

“Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut” BWV 199

1. Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut,
Weil mich der Sünden Brut
In Gottes heiligen Augen
Zum Ungeheuer macht.
Und mein Gewissen fühlet Pein,
Weil mir die Sünden nichts
Als Höllenhenker sein.
Verhasste Lasternacht,
Du, du allein
Hast mich in solche¹ Not gebracht;
Und du, du böser Adamssamen,
Raubst meiner Seelen alle Ruh
Und schliessest ihr den Himmel zu!
Ach! unerhörter Schmerz!
Mein ausgedorrtes Herz
Will ferner mehr kein Trost befeuchten,²
Und ich muss mich vor dem verstecken,
Vor dem die Engel selbst ihr Angesicht verdecken.

1. My heart floats in [congested] blood,³
Because sin's brood⁴
Makes me into a monster
In God's holy eyes;
And my conscience feels pain,
Because sins, to me, are nothing
But hell's executioners.
Hateful vice's night,⁵
You, you alone
Have brought me into such distress;
And you, you evil seed [sown in the heart] of Adam,⁶
Rob my soul of all rest
And close ["rainfall" from] heaven⁷ to it [my soul].
Ah, unheard-of agony!
Henceforward no consolation will water
My dried-up heart,⁸
And I must hide myself from him [God],
Before whom even the angels cover their faces.⁹

¹In the poet's printed version of 1711, this reads not "solche Not" ("such distress") but "diese Not" ("this distress").

²Some modern editions mistakenly give the verb "befruchten" ("to fertilize/fructify") for "befechten" ("to water").

³It is not wrong to translate "schwimmt" as "swims," but here the word needs to be understood in the sense of "to passively float on the surface of a liquid," not "to actively move in, or on, a liquid." In Bach's day, the idea that one's heart might float in blood—indicating an imbalance of blood, one of the four humors—was connected with sadness, and the initiating cause of this condition was held to be sin (see also fn. 4, below).

⁴"Sin" here is singular (with its "n" ending, characteristic of older German), not plural. The word refers to the Lutheran belief in "original sin," the condition of human nature's essence being corrupted as a result of Adam and Eve's disobeying God in the Garden of Eden. Sinful acts are the "brood/offspring" of original sin.

⁵Drunkenness and other unnamed vices are associated with "the night" in 1 Thessalonians 5:4-8, where it is said that the followers of Jesus are "not of the night, nor of darkness."

⁶This somewhat cryptic line probably refers also to "original sin" (see fn. 4, above). "Du böser Adamssamen" apparently does not mean "you evil seed of Adam" in the sense of "you evil progeny of Adam" (i.e., you sinners, who are the descendants of Adam). The sense is most likely "you evil seed sown in the heart of Adam," as the cantata's expression "evil seed" seems to be derived specifically from 2 Esdras 4:30, "Denn in dem Herzen Adams ist von Anfang gesät ein Korn böses Samens; wie viel gottloses Dinges hat es bis hierher gebracht" ("For in the heart of Adam was sown from the beginning a grain of evil seed; thus far, how much ungodliness has it [this grain of evil seed] brought"). The books of Esdras were included in some Luther Bibles of Bach's day.

⁷"Shutting/Closing up the skies/heavens" such that there is no rainfall is a stock expression in the Hebrew Bible. In the cantata the notion is that sin dries up the heart, and only God can water the heart, with consolation, by opening up the blessedness of heaven to it.

⁸It is the hellish heat of sin that dries up the heart.

⁹As stated in Isaiah 6:2.

2. Stumme Seufzer, stille Klagen,
Ihr mögt meine Schmerzen sagen,
Weil der Mund geschlossen ist.
Und ihr nassen Tränenquellen
Könnt ein sichres Zeugnis stellen,
Wie mein sündlich Herz gebüsst.
Mein Herz ist itzt ein Tränenbrunn,
Die Augen heisse Quellen.
Ach Gott! wer wird dich doch zufriedenstellen?

2. Mute sighs, silent lamentations,
You may speak of my agonies,
Because my mouth is closed.¹⁰
And you wet springs of tears
Can give sure witness
Of how my sinful heart has repented.
My heart is now a well of tears,¹¹
My eyes hot springs.
Ah, God, who will yet satisfy¹² you?

