

"Komm, du süsse Todesstunde" BWV 161A

1. Komm, du süsse Todesstunde,
Da mein Geist
Honig speist
Aus des Löwens Munde;
Mache meinen Abschied süsse,
Säume nicht,
Letztes Licht,
Dass ich meinen Heiland küsse.¹

1. Come, you sweet hour of death,
When my spirit
Will feed upon honey
From the mouth of the lion [Jesus];²
Make sweet my departure [from this life];
Tarry not,
Final light [of earthly life],
So that I may kiss my savior.³

2. Welt! deine Lust ist Last!
Dein Zucker ist mir als ein Gift verhasst!
Dein Freudenlicht
Ist mein Komete,
Und wo man deine Rosen bricht,
Sind Dornen ohne Zahl,
Zu meiner Seelen Qual!
Der blasse Tod ist meine Morgenröte,
Mit⁴ solcher geht mir auf die Sonne
Der Herrlichkeit und Himmelswonne.

2. World, your desire⁵ is dead-weight.
Your sugar, to me, is abhorrent like a poison.
Your light of joy
Is my comet;⁶
And wherever one picks your⁷ roses,
There are thorns without number,
To the torment of my soul.
Pallid death is my morning red [sun];
With such [a death and daybreak], the sun
Of glory and heaven's bliss dawns above me.⁸

GENERAL NOTE: There are two lines of transmission for this cantata, and both go back to original Bach sources that are now lost. The differences between the two versions are conflated in most modern editions and performances. The two transmissions are kept separate, however, in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (New Bach Edition) as "version A" and "version B," and here. The most recent scholarship suggests that "version B" was not arranged by Bach himself.

¹ The hymn melody played on the organ in this aria in version A is sung by soprano to the text of the first stanza of "Herzlich tut mich verlangen" in version B.

² These lines are based on the story of Samson, a judge in ancient Israel, who is depicted in Judges 14:5-9 as having killed a lion with his bare hands and returned later to find in the lion's carcass a swarm of bees, whose honey he feasted on. In Lutheran interpretations, Jesus was both Samson and the lion. Luther took Samson's destroying the lion to be a foreshadowing of Christ's destroying death, bringing eternal life to his followers through his own death on the cross. But in Revelation 5:5, Jesus is also called the "Lion of Judah, who has conquered." The cantata's "honey from the mouth of the lion" would have been taken to point, then, to the sweet word of God's salvation that comes from the mouth of Jesus.

³ "Kiss the savior" may sound odd. The notion is most likely derived from Psalm 2:12, "Küsst den Sohn, ... wohl allen, die auf ihn trauen!" ("Kiss the son, ... how well it is with all who trust in him!"). The "son" of Psalm 2, in traditional Christian interpretation, is taken to point to Jesus, the son of God, Jesus ("the savior").

⁴ In the poet's printed version (c. 1716?) and in a 1728 book of librettos assembled largely from Bach's vocal works, this reads not "mit" ("with") but "aus" ("from").

⁵ "Lust" here apparently does not mean "delight." The word "Lust" can mean various things in Luther's German; here it appears to be connected with the biblical word *epithymia* ("desire"; in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "Lust"), which can refer to good desire (see fn. 10, below) but usually refers to evil desire. According to 1 John 2:15-17, *epithymia* not only "is from the world" (Luther Bibles, "ist von der Welt"), but also forms its character and perishes with it.

⁶ That is, the worldly "light of joy" is false because its light is like a comet: bright, but typically brief; as a "comet," this light would additionally be fear-provoking, because in Bach's day comets were still widely believed to be harbingers of calamity.

⁷ The prickly roses of "the world" are meant to be contrasted with the marvelous roses of Song of Songs 6:2, in the "garden" of God's messiah, as explained below, in fn. 11.

⁸ The idiom of a sun rising upon/above someone comes from Genesis 32:31, "als er für Pnuel über kam, ging ihm die Sonne auf" ("as he [Jacob] crossed over Peniel [where he had been all night], the sun dawned above him"), a passage taken in Lutheran interpretation to signify the dawning of "die Sonne der Gerechtigkeit" ("the Sun of Righteousness") from Malachi 4:2, a title for God's messiah, Jesus, foreshadowing the title given him in Revelation 22:16, "der helle Morgenstern" ("the bright Morning Star").

Drum seufz ich recht von Herzengrunde,
Nur nach der letzten Todesstunde!
Ich habe Lust, bei Christo bald zu weiden,
Ich habe Lust, von dieser Welt zu scheiden.

3. Mein Verlangen
Ist, den Heiland zu umfassen
Und bei Christo bald zu sein.
Ob ich sterblich Asch¹² und Erde¹³
Durch den Tod zermalmet werde!
Wird der Seele reiner Schein
Dennoch gleich den Engeln prangen.

