“Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen” BWV 215

1. Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen,
Weil Gott den Thron deines Königs erhält.
Fröhliches Land,
Danke dem Himmel und küsse die Hand,
Die deine Wohlfahrt noch täglich lässt wachsen
Und deine Bürger in Sicherheit stellt.

1. Praise your good fortune, blessed Saxony,
For God upholds the throne of your king.
Happy land,
Thank heaven and kiss the hand [of King August][1]
That lets your welfare yet daily flourish
And sets your citizens in safety.

2. Wie können wir, grossmächtigster August,
Die unverfälschten Triebe
Von unsrer Ehrfurcht, Treu und Liebe
Dir anders als mit grösster Lust
Zu deinen Füssen legen?
Fliesst nicht durch deine Vaterhand
Auf unser Land
Des Himmels Gnadensegen
Mit reichen Strömen zu?
Und trifft nicht unsre Hoffnung ein,
Wir würden noch zu unsrer Ruh
In deiner Huld, in deinem Wesen
Des grossen Vaters Bild und seine Taten lesen?

2. How can we, most greatly mighty August,
Lay the unfeigned impulses
Of our reverence, faithfulness, and love
Other than with greatest delight
At your feet?
Does not, by your fatherly hand,
Heaven’s blessing of mercy
Flow upon our land
In rich streams?
And will not our hope come true,
[If] we would yet, to our peace [of mind],
Sense in your grace, in your nature,
Your great father’s[2] image and his deeds?

3. Freilich trotzt Augustus Name,
Ein so edler Götter Same,
Aller Macht der Sterblichkeit.
Und die Bürger der Provinzen
Solcher tugendhaften Prinzen
Leben in der güldnen Zeit.

3. Assuredly, August’s name,
An ever so noble seed of the gods,
Defies all the might of mortals.[3]
And the burghers of the provinces
Of such virtuous princes [as King August]
Live in the golden age.[4]

4. Was hat dich sonst, Sarmatien, bewogen,
Dass du vor deinen Königsthron

4. What else, Sarmatia,[5] swayed you,
That for your royal throne

GENERAL NOTE. This cantata was assembled and performed in great haste on the occasion of a surprise visit to Leipzig in 1734 by the Saxon Elector Friedrich August II (ruled 1733–63), to whom the words of the cantata are addressed. The visit coincided with the first anniversary of his election as King of Poland, where he reigned as August III. The “election” was made possible by a military victory, part of the War of Polish Succession.

[1]Kissing the sovereign’s hand was a sign of fealty; the description of the event at which this cantata was performed says that four Leipzig counts were permitted to kiss Friedrich August’s hand.

[2]Friedrich August II’s father Friedrich August I (ruled 1694–1733), who was King of Poland as August II. “Des grossen Vaters Bild” (literally, “the great father’s image”) does not mean “our great [God the] Father’s image”; see also line 4 of movement 4.

[3]“Die Macht der Sterblichkeit” (literally, “the power of mortality”) refers not to “the power of the condition of being mortal or subject to death,” but to “the power of mortals collectively, humankind”; i.e., here, “der Sterblichkeit,” employed for its rhyme with “Zeit,” is a synonym for “der Sterblichen.”

[4]Reference to “the golden age” is presumably meant to link August of Saxony with Augustus, the first Roman emporer.

[5]Sarmatia was a Roman name for a region of eastern Europe, here applied poetically to Poland.

Den sächsischen Piast,
Des grossen Augusts würdgen Sohn,
Hast allen andern fürgezogen?
Nicht nur der Glanz durchlauchter Ahnen,
Nicht seiner Länder Macht,
Nein! sondern seiner Tugend Pracht
Riss aller deiner Untertanen
Und so verschiedner Völker Sinn
Mehr ihn allein,
Als seines Stammes Glanz und angeerbten Schein,
Fussfällig anzubeten hin.
Zwar Neid und Eifersucht,
Die leider! oft das Gold der Kronen
Noch weniger als Blei und Eisen schonen,
Sind noch ergrimmt auf dich, o grosser König!
Und haben deinem Wohl geflucht.
Jedoch ihr Fluch verwandelt sich in Segen,
Und ihre Wut
Ist wahrlich viel zu wenig,
Ein Glücke, das auf Felsen ruht,
Im mindsten zu bewegen.

You preferred the Saxon Piast,[6]
The great August's[7] worthy son,
To all others?
Not just the luster of serene high ancestry,
Not the might of his lands;
No! rather the splendor of his virtue
Enraptured the mind of all your subjects
And of such diverse peoples
To worship on bended knee
More him alone
Than the luster and hereditary brilliance of his lineage.
To be sure, envy and jealousy,
Which (alas!) often cherish[8] the gold of [coins called] crowns[9]
Yet less than [the] lead and iron [of weaponry],
Are yet embittered against you, O great king,
And have cursed your weal.
Their curse, however, transforms itself into blessing,
And their wrath
Is truly far too paltry
To disturb in the slightest
A good fortune that rests on bedrock.