3. Doch Gott muss mir genädig sein,
Weil ich das Haupt mit Asche,
Das Angesicht mit Tränen wasche,
Mein Herz in Reu und Leid zerschlage
Und voller Wehmut sage:
“Gott sei mir Sünder gnädig!”
Ach ja! sein Herze bricht,
Und meine Seele spricht:

3. Yet God must be gracious to me,
Because I wash my head with ashes¹³
[And] my countenance with tears,
[And because I] shatter my heart¹⁴ in remorse and suffering
And say, full of melancholy:
“God, be gracious to me the sinner.”¹⁵
Ah, yes, his heart breaks [for me],¹⁶
And my soul says:

¹⁰The “I” in the cantata, with a “closed mouth,” is being likened to the writer of Psalm 38, who as a helpless sinner remains silent and waits for God because he has no way to withstand evil by himself. The language of this line is derived specifically from Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Psalm 38:14, “Ich aber muss sein ... wie ein Stummer, der seinen Mund nicht aufzut” (“But I [as a helpless sinner] have to be like a mute person, who [cannot respond to his foes and thus] does not open his mouth”).

¹¹For the heart to “float in blood” is not a good thing (see fn. 3 above). The liquid in which the heart floats ought, instead, to move about through the body. Thus this cantata poetry, conflating congested blood and tears, speaks of “springs of wet tears” flowing from “the heart [that is] a well of tears” and then streaming out from the “eyes [that are] hot springs.”

¹²“Satisfy” is meant here in its technical sense of “to make atonement [for sin]” (i.e., where “Zufriedenstellung” is a synonym for “Versöhnung”), not in its more informal sense of “to fulfil a desire.” The cantata’s question is presumably a rhetorical one, as the Lutheran understanding, overwhelmingly, was that only Christ can satisfy God the father.

¹³“Ashes” here apparently do double duty as symbols of sadness and of cleansing. Putting ashes on one’s head was a gesture of grief, portrayed in several key biblical narratives (e.g., 2 Samuel 13:19, Ezekiel 27:30, and the expanded Greek version of Esther 3:2 [14:2 in modern English Bibles]). To “wash with ashes” might sound strange to modern readers, but audiences in Bach’s day would more likely have known about “Lauge” (“lye”) as a liquid that was leached from wood ashes and employed for making soap.

¹⁴The notion of a shattered heart is derived from Psalm 51:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Die Opfer, die Gott gefallen, sind ein geängster Geist: ein geängstes und zerschlagen Herz wirst du, Gott, nicht verachten” (“The offerings that please God are [not burnt animal sacrifices but] a distressed spirit: a distressed and shattered heart, God, you will not despise”).

¹⁵A quotation of Luke 18:13, from the gospel portion chanted on the occasion that this cantata was designed for. The original Greek of Luke’s phrase ends “me *the* sinner,” not “me[,] a sinner.”

¹⁶The sense of this line is apparently derived from Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Jeremiah 31:20, “darum bricht mir mein Herz gegen ihn, dass ich mich sein erbarmen muss, spricht der HERR” (“therefore my heart breaks for him [Ephraim], so that I must have mercy on him, says the LORD”).

4. Tief gebückt und voller Reue
Lieg ich, liebster Gott, vor dir.
Ich bekenne meine Schuld,
Aber habe doch Geduld,
Habe doch Geduld mit mir!

4. Deeply bent over¹⁷ and full of remorse
I lie, dearest God, before you.
I acknowledge my guilt,
But [may you] yet have patience,
Yet have patience with me.

