

“Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust” BWV 170

1. Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust!
Dich kann man nicht bei Höllensünden,
Wohl aber Himmelseintracht finden;
Du stärkst allein die schwache Brust,
Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust!
Drum sollen lauter Tugendgaben
In meinem Herzen Wohnung haben.

2. Die Welt, das Sündenhaus,
Bricht nur in Höllensieder aus,
Und sucht durch Hass und Neid
Des Satansbild an sich zu tragen.
Ihr Mund ist voller Ottergift,
Der oft die Unschuld tödlich trifft,
Und will allein von Racha! Racha! sagen.
Gerechter Gott, wie weit
Ist doch der Mensch von dir entfremdet;
Du liebst, jedoch sein Mund
Macht Fluch und Feindschaft kund,
Und will den Nächsten nur mit Füßen treten.
Ach! diese Schuld ist schwerlich¹ zu verbeten!

1. Contented rest, beloved delight of the soul,
One can find you not in hell’s sins
But rather in heaven’s concord;
You alone strengthen the weak breast:
Contented rest, beloved delight of the soul.
And so nothing but virtue’s gifts shall
Have a home in my heart.

2. The world, the house of sin,
Breaks out only in hell’s songs
And seeks through hate and envy [of heaven]
To bear upon itself the image of Satan.²
Its [the world’s] mouth is full of viper’s poison
That³ often strikes innocence dead
And wants to say only “Raca!” “Raca!”⁴
Righteous God, how far distanced
Is humankind yet from you;
You love, but its [humankind’s] mouth
Spreads curse and enmity
And wants only to trample its neighbor underfoot.
Ah, this sin/debt is not easily redressed⁵ through prayer.⁶

¹In the librettist’s printed book of poetry this reads not “schwerlich” (“scarcely,” “not easily”) but “nimmer” (“never”). To say that “this [moral] debt is ‘never’ [to be] redressed through prayer” may have been considered theologically questionable by many orthodox Lutherans. It is unknown when and through whom the cantata’s wording “schwerlich” originated.

²The image of Satan, encountered in life under the taint of sin, is to be contrasted with the proper image of God (as narrated in Genesis 1:26) that the first humans, Adam and Eve, had been created with—they corrupted this image by falling into sin.

³The antecedent for the “der” (“that”) here is not “Mund” (“mouth”) but “Gift” (“poison”). In modern German, “Gift” is neuter and thus would use not “der” but “das.” In older German, this word could be masculine (“der Gift”), feminine (“die Gift”), or neuter (“das Gift”). James 3:8, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, employed “Gift” as feminine, declaring that “die Zunge [ist] voll tödlicher Gift” (“the [speech of the evil human] tongue [is] full of deadly poison”); later Luther Bibles changed this to “tödlichen Giftes.”

⁴“Racha” should not be confused with the word “Rache” (“revenge,” “vengeance”). The libretto’s word “Racha” is an ancient Aramaic term of abuse (in English, “[You] blockhead!”) that is given untranslated as “rhaka” in the Greek of the New Testament (in Matthew 5:22, which is part of the gospel portion chanted on the liturgical occasion for which Bach composed this cantata) and is likewise untranslated, as “Racha,” in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day.

⁵“Verbeten” is an old-fashioned synonym for the expression “durch beten beseitigen” (“to remediate/redress through prayer”).

⁶This line indirectly alludes to one of the most well-known and widely used prayers in Christianity, “The Lord’s Prayer,” versions of which are found in Matthew 6:7-15, Mark 11:25[-26], and Luke 11:1-4. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Matthew 6:12 reads “Und vergib uns unsere Schulden, wie wir unsren Schuldigern vergeben” (“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”); the parallel, Luke 11:4, reads “Und vergib uns unsre Sünden, denn auch wir vergeben allen, die uns schuldig sind” (“And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive all who are indebted to us”).

3. Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen,
Die dir, mein Gott, so sehr zuwider sein;
Ich zittre recht und fühle tausend Schmerzen,
Wenn sie sich nur an Rach und Hass erfreun!
Gerechter Gott, was magst du⁷ doch gedenken,
Wenn sie allein mit rechten Satansränken
Dein scharfes Strafgebot so frech verlacht!
Ach! ohne Zweifel hast du so gedacht:
Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen!

3. How perverse⁸ hearts do move me yet to compassion,⁹
[Those] who are so exceedingly contrary to you, my God;
I truly tremble and feel a thousand pains,
When they rejoice only in vengeance and hate.
Righteous God, what may¹⁰ you yet think,
When, with true machinations of Satan,¹¹ they
So impudently deride your commandment, decreed under
threat of severe punishment.¹²
Ah, without doubt you have thus thought:
How perverse hearts do move me yet to compassion!

4. Wer sollte sich demnach
Wohl hier zu leben wünschen,
Wenn man nur Hass und Ungemach
Vor seine Liebe sieht.
Doch, weil ich auch den Feind,
Wie meinen besten Freund
Nach Gottes Vorschrift lieben soll;
So flieht

4. Who, therefore should
Well desire to live here,
When one sees only hate and affliction
[In return] for his [God's] love [for humankind]?¹⁴
Yet because, according to God's written instruction,¹⁵
I shall love even¹⁶ my enemy
As [I do] my best friend,
My heart thus flees

⁷In the librettist's printed book of poetry this reads not "magstu" ("may you") but "mustu" ("must you").

⁸In this context, the adjective "verkehrt" connotes moral perversity. The language of this line is derived from Proverbs 11:20, "Der HERR hat Greuel an den verkehrten Herzen" ("The LORD has abhorrence of perverse hearts").