5. Rase nur, verwegner Schwarm,
In dein eignes Eingeweide!
Wasche nur den frechen Arm,
Voller Wut,
In unschuldger Brüder Blut,
Uns zum Abscheu, dir zum Leide!
Weil das Gift
Und der Grimm von deinem Neide

5. Just boil with rage, impudent swarm,
To your own innermost parts.[11]
Just bathe your insolent arm,
Full of wrath,
In innocent brothers' blood,[12]
To our disgust, to your grief.
For the poison
And the ferocity of your envy
Strikes you more than August.

[6]The house of Piast was the first historical ruling dynasty of Poland (from the tenth to fourteenth centuries).

[7]See n. 2.

[8]The convoluted sentiment of this and the next line, apparently, is that others are more envious of Augusts's might than of his prosperity, thus causing them, unfortunately, to go to war.

[9]"Gold der Kronen" is here apparently employed in place of the standard technical term "Kronengold," to accommodate a rhyme with "schonen." There were many different kinds of gold in the Germany of Bach's day, and two main ones were "Kronengold," which was gold of the required purity—namely, 18 carat gold, alloyed with 6 carats of silver or copper, or both—for minting coins called "Kronen" ("crowns"); the other kind was "Ducatengold."

[11]"Eingeweide" is usually used in connection with animals, to refer to their "entrails"; but the word's use in connection with people usually refers to the "gut" as the seat not of appetite but of emotion (as in the expression "gut feeling" in English), or to the "innermost parts," or "innermost being."

[12]Probably an ironic echo of Psalm 26:6, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Ich wasche meine Hände mit Unschuld" ("I will wash my hands in [a state of] innocence"). Compare also the English expression "to wash one's spears [in blood]."

Dich mehr als Augustum trifft.[10]

6. Ja, ja!
Gott ist uns noch mit seiner Hülfe nah
Und schützt Augustens Thron.
Er macht, dass der gesamte Norden
Durch seine Königswahl befriedigt worden.
Wird nicht der Ostsee schon
Durch der besiegten Weichsel Mund
Augustus Reich
Zugleich
Mit seinen Waffen kund?
Und lässet er nicht jene Stadt,
Die sich so lang ihm widersetzet hat,
Mehr seine Huld als seinen Zorn empfinden?
Das macht, ihm ist es eine Lust,
Der Untertanen Brust
Durch Liebe mehr denn Zwang zu binden.

7. Durch die von Eifer entflammeten Waffen
Feinde bestrafen,
Bringt zwar manchem Ehr und Ruhm;
Aber die Bosheit mit Wohltat vergelten,
Ist nur der Helden,
Ist Augustus Eigentum.

6. Yes, yes!
God, with his help, is yet near to us
And protects August's throne.
He [God] makes it so, that the entire North,
By dint of his [August's][13] election as king, is contented.
Does not the Baltic already know,
As a result of the vanquished mouth of the Vistula [river],[14]
Of August's realm
Together
With his armaments?
And does he not let that city [Danzig[15]],
Which had so long opposed him,
Feel more his favor than his anger?
This means that to him it is a delight
To bind [as his sovereign] the subject's breast
By love more than by force.

7. To punish enemies
With weapons enflamed by zeal,
To be sure, brings honor and renown to some;
But to repay malice with beneficence
Is a trait[16] only of heroes,
Is [a trait] of August.

[10]The printed libretto booklet made available to Bach's original audience here reads "Dich*, und nicht* Augustum trifft" ("Strikes you, *and not* August"). The reading in the poet's manuscript that Bach worked from is likewise "*Dich und nicht* Augustum trifft" (i.e., without the comma), but at this point there is notated, apparently in Bach's handwriting, a change in wording to "Dich *mehr als* Augustum trifft" ("Strikes you *more than* August"). Bach's own score and performing part give only this latter reading.

[13]The language here is ambiguous. The antecedent of "seine" ("his"/"its") is most probably "August," but grammatically at least, it could otherwise be either "Gott" (yielding the sense: "by God's choice of king") or "Norden" (yielding: "by its choice of king"). It is also not entirely clear whether this line means that the North is contented with the choice/election of August as king, or that the North can be contented in general on account of August's having been chosen/elected as king.

[14]The mouth of the Vistula river, which runs through Poland, is at the Baltic Sea at Gdańsk. "That city" (then called Danzig) was the site of Friedrich August's decisive military victory in 1734 that gave him the Polish crown.

[15]See fn. 14, above.

[16]"Eigentum" ("property") is being used here in its senses of "Eigenschaft" (a characteristic quality/trait of a person) or "Eigenheit" (a peculiarity of a person).