5. Auf diese Schmerzensreu
Fällt mir alsdenn dies Trostwort bei:

5. Then, upon this aching remorse,
This word of consolation comes to mind:¹⁸

**6. Ich, dein betrübtes Kind,
Werf alle meine Sünd,
So viel ihr in mir stecken
Und mich so heftig schrecken,
In deine tiefen Wunden,
Da ich stets Heil gefunden.**¹⁹

**6. I, your [Jesus's] dejected child,
Cast all my sins,
So many of them as stick fast within me
And frighten me so grievously,²⁰
Into your deep wounds,²¹
Where I have always found salvation.**

7. Ich lege mich in diese Wunden
Als in den rechten Felsenstein;
Die sollen meine Ruhstatt sein.
In diese will ich mich im Glauben schwingen
Und drauf vergnügt und fröhlich singen:

7. I lay myself into these wounds
As into [Christ] the proper quarry stone;²²
They [the wounds] shall be my place of rest.
Into these [wounds] will I, in [Christian] belief,²³ fling myself
And thereupon contentedly and cheerfully sing:

¹⁷The sense of this line is dependent on Psalm 38:7 in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, where the psalmist, weighed down by sin, says "Ich gehe krumm und sehr gebückt; den ganzen Tag gehe ich traurig" ("I go about hunched and very bent over; all the day I go about, mournful").

¹⁸"Etwas fällt jemandem bei" is an older German synonym for "etwas fällt jemandem ein," in the sense of "something comes to one's mind."

¹⁹A stanza of "Wo soll ich fliehen hin."

²⁰That is, frighten me with the prospect of eternal damnation.

²¹Regarding "the wounds [of Jesus]," see fn. 22, below.

²²This notion of a "proper stone" is presumably derived from the quotation of Psalm 118:26 famously applied to Jesus in Acts 4:11, "[Jesus] ist der Stein, von euch Bauleuten verworfen, der zum Eckstein worden ist" ("[the apostle Peter said to the people of Israel: 'Jesus] is the stone, rejected by you builders, that/who is become the cornerstone"); Psalm 118:26 is similarly quoted in Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, and 1 Peter 2:7. But the cantata's phrase "in den ... Felsenstein" is also, further, an adaptation of poetic language from the Hebrew Bible that had come to be associated with the wounds of the crucified Jesus. In the call of the lover to his beloved in Song of Songs 2:14, "Meine Taube in den Felslöchern, in den Steinritzen" ("My dove [ensconced] in the cliff hollows, in the rock clefts, [let me see you]"), the dove was taken to foreshadow the church, and the rock cavities were taken to foreshadow the wounds in the side of Jesus's body that are narrated in John 19:34, "Der Kriegsknechte einer eröffnete seine Seite mit einem Speer, und alsobald ging Blut und Wasser heraus" ("[Upon seeing that Jesus was dead on the cross,] one of the Roman soldiers opened his [Jesus's] side with a spear, and immediately blood and water went out"). The wound-cavity in Jesus's rib was embraced as a metaphorical place of refuge for Christian believers, as for example here in line 3 of the cantata poetry; for another example, consider a chorale stanza in the Wagner Hymnal, owned by Bach, which reads: "Jesu, ... / Deiner Wunden Höhle / Ist mein Aufenthalt / ... [Ich] finde Ruh / In der offenen Seiten Ritze / Da ich sicher sitze" ("Jesus, ... your wound-cavity is my abode ... I find rest/peace in the opened side's cleft, where I sit securely").

²³The language of "Glauben" ("[Christian] faith/belief") and of "legen in" ("to lay [something] into [something]") here is derived from John 20:27, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Spricht er zu Thomas: ... reiche deine Hand her und lege sie in meine Seite, und sei nicht ungläubig, sondern gläubig" ("He [Jesus] says to Thomas [the disciple]: Reach your

8. Wie freudig ist mein Herz,
Da Gott versöhnet ist.
Und mir nach²⁴ Reu und Leid
Nicht mehr die Seligkeit
Noch auch sein Herz verschliesst.

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8. How joyful is my heart,
Because God is reconciled [to the sinner by Christ's wounds];
And [because] after [my] remorse and suffering,
[God] will not any longer close²⁵ [eternal] blessedness
Or his heart to me.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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hand here [in this loose garment] and lay it into my side [where there is a hollow from my spear wound on the cross], and be not unbelieving [in me as God's messiah] but believing").

²⁴Bach wrote "auf Reu und Leid" ("upon remorse and suffering") in m. 19 of his own score (which is the same wording as the poet's printed text of 1711), but then wrote "nach Reu und Leid" ("after remorse and suffering") in mm. 23 and 26.

²⁵On God's closing of heaven/blessedness, see fn. 7, above.