Acts 2:26-27, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads, as glossed in the Calov study Bible (see fn. 18, above) and indicated here in brackets, “mein Fleisch [*meine menschliche Natur*] wird ruhen in der Hoffnung [*der Auferstehung von den Toten*], denn du wirst meine Seele nicht in der Hölle [*in höllischer Angst und Schmerzen*] lassen [... und also auch meinem Leib nicht lassen in der Verwesung]” (“[in the grave,] my flesh [*my human nature*] will rest in the hope [*of the resurrection of the dead*], for you will not leave my soul in hell [*in hellish anxiety/fear and pain ... and also not leave my body in (its burial state of) decay*]”).

²¹“Genung” is an old spelling (and sometimes pronunciation) of “genug” (“enough”).

²³The “it” here is “das Leben” (“[one’s] life”); in 1 Kings 19:4, Elijah prays to God that “seine Seele stürbe, und sprach: Es ist genug, so nimm nun, HERR, meine Seele” (that “his [Elijah’s] soul might die, saying: ‘It is enough; then take now, LORD, my soul’”).

²⁴“Wenn es dir [Gott] gefällt,” here, is meant in the sense of “if it is your will”—just as the expression is still used, e.g., in a convention of German death announcements, “Es hat Gott dem Herrn gefallen, ... in die Ewigkeit abzurufen” (literal meaning: “It has pleased the Lord God to call [name of person] into eternity”; sense: “It is God’s will that [name of person] has now passed away”).

²⁵For its sense, this line apparently draws on Job 30:11, “Sie haben mein Seil ausgespannet, und mich zunichte gemacht, und das Meine abgezäumet” (“They have unharnessed my rope, and ruined me, and unbridled what is mine”). Considering Luther’s use in Job 30:11 of “abgezäumet” (“unbridled”) and considering the standard German expression “die Pferde ausspannen” (“unharness the horses”), we would offer as a best construal for Cantata 60’s vexing “So spanne mich doch aus” (sometimes rendered in English along the lines of “help me relax”) the translation “Then do unharness me [of the world’s ‘trappings,’ and from the yoke of this world’s endless sorrows, trials, and burdens].” (See also line 8 of this chorale stanza.) It is worth noting the corroboration of this construal that is provided in a collection of funeral sermons by Heinrich Müller, an author significantly represented in Bach’s personal library: “Simeon nennet den Tod eine Ausspannung. [In marg. Luc 2/29.] Hie sind wir eingespannet in das Joch der Mühe / des Jammers und Leidens. Der Tod spannet uns aus aus dem Leidens und Angst-Joch” (“Simeon calls death an unharnessing [margin: ‘Luke 2:29’]. Here [in the present world] we are harnessed in the yoke of trouble, misery, and suffering. Death unharnesses us out from the yoke of suffering and anxiety/fear”).

²⁶“Kömmt” is not a subjunctive form (which here would have been “komme” or “käme) but simply an alternative, old-fashioned spelling of the indicative “kommt” (“comes,” “is coming”).

²⁷With regard to a “house of/in heaven,” 2 Corinthians 5:1 states “dass wir einen Bau haben, von Gott erbauet, ein Haus, nicht mit Händen gemacht, das ewig ist, im Himmel” (“[we followers of Jesus know] that we have a building, built by God, a house, not made with [human] hands, that is eternal, in heaven”).

**Ich fahre sicher hin mit Frieden,
Mein grosser Jammer bleibt danieden.
Es ist genug, es ist genug.²²**

**I am securely going there in peace;
My great misery will remain down here [on earth].
It is enough, it is enough.**

(transl. Michael Marissen & Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV60> for an annotated translation

²²The last stanza of the hymn “Es ist genu[n]g, so nimm, Herr, meinen Geist.”