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The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 8.7. Issues in Bach's Late Songs

Even highly regarded settings such as Psalm 8 from the Cramer set and “Über die Finsternis” from the first Sturm volume (discussed in the main text) are constructed one phrase at a time, almost like recitative, with neither recurring motives nor an overall melodic arc to make each phrase of the vocal line adhere to the next.¹ In Psalm 8, for example, the declamation of the opening “choral” stanzas (that is, the A section) avoids the banality that might arise if Bach had fitted the irregular, prose-like poetic lines into regular four-bar phrases. Yet what he did write is not quite recitative, not quite aria or song, and fails to delineate a clear tonal design. The three segments (mm. 3–6, 7–12a, 12b–16) modulate rapidly through V, ii and vi, and iii, but each returns inconsequentially to the tonic. The “solo” stanza or B section begins with a step sequence ([see online supplement 8.4](#)), moving quickly through vi, bVII, I, and ii (online example 8.54). The energetic instrumental introduction, followed by a craggy vocal part, is initially exhilarating; Bitter called Bach's choral version “among his best works for the church.”² But it lacks a clear direction, and the fragmentation of the text, especially in the B section, is hard to relate to its poetic rhetoric.

As in Telemann's vocal music, which sometimes suffers from the same problem, one wonders whether the composer was simply writing too much vocal music too quickly. During 1780–81, when he published the Sturm Songs, Bach, far from lightening his activities, appears to have been busier than ever, publishing as well his four *Orchestral Sinfonias* (W. 183) and two volumes of pieces for *Kenner und Liebhaber*. Meanwhile he was writing further keyboard pieces and composing, or at least assembling, several large vocal works, including his first oratorio and serenata for the Hamburg militia. It would not be surprising for quickly composed little songs to contain echoes of other music, and “Andenken an den Tod” (“Reflection on Death, W. 198/12) opens somewhat like the Sonata W. 55/3, published two years previously (online example 8.56). “Fürbitte des gekreuzigten Jesu für seine Feinde” (The crucified Jesus's prayer for his friends, W. 198/21) seems to quote the aria “Wie ruhig ist dein Angesicht” from Bach's 1769 St. Matthew Passion, which was repeated frequently in concert form as the Passion Cantata. The parallelism reflects not only the similar subject matter but the affinity of Bach's Hamburg arias to his songs (online example 8.57).

¹ The first three phrases of “Über die Finsternis” end respectively on e', f-sharp', and g', with a further ascent to a' at the end of the fifth phrase and subsequently to b-flat', albeit only as an appoggiatura. But even if the melody does arc gradually upwards toward the climactic e-flat" in measure 14, the absence of any recurring melodic ideas leaves it in danger of seeming incoherent.

² *Carl Philipp Emanuel und Wilhelm Friedemann Bach und deren Brüder*, 1:299.

Example 8.54a. "Der 8. Psalm," W. 196/4, mm. 1-6

Prächtig und etwas langsam

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and common time. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows the piano introduction. The second system, starting at measure 3, includes the vocal line for the 'Erster Chor' and the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Wer ist so wür-dig als du, als du, von uns be-wun-dert zu'. The third system, starting at measure 5, continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'wer-den, wer? Du, un-ser Be-herr-scher, o Gott?'. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand.

3 **Erster Chor**
Wer ist so wür-dig als du, als du, von uns be-wun-dert zu

5
wer-den, wer? Du, un-ser Be-herr-scher, o Gott?

Example 8.54b. "Der 8. Psalm," W. 196/4, mm. 20–25

20 **Zweiter Chor**

Wer schaut zu dei - nen Him - meln hin - an, sieht

22 dei - ne Ma - - - - - je - stät im

24 Glan - ze je - - - - - der Son - ne

Example 8.56. (a) “Andenken an den Tod,” W. 198/12, mm. 1–4; (b) Sonata in B Minor, W. 55/3, movement 1, mm. 1–4

(a) **Etwas langsam**

Wer weiß, wie nah der Tod mir ist?

(b) **Allegretto**

Example 8.57. (a) “Fürbitte des gekreuzigten Jesu für seine Feinde,” W. 198/21, mm. 11–13; (b) aria “Wie ruhig ist dein Angesicht,” no. 8 from the St. Matthew Passion for 1769, H. 782a, mm. 15–19 (without strings)

(a)

Du siehst mit se-gen-vol - lem Blick Von ih - nen weg, auf den zu-rück,

(b)

Wie ru - hig, wie ru - hig bleibt dein An - ge - sicht

5 6 5 8 7 5 6 7
3 4 3 4 - - 3 4 5
2 - - 4