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The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 8.2. More on Gerstenberg's Experiments

A letter to Friedrich Nicolai mentions in addition a parody text for *Phyllis und Thirsis* (W. 232) of 1765, substitute texts by [C. F.] Cramer and Hagedorn for some of the Gellert Songs, and further texts for “some of Bach's keyboard pieces” (*einige Bachische Clavierstücke*), including variations on “an aria that until now has been without words.”¹ The last of these, perhaps involving the Variations on an Italian Arietta W. 118/2 or the Variations on an Arioso 118/4, would have been an experiment in reconciling strophic poetry with variation form. Gerstenberg evidently wrote each stanza of his poem to match Bach's successive variations, reversing the usual compositional order of words, then music.

Gerstenberg's “experiments” were apparently unrelated to an older French tradition of creating texted vocal parodies of keyboard works (including those of François Couperin). Gerstenberg described the *Experiment* involving “Hamlets Monolog” in the same letter of 1767. Wieland's prose translation had been published the previous year,² and Gerstenberg has long been regarded as an important figure in eighteenth-century German Shakespeare reception.³ His appropriation of Bach's music for this text suggests that he saw Bach's fantasia as achieving the same sublime status as the poetry. Gerstenberg's second text, relating the death of Socartes, derives from Plato's *Phaedo*. It is first documented only in a report from 1786, one year before the publication of both versions, but Tobias Pleburch has argued that both originated at about the same time.⁴ If so, the modern nickname of the so-called “Hamlet” fantasia, which in any case has nothing to do with Bach, is misleading; the piece might equally well be called the “Socrates” fantasia.

¹ “einer von Bach vorlängst mit Variationen gesetzten textlosen Arie” (letter of Dec. 5, 1767, to Friedrich Nicolai, in Werner, “Gerstenbergs Briefe an Nicolai,” 58–60). Much of the letter is reprinted in Schünemann, “Friedrich Bachs Briefwechsel,” 24–26.

² *Hamlet* appears in the last volume (vol. 8) of *Theatralische Werke [von] Shakespear, aus dem Englischen übersezt von Herrn [Christoph Martin] Wieland* (Zürich: Orell, Gessner, 1762–66).

³ “The five letters on Shakespeare in Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg's *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur* [Schleswig, 1766–7] are, perhaps, the most important contribution to continental Shakespearean criticism of the entire eighteenth century,” as declared a century ago in Ward and Waller, eds., *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, 5:297.

⁴ “Dark Fantasies,” 51–52. Helm, however, pointed out that Cramer made no mention of a second text when he described Gerstenberg's arrangement in *Magazin der Musik* 1 (1783): 1253 (“The 'Hamlet' Fantasy,” 286n. 12). Cramer published both of Gerstenberg's versions in his anthology *Flora* (Kiel and Hamburg, 1787) alongside original songs by Bach, Gluck, Reichardt, and others.

The relationship of both texts to their models is quite free. In the Hamlet text, only the words for the outer (unbarred) sections are based, quite loosely, on Shakespeare's. The words for the inner (Largo) section are entirely by Gerstenberg, who described them as representing “a voice from the grave” (*eine Stimme aus den Gräbern*). Only in a letter of the following year is the text itself preserved, in a version that differs in some respects from the one that Gerstenberg eventually published. This letter of 1768 also leaves some doubt as to whether Gerstenberg had as yet notated the music for his setting or, rather, simply sang along in a somewhat improvisatory manner as he played Bach's original piece.⁵ Although it is clear from this letter that Gerstenberg and Nicolai were exchanging copies of other musical compositions, Gerstenberg does not mention a score for his arrangement. His letter gives musical notation only for the first three words (“Seyn! oder Nichtseyn!”) and for the three-note chord played at that point by the right hand—not a separate vocal part. That Gerstenberg was capable of playing Bach's fantasia is clear from Claudius's assuring him that “we haven't played it entirely incorrectly.”⁶

⁵ Letter to Nicolai of April 27, 1768, in Werner, “Gerstenbergs Briefe,” 60–63.

⁶ “wir sie nicht sehr unrecht gespielt haben,” undated letter to Gerstenberg, no. 24 in *Briefe an Freunde*, 49.