4. Der Schluss ist schon gemacht:¹⁶
Welt, gute Nacht!
Und kann ich nur den Trost erwerben,
In Jesu Armen bald zu sterben:¹⁷

Thus I yearn⁹ only, right from the bottom of my heart,
For my final hour of death!
I have the desire¹⁰ to revel¹¹ soon with Christ [in heaven],
I have the desire to depart from this world.

3. My longing
Is to embrace¹⁴ the savior
And to be soon with Christ.
Though I, [this body of] mortal ashes and earth,¹⁵
Will be crushed into pieces by death,
The pure luster of my soul
Will nonetheless shine forth like the angels.

4. My decision²² is already made:²³
World, good night.
And if only I can obtain the consolation
Of dying soon in Jesus' arms.

⁹ “Nach etwas seufzen” is an archaic synonym for “nach etwas verlangen” (“to long/yearn for something”).

¹⁰ As in line 1 of this movement (see fn. 5, above), the underlying biblical word in the closing lines for the German word “Lust” is *epithymia*. The language of this good “desire” is derived from Philippians 1:23, “Ich habe Lust abzuschneiden, und bei Christo zu sein” (“I [the apostle Paul] have the desire to depart [this world] and to be with Christ”).

¹¹ “Weiden” here most likely does not mean “to feed.” In Song of Songs 6:2, the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Mein Freund ist hinab gegangen in seinen Garten, zu den Würzgärtlein, dass er *sich weide* unter den Garten und Rosen breche” (“My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the little herb-gardens, so that he *may revel* [or, ‘feast his eyes’] among the gardens, and may pick roses”). By dint of the biblical allusion, the cantata line’s “weiden” should presumably be understood as if it were the reflexive “sich weiden.” The male lover in the Song of Songs is, according to traditional Christian interpretation, a foreshadowing of God’s messiah, Jesus, who at the end time will marry his “bride,” the church or Christian soul.

¹² In some modern printings of the libretto, “Staub” (“dust”) is given, but the sources read “Asch” (“ashes”).

¹³ In the poet’s printed version (c. 1716?) and in a 1728 book of librettos assembled largely from Bach’s vocal works, this reads “Ob ich *Scherbe, Thon* und Erde durch den Tod zermalmet werde” (“Though I—[who am but] *shard, clay*, and earth—will be crushed into pieces by death”). Version B of the cantata gives “Ob ich *schon zu* Asch und Erde durch den Tod zermalmet werde” (“Though I will, *by this time*, be crushed into pieces by death, *to* ashes and earth”).

¹⁴ “Umfassen” here is a synonym for “umarmen/umfassen” (“to embrace”).

¹⁵ The sense of this poetry is not simply “death will crush mortal me into ashes and earth” but “I am (by nature made up of) mortal ashes and earth, and death will crush me into ashes and earth.” The phrase “ashes and earth” is taken from Genesis 18:27, where Abraham says, “ich habe mich unterwunden zu reden mit dem HERRN, wiewohl ich Erde und Asche bin” (“I have dared to speak with the [divine] LORD [God], although I am [nothing but mortal] earth and ashes”); “sich etwas unterwinden zu tun” is an old-fashioned synonym for the likewise old-fashioned “sich etwas unterstehen zu tun” (“to dare to do something”).

¹⁶ Version B of the cantata gives “Der Schluss ist nun gemacht” (“My decision is now made”).

¹⁷ In the poet’s printed version (c. 1716?) and in a 1728 book of librettos assembled largely from Bach’s vocal works, this reads “Ich will im Leben täglich sterben, so bringt der Tod mir kein Verderben! Er ist mein sanfter Schlaf!” (“I will die daily in [this temporal] life, so that death brings me no [eternal] ruin! It [death] is my gentle sleep!”).

²² “Der Schluss” is literally “*the* decision/determination.” The “decision” here does not refer to a Calvinistic conviction that one’s fate is already sealed, or a recognition that death is inevitable, or that a decision has been made by someone else. In the context of this cantata, “Der Schluss ist schon gemacht: Welt, gute Nacht!” appears to mean that the speaker, entirely prepared for death, has “already” decided to say “good night” to “the world.”

²³ “Der Schluss ist schon gemacht” (“The decision/determination is already made”) is a stock phrase in older German. Its Hebrew equivalent occurs at Daniel 11:36 (which, however, Luther rendered differently).

Er ist mein sanfter Schlaf!¹⁸
Das kühle Grab wird mich mit Rosen decken,
Bis Jesus mich wird auferwecken,¹⁹
Bis er sein Schaf
Führt auf die süsse Himmelsweide,²⁰
Dass mich der Tod von ihm nicht scheide!²¹
So brich herein, du froher Todestag!
So schlage doch, du letzter Stundenschlag!

