

"Christum wir sollen loben schon" BWV 121

**1. Christum wir sollen loben schon,
Der reinen Magd Marien Sohn,
So weit die liebe Sonne leucht
Und an aller Welt Ende reicht.**

2. O du von Gott erhöhte Kreatur,
Begreife nicht, nein, nein, bewundre nur:
Gott will durch Fleisch des Fleisches Heil erwerben.
Wie gross ist doch der Schöpfer aller Dinge,
Und wie bist du verachtet und geringe,
Um dich dadurch zu retten vom Verderben.

**1. We should resplendently¹ praise Christ,
Son of the virginal maidservant² Mary,
Just as far as the beloved sun shines
And reaches to the ends³ of all the world.**

2. Oh you creature elevated by God,⁴
Do not [try to] comprehend; no, no, just marvel:⁵
God will purchase the salvation of [sinners'] flesh by
[sacrificing Christ's] flesh⁶—
How great indeed is [God] the creator of all things,⁷
And how despised and lowly are you!—
So as thereby to rescue you from [eternal] ruin.⁸

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 6 take their texts verbatim from the two outer stanzas of the hymn "Christum wir sollen loben schon." The internal movements paraphrase other stanzas.

¹In older German, "schon" is a possible alternate spelling of "schön," presumably employed here for its better rhyme with "Sohn" ("son"). That is, without a need to accommodate this rhyme, the phrase could straightforwardly have read "Christum sollen wir schön loben" or "Wir sollen Christum schön loben." The word "schön" basically means "beautiful," but it also can carry a sense of "brightness" (the English words "shine" and "sheen" share historical roots with "schön"), hence the rendering with the adverb "resplendently." The language of this line is apparently derived from Psalm 147:1, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Lobet den HERRN, denn unsern Gott loben, das ist ein köstlich Ding; solch Lob ist lieblich und schön" ("Praise the LORD; for to praise our God, that is an excellent thing; such praise is lovely and beautiful/resplendent"). See also fn. 17, below.

²"Magd," in older German, like "maid" in older English, can mean "a young (unmarried) woman" and/or "a female servant/attendant" and/or "a virgin." In the original Greek of the New Testament, Mary is called in Luke 1:38 a "maidservant of the LORD" (Luther Bibles, "des HERRN Magd"), and in Matthew 1:18-25 a "maiden/virgin" (Luther Bibles, "Jungfrau," i.e., "virgin," but hyperliterally, "young woman").

³In older German the plural of "das Ende" ("the end") could be either "die Ende" or "die Enden." The phrase "aller Welt Ende" appears a number of times in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, clearly as plural ("[geographical] ends of all the world"). The biblical writers assumed the world was flat, and therefore could speak literally (and metaphorically) of the "ends" of the earth.

⁴That God has elevated humankind above other earthly creatures is the subject of Psalm 8.

⁵Psalm 139:6, in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, reads "Solches Erkenntnis ist mir zu wunderbar, und zu hoch; ich kanns nicht begreifen" ("Such knowledge [as God has] is to me too marvelous, and too high; I cannot comprehend it").

⁶The sense of this line is partly derived from Acts 20:28, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "habt nun acht ... zu weiden die Gemeinde Gottes, welche er durch sein eigen Blut erworben hat" ("Now take heed ... to feed the congregation/community [or, 'church'] of God, which he [Jesus] has purchased with his own blood [in dying sacrificially on the cross]").

⁷Great also in mercy, by "pouring out wisdom" on people, according to Sirach 1:7, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Einer ist, der Allerhöchste, der Schöpfer aller Dinge, ... der auf sein Thron sitzt ... hat die Weisheit ausgeschüttet ... über alles Fleisch, nach seiner Gnade" ("There is but one, the Most High [God], the creator of all things, ... who sits on his throne ... [he] has poured out wisdom upon all flesh, according to his mercy/grace"). In the New Testament, Jesus is implicitly hailed as the personification of God's wisdom. Wisdom 9:10 (like Sirach 1:7) was understood in this light, which the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Sende sie herab von deinem heiligen Himmel, und aus dem Thron deiner Herrlichkeit sende sie, dass sie bei mir sei und mit mir arbeite" ("Send her [the personification of wisdom] down from your holy heaven; and off the throne of your glory send her, that she may be with me and may labor with me"). This was interpreted to mean that the personification of wisdom was sent by God, out of eternity into time, to become the flesh of Jesus and to do the "labor" of sacrificially dying on the cross, as an act of Jesus's love for humanity.

