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The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 8.6. Some Features of the Gellert Songs

Bach's foreword, although brief, provides clues to how he conceived his settings. He practically apologizes for the fact that in a strophic song the same music must serve many different lines of poetry, mentioning the “distinctive imagery” of respective stanzas,¹ the use of monosyllabic words in one versus polysyllabic words in another, and of course their varying “matter” or substance. He also implicitly addresses the opinion of Krause, who was probably joined in it by Gellert, that a song (as opposed to an aria or other more formal setting) should be complete as a melody alone. Bach has “added the necessary harmony and figuration,” which today sounds vague but for an eighteenth-century reader was a way of indicating that Bach has not only written out the keyboard part (there is no figured bass), but has also included all the necessary ornaments and embellishments (*Manieren*). Indeed, Bach's responses to Gellert's poems were far too specific and sophisticated to be notated in the form of melody and figured bass, and he effectively admits that he has turned his settings into keyboard pieces (*Handstücke*). He justifies the occasional insertion of a “supplementary theme” (*angenommenes Thema*) in the keyboard part as adding variety and makes an analogy with chorales, in which organists often played brief passages between the lines.² In at least one song, “Warnung vor der Wollust” (Warning against Greed, no. 30), the “supplementary theme” seems essential to the meaning of the song: the dotted introduction and interludes of the keyboard, played *forte*, could represent the greed or envy of the title, against which the voice inveighs in its *piano* entries. But it is hard to see a similar meaning in the longer passages for the keyboard in “Wider den Übermuth” (Against Arrogance, no. 48), whose graceful triplet motion seems to contradict the arrogance to which the text objects.

Gellert himself, like Goethe when confronted by Schubert's settings of his poetry, may have been somewhat taken aback by Bach's songs. Gellert wrote to his sister that Bach's songs were “good, but too good for a singer who is not musical.”³ A reviewer in 1765 observed that “they seem to have been conceived more in terms of the keyboard than the voice.”⁴ Gellert himself was musical, however; he had intended thirty-three of his poems to be sung to existing chorale melodies, modeling them on existing poetry. His Christmas poem “Auf, schicke dich” (“Up, rouse yourself”), for example, is a parody of Caspar Fügler's sixteenth-century chorale “Wir Christenleut.” Bach's setting (no. 5) makes no reference to the familiar melody, however, nor does

¹ Bach's expression “die Verschiedenheit der Unterscheidungszeichen” is hard to translate; Philip Whitmore took it to mean “punctuation” (Ottenberg, *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach*, 97), whereas Berg renders it literally as “distinguishing marks” (CPEBCW 6/1:xviii).

² As documented in Sebastian's so-called Arnstadt chorale settings, BWV 715, 722, etc., and by Burney, *Present State of Music in Germany*, 2:280.

³ Letter of March 25, 1758, in Ottenberg, *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach*, 100.

⁴ From a review of the third edition in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (quoted in CPEBCW 6/1:xiv).

he repeat the music of lines 1–2 for lines 4–5, as does the traditional chorale (online example 8.31).⁵

[Example 8.31a. “Weihnachtslied,” W. 194/5, mm. 1–8](#)

Munter

Auf, schi - - - cke dich, Recht fei - - er - lich Des
Hei - lands Fest mit Dan - ken zu be - ge - hen!

[Example 8.31b. Chorale “Auf, schicke dich,” no. 1 from the Christmas Piece W. 249, mm. 1–13 \(vocal parts only\)](#)

S
A
T
B
Auf, schi - cke dich, Recht fei - er - lich, Des
Hei - lands Fest mit Dan - ken zu be - ge - - - hen!

⁵ Bach used the original chorale as the opening movement of his Christmas piece for 1775 (W. 249).

Gellert was sufficiently musical to place important grammatical divisions fairly consistently within the various stanzas of a strophic poem. Thus each six-line stanza in “Auf, schicke dich” reaches the end of a clause or sentence midway, after line 3. Lines 1 and 2 are very short, as are lines 4 and 5, but although each of these lines may contain a grammatically complete sentence, the thought is completed only with the third, longer line. This made it possible for the composer to set the short lines as discrete musical phrases, but with full cadences falling only at the ends of lines 3 and 6. Bach composed the song as a little rounded binary form, with a cadence to the dominant at the center, after line 3. The same cadential phrase recurs at the end, reflecting the poetic rhyme between the same third and sixth verses. The musical form thus closely reflects the poetic one, although not exactly (lines 4–5 of the poem introduce a new rhyme).

Naturally, the emotional character of Gellert's poem is reflected in the tempo, mode, and general character of the music. As one would expect in a Christmas song, Bach's setting avoids harmonic complications, opening with a purely diatonic formulaic phrase that also occurs in his little aria “La Sophie,” composed in probably the same year (online example 8.32).⁶ Some light chromaticism in the following phrase falls initially on the word *Heiland* (savior), hardly an appropriate place for it according to the older ideas of musical rhetoric. But text painting is rare in Bach's songs, which regularly set words such as *Gott* (God), *Himmel* (heaven), and the like to falling or low notes. On the other hand, no. 36 of the Cramer Psalms, a setting of the penitential Psalm 130, opens with an *upward* leap of an octave to the word *Tiefe* (depths). This might be construed as “painting” the idea of a cry *up* to “God, in your heights” (mentioned in line 2)—but that is not how Sebastian had approached the phrase when he set it in one of his earliest surviving vocal works (online example 8.33).

[Example 8.32. “La Sophie,” W. 117/40, mm. 9–12](#)

The musical score for Example 8.32, "La Sophie," W. 117/40, mm. 9–12, is presented in a two-staff format. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the keyboard accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line begins with a fermata over the first measure, followed by the lyrics "O hol - de Zeit! Zur Lust be - reit,". The keyboard accompaniment provides a simple harmonic support, with some chromaticism in the right hand.

⁶ “La Sophie” (W. 117/40) was, anomalously, disseminated as one of five little keyboard pieces (NV 97) of 1757; its theme was taken from the final movement of the Trio W. 163 of 1755.

Emanuel does not entirely abandon old-fashioned musical rhetoric in the Gellert Songs. An example occurs in the Easter Song (no. 41), whose first and last stanzas quote the New Testament verse *halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ*.⁷ Bach's use of a long unaccompanied note to “paint” the first word also points out the presence of the quotation and is entirely apposite in several other stanzas—notably stanza 6, where the words “ever, ever blessed” (*ewig, ewig selig*) follow. But it becomes meaningless when simple prepositions and conjunctions (*als, wenn, und,* etc.) fall at this point in other strophes (online example 8.34).

[Example 8.33. \(a\) Psalm 130, W. 196/36, mm. 1–4; \(b\) J. S. Bach, *Aus der Tiefe*, BWV 131, mm. 24–8 \(oboe and strings omitted\)](#)

(a) **Choralmäßig**

Aus der Tie - fe ruf ich dir,

28 Tie - fe, aus der Tie - fe ruf ich, Herr, zu dir,

(b) Aus der

[Example 8.34. “Osterlied,” W. 194/42, mm. 9–13 \(stanzas 1, 2, 5, and 6\)](#)

9

[1]Halt	im	Ge -	dächt -	nis	Je -	sum	Christ,
[2]als	sprach	er:	Frie -	de	sei -	mit	dir!
[5]wenn	sie	mein	Gest	mit	dir	ver -	gleich,
[6]und	e -	wig,	e -	wig	se -	lig	sein;

⁷ “Hold Jesus Christ in memory,” 2 Timothy 2.8 (the opening verse in Sebastian's church piece BWV 67).