5. Wenn es meines Gottes Wille,
Wünsch ich, dass des Leibes²⁷ Last
Heute noch die Erde fülle,
Und der Geist, des Leibes Gast,
Mit Unsterblichkeit sich kleide
In der süßen Himmelsfreude.
Jesu, komm und nimm mich fort!
Dieses sei mein letztes Wort.

**6. Der Leib zwar in der Erden,
Von Würmen wird verzehrt,
Doch auferweckt soll werden,
Durch Christum schön verklärt,**

It [this consolation] is my gentle sleep!²⁴
The cool grave will cover me with roses,
Until Jesus will resurrect me,
Until he leads [me]²⁵ his sheep
Into heaven's sweet pasture,
So that death may not part me from him.
Burst in, then, you happy day of death.
Do strike, then, you final hour's stroke [of the clock].²⁶

5. If it is my God's will,
I wish that the dead-weight of my body
Might even today fill the earth [my grave],
And that my spirit, the guest of my body,
Might clothe itself with immortality²⁸
In the sweet joy of heaven.
Jesus, come and take me forth [into heaven];
May this be my final word.

**6. Indeed, the body in the earth
Is consumed by worms;
Yet [it] shall be resurrected,
Beautifully transfigured by Christ;³⁰**

¹⁸ In the earliest surviving materials for version A of this cantata, the text reads “sanfter Schlaf” (“gentle sleep) twice in m. 14 but “sanfter Tod” (“gentle death”) in mm. 8 and 12.

¹⁹ In some modern printings of the libretto, “erwecken” (“to awaken [from literal sleep]”) is given, but versions A and B of the cantata both give “auferwecken” (“to awaken/resurrect [from death—i.e., a metaphorical sleep, which Lutheranism called the ‘Todesschlaf,’ ‘sleep of death’]”).

²⁰ In the poet's printed version (c. 1716?), in a 1728 book of librettos assembled largely from Bach's vocal works, and in version B of the cantata, this reads “Lebensweide” (“[eternal] life's pasture”). The “Himmelsweide” is eternal, but “Lebensweide” could be temporal or eternal. “Lebensweide” is apparently used in its eternal sense here.

²¹ In version B of the cantata, this line reads “*da* mich der Tod von ihm nicht scheide” (“*where* death may not part me from him”).

²⁴ On the “gentle sleep” as the “Todesschlaf” (“sleep of death”), see fn. 19, above.

²⁵ “Sein Schaf” is most likely singular (the sense of the next two lines would seem to argue against this being a poetically clipped version of the plural, “sein[e] Schaf[e]”). In this context, the English equivalent, “sheep,” is unavoidably ambiguous in quantity.

²⁶ The “letzter Stundenschlag” (“final hour's stroke”) refers not to a person being struck down by death but to the last stroke of the hammer on a chiming clock that one might hear before dying. In Bach's setting of this line, the gears of a clock are musically depicted in spectacular fashion.

²⁷ Curiously, the soprano, alto, and bass parts of the earliest surviving source for version A read “des Todes” (“of death's”), not “des Leibes” (“of the/my body's”); the tenor line, however, reads “des Leibes,” as do the poet's printed version (c. 1716?), the 1728 book of librettos assembled largely from Bach's vocal works, and the earliest surviving source for version B.

²⁸ This notion of the *spirit* being clothed with immortality is derived from what is said of the Christian's *body* in 1 Corinthians 15:53, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Denn dies Verwesliche muss anziehen das Unverwesliche, und dies Sterbliche muss anziehen die Unsterblichkeit” (“For this perishable [body] must put on [i.e., ‘clothe itself with’] the imperishable, and this mortal [body] must put on [heaven's] immortality”).

³⁰ The idea that Jesus will transfigure the Christian's body comes from Philippians 3:20-21, which in the idiosyncratic rendering of the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Jesu Christi ... welcher unsern nichtigen Leib verklären wird, dass er ähnlich werde seinem verklärten Leibe” (“Jesus Christ ... who will transfigure our transitory [earthly] body [after death],

**Wird leuchten als die Sonne
Und leben ohne Not
In himml'scher Freud und Wonne.
Was schadt mir denn der Tod?²⁹**

Salomo Franck

**[My transfigured body] will blaze like the sun
And live without distress
In heavenly joy and bliss.
How can death do harm to me then [in eternity]?**

(transl. Michael Marissen & Daniel R. Melamed)



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so that it might be similar to his [Christ's] transfigured [heavenly] body"). Note that "nichtig" can mean "vain" or "worthless" or "insubstantial," but here it seems to mean "ephemeral" or "transitory."

²⁹ A stanza of "Herzlich tut mich verlangen."