⁸It is certainly unusual for the text of the "B" section of an aria to begin as a parenthetical observation to an incompletely stated sentiment from the "A" section, and for the "B" section then to close by completing that earlier sentiment from the "A" section. But that appears to be the case here, where the antecedent for "dadurch" ("thereby") is the "A" section's statement about God's "purchase of salvation."

3. Der Gnade unermesslichs Wesen
Hat sich den Himmel nicht
Zur Wohnstatt auserlesen,
Weil keine Grenze sie umschliesst.
Was Wunder, dass allhie Verstand und Witz gebriecht,
Ein solch Geheimnis zu ergründen,
Wenn sie sich in ein keusches Herze giesst.
Gott wählet sich den reinen Leib zu einem Tempel
seiner Ehren,
Um zu den Menschen sich mit wundervoller Art zu
kehren.

4. Johannis freudenvolles Springen
Erkannte dich, mein Jesu, schon.
Nun da ein Glaubensarm dich hält,
So will mein Herze von der Welt
Zu deiner Krippe brünstig dringen.

5. Doch wie erblickt es dich in deiner Krippe?

3. Mercy's/Grace's unmeasurable essence
Has not selected [only] heaven
For [its] dwelling place,
Because no border can enclose it [mercy/grace].
What wonder [is it] that here⁹ understanding and intellect¹⁰
are deficient
To fathom such a mystery,
When it [mercy/grace] pours itself into a chaste heart.¹¹
God chooses the undefiled body¹² as a temple of his honor,¹³
So as, in wonderful fashion, to turn himself toward
humankind.¹⁴

4. John [the Baptist]'s joyful leaping [in the womb]¹⁵
Already¹⁶ recognized you [as Christ], my Jesus.
Now that an arm of faith¹⁷ holds you,
So will my heart fervently press on¹⁸
From the world¹⁹ to your manger.

5. But how does it [my heart] behold you in your manger?

⁹“Allhie” or “allhier” is an older German intensified version of “hier” (“[right] here,” “in this [very] place/situation”), sometimes poetically employed simply to bring in an extra syllable.

¹⁰“Witz” here does not mean “joke” or “(amusing) wit.” In older German the word was a synonym for “Wissen” in the sense of “intellectual ability,” “mental capacity.”

¹¹A variation on Romans 5:5, “die Liebe Gottes ist ausgegossen in unser Herz durch den Heiligen Geist” (“the love of God is poured out into our heart through the Holy Spirit”).

¹²The “undefiled body” here refers primarily to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the mystery of her giving birth, as a virgin, to God’s messiah. But the human body per se is said to be a “temple” of God’s in 1 Corinthians 6:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “wisset ihr nicht, dass euer Leib ein Tempel des Heiligen Geistes ist, der in euch ist, welchen ihr habt von Gott” (“do you [believers in Christ] not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God”).

¹³In older German, “Ehre” (“honor”) would take an “n”-ending in the genitive singular.

¹⁴This line speaks of God’s turning himself toward humankind, not of humankind’s turning themselves toward, or converting to, God. Its sense is derived from Psalm 90:13, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “HERR, kehre dich doch wieder zu uns und sei deinen Knechten gnädig” (“LORD, turn yourself again indeed toward us and be merciful/gracious to [us humans,] your servants”).

¹⁵As narrated in Luke 1, where Mary, carrying in her womb the baby Jesus, visits Elizabeth (said in Luke to be a relative of Mary’s), carrying in her womb the baby John (the Baptist). As soon as the sound of Mary’s greeting reaches Elizabeth’s ears, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy (i.e., in recognition of the presence of God’s messiah, Jesus).

¹⁶Linguistically and theologically, the word “schon” here would most likely mean “already,” but it might possibly instead or simultaneously be understood as an alternate version of “schön” (“beautifully/resplendently”), echoing the usage in the first movement (see fn. 2, above).

¹⁷The “Glaubensarm” or “Arm des Glaubens” (“arm of faith/belief”) was a poetic term employed in hymns and elsewhere to symbolize the grasping of the gift of divine grace through faith. It originated in connection with Luther’s rendering of Ephesians 6:16, “Vor allen Dingen aber ergreifet den Schild des Glaubens” (“Before/Above all things, however, grasp the shield of faith”); i.e., in this biblical passage the (explicit) “shield of faith” is grasped/comprehended with the (implied) “arm of faith.” The “arm” in the cantata’s “Glaubensarm” also, more specifically, alludes to Luke 2:28, where Simeon, a man to whom the Holy Spirit was said to have revealed that he would live to see God’s messiah, takes/holds the baby Jesus “in his arms” and praises God.

¹⁸As the shepherds did; in Luke 2:16, shepherds “hurry” from the field to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus in the manger.