⁹For such usages as here, the verb "jammern" was defined in older German as "zum höchsten Grade des Mitleidens bewegen" ("to be moved to the highest degree of compassion"). The previous movement speaks of "God who loves," and this line expresses a parallel sentiment on the part of the poem's voice.

¹⁰With regard to "may you" versus "must you," see fn. 7, above.

¹¹This line draws for its sense on Proverbs 14:22, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Die mit bösen Ränken umgehen, werden fehlen" ("[Those] who deal with evil machinations will err").

¹²The "scharfes Strafgebot" (a singular "commandment, decreed under threat of severe punishment"—i.e., not plural commandments or precepts) here refers to the culmination of what Jesus says in Matthew 5:21-22, "Ihr habt gehört, dass zu den Alten gesagt ist: Du sollst nicht töten; wer aber tötet, der soll des Gerichts schuldig sein; ich aber sage euch: Wer mit seinem Bruder zürnet, der ist des Gerichts schuldig; wer aber zu seinem Bruder sagt, Racha, der ist des Rats schuldig; wer aber sagt: du Narr, der ist des höllischen Feuers schuldig" ("You have heard that it was said to the ancients [of Israel], 'You shall not kill; but whoever kills, he shall be culpable of judgment'; but I say to you, 'Whoever is angry with his brother, he is culpable of judgment; but whoever says "Racha" to his brother, he is culpable of the council; but whoever says "you fool," he is culpable of the infernal fire"). With regard to the exclamation of "Racha," see fn. 4, above.

¹⁴The antecedent for "his love" being God's love for humanity is found at line 10 in movement 2.

¹⁵Loving one's enemy is prescribed in Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:35. But with the words "soll," "lieben," and "wie," there are also echos in these lines of the command written in Leviticus 19:18, "Du sollst deinen Nächsten lieben wie dich selbst, denn ich bin der HERR" ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself, for I am the LORD").

¹⁶These lines, with their use of "auch" (here apparently "even," i.e., not "also" or "too") and "Feind" ("enemy"), probably draw for their sense on Proverbs 16:7, "Wenn jemand's Wege dem HERRN wohlgefallen, so machet er auch seine Feinde mit ihm zufrieden" ("If someone's ways please the LORD well, then he [the LORD] makes even his [the someone's] enemies to be at peace with him [the someone]").

Mein Herze Zorn und Gall,¹³
Und wünscht allein bei Gott zu leben,
Der selbst die Liebe heisst.
Ach, eintrachtvoller Geist,
Wenn wird er dir doch nur
Sein Himmelszion geben?

5. Mir ekelt mehr zu leben,
Drum nimm mich, Jesu, hin.
Mir graut vor allen Sünden,
Lass mich dies Wohnhaus finden,
Woselbst²¹ ich ruhig bin.

Georg Christian Lehms

From wrath and venom¹⁷
And wishes only to live with God,
Who is himself called “Love.”¹⁸
Ah, [my] spirit [on earth], full of [heaven’s anticipated]
concord,¹⁹
Just when will he [God] grant you
His [eternal] Zion of heaven?²⁰

5. To go on living nauseates me,
So take me, Jesus, up²² [into heaven].
I feel revulsion²³ at all sins;
Let me find that dwelling house [in heaven]
Where I am [to be] at rest.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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¹³The last word in this line is difficult to decipher in Bach’s own score; it seems to read as “Gall,” and “Gall” is indeed what Bach’s assistant copyist wrote here in the original separate performing part. The librettist’s printed book of poetry gives “Groll” (“rancor”), which rhymes more closely with the “soll” of two lines earlier. Both “Zorn und Groll” (“wrath and rancor”) and “Zorn und Gall” (“wrath and [figurative] venom”) were established expressions in Bach’s day (the latter, which is the harsher of the two, is now obsolete). Modern editions of the cantata give “Groll,” perhaps in part on account of a mistaken notion that “Gall” would be contextually improbable here.

¹⁷“Gall” had a wide variety of meanings in older German; here it apparently connotes (figurative) “venom.” On “Gall” versus “Groll” as the wording here, see fn. 13, above.

¹⁸1 John 4:8, “Gott ist die Liebe” (“God is love”).

¹⁹This is the “concord” of line 3 in movement 1.

²⁰A heavenly Zion is spoken of in Hebrews 12:22, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “ihr seid kommen zu dem Berge Zion und zu der Stadt des lebendigen Gottes, zu dem himmlischen Jerusalem” (“you [followers of Jesus] are come [from the earthly mount Sinai of the law] to the [heavenly] mount Zion [of the gospel] and to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem”).

²¹This line is sometimes given as “Wo selbst ich ruhig bin,” yielding the sense “Where I myself am [to be] at rest” or “Where even I am [to be] at rest.” The line should read, however, not with the two words “wo selbst” but the one word “woselbst.” The latter is an old-fashioned, intensified form of “wo” (“where”), a prepositional fusion of “wo” and “daselbst” (“in said place”), meaning “the very place where”; it is sometimes employed in poetry just to accommodate the need for an extra syllable.

²²“Hinnehen” can simply be a synonym for “annehmen” (“to accept”), but it was also used in such expressions as “Gott hat ihn hingenommen” (“God has taken him [from this world] away/there/up [into heaven]”).

²³The verb “grauen” had a wide variety of meanings in older German. The more common use was as a synonym for “erschrecken” (“to horrify”), and the word was often employed in this sense in connection with “Sünde” (“sin”). A less common usage, the one apparently encountered here (even though employed in connection with “sin”), is as a synonym for “ekeln” (“to irk”; or, “to feel a sickening dread”; or, “to feel nausea/revulsion”).