8. Lass doch, o teurer Landesvater, zu,
Dass unsre Musenschar
Den Tag, der dir so glücklich ist gewesen,
An dem im vorgen Jahr
Sarmatien zum König dich erlesen,
In ihrer unschuldvollen Ruh
Verehren und besingen dürfe.
Zu einer Zeit,
Da alles um uns blitzt und kracht,
Ja, da der Franzen Macht,
(Die doch so vielmal[17] schon gedämpfet worden,)
Von Süden und von Norden
Auch unserm Vaterland mit Schwert und Feuer dräut,
Kann diese Stadt so glücklich sein,
Dich, mächtgen Schutzgott unsrer Linden,
Und zwar dich nicht allein,
Auch dein Gemahl, des Landes Sonne,
Der Untertanen Trost und Wonne,
In ihrem Schoss zu finden.
Wie sollte sich bei so viel Wohlergehn
Der Pindus nicht vergnügt und glücklich sehn!
Himmel lass dem Neid zu Trutz
Unter solchem Götterschutz

8. Please allow, O esteemed sovereign,
That our band of Muses,[18]
In its fully innocent peace [of mind],[19]
Might be allowed to honor and sing about
The day that was so fortunate for you,
On which, in the foregoing year,
Sarmatia selected[20] you as king.
At a time
When everything around us flashes and cracks [of war],
Yes, when the might of the French,[21]
(Which, however, has already been subdued so many times,)
From the south and the north,
Also threatens our fatherland with sword and fire,
This city [Leipzig] can be so fortunate to find
You, powerful tutelary god of our lindens[22]—
And, to be sure, not you alone,
[But] also your spouse,[23] the sun of this land,
The comfort and joy of your subjects—
In its [Leipzig's] bosom [of good fortune].[24]
How, among so much wellbeing
Is Pindus[25] [Leipzig] not supposed to regard itself as pleased and fortunate!

[17]The printed libretto made available to Bach's original audience gives this same reading. The poet's handwritten libretto gave "Die doch *in Welschland* schon gedämpfet worden" ("Which, however, was already subdued *in Italy,*" where campaigns were fought), and this is changed, apparently in Bach's handwriting, to "Die doch *so vielmal* schon gedämpfet worden" ("Which, however, has already been subdued *so many times*").

[18]The "Musenschar" is used as a metaphor for Bach's own ensemble, which is apparently able to perform in a peaceful, innocent, protected atmosphere in Leipzig (see fn. 19, below).

[19]It is not totally clear whether the line "In ihrer unschuldvollen Ruh" refers to the "Musenschar" or to "Sarmatien." Also unclear is whether "Sarmatien" is plural or singular. Other translators have taken the sense of lines 1–7 to be, "Please allow, O esteemed sovereign, that our band of Muses might be allowed to honor and sing about the day that was so fortunate for you, on which, in the foregoing year, [the] Sarmatians, in their fully guileless/innocent peace [of mind], selected you as king." If this is about the "band of Muses" (i.e., symbolizing Bach's performing ensemble), however, the "fully innocent peace [of mind]" would apparently point to the safe atmosphere of Leipzig that has been provided them by virtue of having August as their ruler.

[20]In context, the perhaps seemingly present-tense plural "Sarmatien dich erlesen" ("[the] Sarmatians select you") should most likely be understood as past-tense singular "Sarmatien dich erlesen [hat]" ("Sarmatia [has] selected you"); see also fn. 19, above.

[21]The War of Polish Succession drew in all of Europe; this line refers to France's attacks on the Hapsburg Empire, of which Saxony was a part.

[22]Linden trees were the symbol of Leipzig, whose name originates in a word meaning "place where lindens grow."

[23]Electress Maria Josepha, the daughter of Hapsburg Emperor Joseph I.

[24]This line apparently implies the stock phrase "Schoss des Glückes" ("bosom of good fortune").

[25]One of three mountains where the Muses lived. Here "Pindus" (like the "lindens" several lines earlier) symbolizes Leipzig.

Sich die Wohlfahrt unsrer Zeiten
In viel tausend Zweige breiten!

Heaven, in defiance of envy
Under such divine protection,
Let the welfare of our times
Spread itself in many thousand branches.

9. Stifter der Reiche, Beherrscher[26] der Kronen,
Baue den Thron, den Augustus besitzt.
Ziere sein Haus
Mit unvergänglichem Wohlergehn aus,
Lass uns die Länder in Friede bewohnen,
Die er mit Recht und mit Gnade beschützt.

9. [God,] founder of realms, Lord and Master of crowns,
Build up the throne[27] that August occupies.
Adorn his dynasty
With imperishable wellbeing,
Let us live in peace, the lands
That he protects with justice and with mercy.[28]

Johann Christoph Clauder

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV215 for an annotated translation

[26]The printed libretto booklet made available to Bach's original audience gives this same reading. The poet's handwritten libretto gave "*Beschützer* der Kronen" ("*protector* of crowns"), and this is changed, apparently in Bach's handwriting, to "*Beherrscher* der Kronen" ("*Lord and Master* of crowns").

[27]Alluding to Psalm 89:5, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Ich will … deinen Stuhl bauen für und für" ("I [God] will, ever and ever, build up your throne").

[28]Alluding to Psalm 101:1, "Von Gnade und Recht will ich singen und dir, HERR, lobsagen" ("Of mercy and justice will I [King David] sing, and to you, LORD, speak praise"). August is thus being likened to King David of ancient Israel; see also fn. 4, above, where he is likened to Emperor Augustus of ancient Rome.