¹⁹That is, from “in the world,” where the believer is lodged, by analogy to “in the field” (Luke 2:16; Luther Bibles, “auf dem Felde”), where the shepherds of the biblical Christmas story are lodged.

Es seufzt mein Herz: mit bebender und fast geschlossener
Lippe
Bringt es sein dankend Opfer dar.
Gott, der so unermesslich war,
Nimmt Knechtsgestalt und Armut an.
Und weil er dieses uns zugutgetan,
So lass ich²⁰ mit der Engel Chören
Ein jauchzend Lob- und Danklied hören!

**6. Lob, Ehr und Dank sei dir gesagt,
Christ, geboren von der reinen Magd,
Samt Vater und dem Heiligen Geist
Von nun an bis in Ewigkeit.**

My heart sighs; with trembling and almost closed [upper]
lip²¹
It brings its offering in thanks there [to the manger].²²
God, who [before Christ's birth] was so unmeasureable,
[In Christ] assumes servant's form²³ and poverty.²⁴
And because he [God] has done this for our benefit,
So I, together with the choirs of angels,²⁵ will make heard
A jubilant song of praise and thanks [to Christ].

**6. May praise, honor, and thanks be declared to you,
Christ, born of the virginal maidservant,
Together with [God the] father and the Holy Spirit
From this time forth until [we are] in eternity.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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²⁰In modern editions, these lines are sometimes given as “So lasset mit der Engel Chören ein jauchzend Lob- und Danklied hören” (“So let there be heard with the choirs of angels a jubilant song of praise and thanks [to Christ]”). The reading “So lass[e] ich mit der Engel Chören ein jauchzend Lob- und Danklied hören” (“So I, together with the choirs of angels, will let be heard a jubilant song of praise and thanks [to Christ]”), however, perhaps has greater claims to being what Bach went with in his performances. Bach’s own score and five original separate vocal performing parts survive for this cantata. In the handwriting of Bach’s assistant copyist, there is one part each for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. There is also a second (nearly identical) separate soprano part that is in Bach’s handwriting. This is often often described as a “doubling part,” but whatever the reason for another soprano part’s having been produced, it seems unlikely in the extreme that movement 5, a recitative, would ever have been sung in unison by several sopranos. Not only Bach’s own score and the soprano part in his handwriting but also a recently discovered 1728 book of librettos (apparently based on the mostly now lost printed text booklets that were made available to Bach’s church audiences) agree in reading “so lass ich mit der Engel Chören.” Only the assistant copyist’s soprano part reads “so lasset mit der Engel Chören.” His part was clearly copied from Bach’s score, and this copyist’s text at first was (mistakenly) written out as “so lass ich der Engel Chören,” i.e., without the word “mit” and thus having one too few syllables for Bach’s particular musical setting. When and by whom the copyist’s text was fixed up within this part by adding “et” to “lass” and by altering “ich” to “mit” is not entirely clear.

²¹The language of this and the next line is apparently derived from Hebrews 13:15, “So lasset uns nun opfern, durch ihn, das Lobopfer Gott allezeit: das ist, die Frucht der Lippen, die seinen Namen bekennen” (“So let us now offer, through him [Jesus], the praise offering to God all the time: that is, the [verbal] fruit of the lips that profess his name”). There are many biblical passages in the Luther Bibles that speak of “die Lippen auf tun” (“to open the lips [i.e., to speak]”). Lines 2-3 of this cantata movement are saying that at the “sight” of the manger one’s lip trembles (i.e., one cannot keep a stiff upper lip), but that one is thus able to open one’s mouth just enough to be able to utter a praise offering (i.e., which is the “fruit of the lips” from the person who acknowledges Jesus).

²²“Dankopfer” is the Luther Bible’s standard rendering of the technical term usually given in English as “thanks offering” or “peace offering.” Presumably the cantata line uses “dankend Opfer” (“offering in thanks”) to obtain an extra syllable.

²³Philippians 2:6-7, “er ... nahm Knechtsgestalt an” (“he [Jesus] ... assumes servant’s form”).

²⁴This is said of Jesus and poverty in 2 Corinthians 8:9.

²⁵That is, these choirs of angels are “die Menge der himmlischen Heerscharen” (“the multitude of the heavenly legions [of angels]”) in Luke 2:13, who at the birth of Jesus exclaim “Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe und Friede auf Erden und den Menschen ein Wohlgefallen” (“May honor be to God on high, and peace on earth, and to humankind [God’s] great pleasure”). The Christian believer is thus linked in this cantata to both the shepherds and the angels of the Christmas narrative in Luke 2:8-20.