

“Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen” BWV 213

Hercules¹ auf dem Scheidewege
Drama per musica

1. RATSCHL[USS] DER GÖTTER
Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen,
Über unsern Göttersohn.
Unser Thron
Wird auf Erden
Herrlich und verkläret werden,
Unser Thron
Wird aus ihm ein Wunder machen.
Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen
Über unsern Göttersohn.

2. HERCULES
Und wo? Wo ist die rechte Bahn,
Da ich den eingepflanzten Trieb,
Dem Tugend, Glanz und Ruhm⁴ und Hoheit lieb,
Zu seinem Ziele bringen kann?
Vernunft, Verstand und Licht
Begehrt, dem allen nachzujagen.
Ihr schlanken Zweige, könnt ihr nicht

Hercules at the Crossroads
Musical drama

1. [THE] DECREE² OF THE GODS
Let us take care, let us watch
Over our son of the gods.³
[The worthiness of] our throne [of Zeus, on Mount Olympus]
Will, on earth,
Become glorious and transfigured;
Our throne
Will make a wonder of him.
Let us take care, let us watch
Over our son of the gods.

2. HERCULES
But where? Where is the right path
Where I can bring the inclination implanted [in me]—
Dear to virtue, splendor and renown, and majesty—
To its goal?
Reason, intellect, and light
Demands to chase after all of this.
You slender branches [in this grove],⁵ are you not able to

GENERAL NOTE: This work was first performed by the Leipzig Collegium musicum under Bach’s direction, in honor of the young Saxon Electoral Prince Friedrich, on September 5, 1733, the prince’s 11th birthday. The German text of this libretto is often awkward in expression, and at times grammatically and logically quite clumsy or convoluted or both.

¹The librettist, Picander, spelled this name with a “c” (not a “k”).

²What the gods have decreed is expressed in the B section (lines 3–7) of this movement. In older-German, “Ratschluss” could be a synonym for “Beschluss” (“decision,” or “[a legal] ruling”); but in the contexts of pagan religion and of Christianity, “der Ratschluss der Götter” and “die Ratschlüsse des Gottes” were employed in the senses of “the will/decreed of the gods” and “the will/decreed of God.”

³The opening movement of the libretto from BWV 213 is meant with the use of “Göttersohn” to refer literally to Hercules and allegorically to the young Saxon Electoral Prince Friedrich (see the General Note, above). In many contexts, the word “Göttersohn” could mean “[divine or semi-divine] son of the [ancient Greek/Roman] gods”; and in other contexts, simply “hero”; but in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German, “Göttersohn” was often also employed, as here, panegyrically for German princes, reflecting an understanding of exalted earthly rulers as “Götter” (“[earthly, not divine,] gods”) and of each of their ruling progeny as a “Göttersohn” (“son of the ‘gods’”). These panegyric usages were derived not so much from classical mythology as they were from one of the particular employments of the expression “ha elohim” (“the gods”) in the Hebrew Bible. In many biblical contexts, “elohim” could mean “God,” “gods,” “divine ones,” “angels,” or “exalted ones.” Especially in Exodus 21:6 and 22:8-9, however, “elohim” refers to earthly rulers, and thus in these contexts the word is often rendered in English Bibles as “judges” or “magistrates.” The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day and earlier rendered Exodus 21:6 and 22:8-9 with “Götter,” understanding the term there as denoting human earthly rulers placed in power by God.

⁴The words “und Ruhm” (“and renown”) are not found in Picander’s 1737 printing of the libretto.

⁵The expression “ihr schlanken Zweige” here is often translated as “you slender/narrow crossroads,” but such renderings are most likely inaccurate. Xenophon, who transmits Prodicus’s Hercules story, says that Hercules went out to a quiet place to make his choice.

Rat oder Weise sagen?

3. WOLLUST⁶

Schlafe, mein Liebster,⁷ und pflege der Ruh,
Folge der Lockung entbrannter Gedanken.
Schmecke die Lust
Der lüsternen Brust
Und erkenne keine Schranken.

4. WOLLUST

Auf! folge meiner Bahn,
Da ich dich ohne Last⁸ und Zwang
Mit sanften Tritten werde leiten.
Die Anmut gehet schon voran,
Die Rosen vor dir auszubreiten.
Verziehe nicht, den so bequemen Gang
Mit Freuden zu erwählen.

TUGEND

Wohin, mein Hercules, wohin?
Du wirst des rechten Weges fehlen.
Durch Tugend, Müh und Fleiss
Erhebet sich ein edler Sinn.

WOLLUST

Wer wählet sich den Schweiss,
Der in Gemächlichkeit
Und scherzender Zufriedenheit

Impart advice or [the better] direction?

3. PLEASURE

Sleep, my dearest, and tend to your rest;
Follow the allure of inflamed thoughts.
Savor the delight
Of your craving breast
And recognize no bounds.

4. PLEASURE

Up; follow my path
On which I will guide you, without burden or coercion,
With gentle steps.
Already, Charm goes on ahead
To spread roses before you.
Do not tarry⁹ in selecting, with joy,
The route that is so easy.

VIRTUE

Where to, my Hercules, where to?
[If you follow pleasure,] you will miss the right path.
[But] through virtue, toil, and diligence
A noble disposition soars.

PLEASURE

Who elects for himself the sweat [of hard labor]

That would appear to be the woods or a grove, a setting provided in many visual depictions of the story. (Note, also, that the first performance of BWV 213 took place outdoors at the garden associated with Leipzig's Zimmermann coffee-house concerts.) "Die schlanken Äste/Zweige" ("the slender [tree] branches") was a common expression in older German. Many among Bach's audience would have been familiar with a Christian version of quasi-Herculean tree-branch imagery from post-reformation Lutheran art in the form of "Gesetz und Gnade" ("Law and Grace") paintings (e.g., which were found at that time in both the Thomas and Nicholas Churches of Leipzig). In these works a central figure is shown presented with a choice between various depictions of the virtues of redemption and life on the one side and the vices of sin and death on the other; between them is conventionally depicted an extraordinary tree whose right side teems with foliage, while the branches on the left side are completely withered (i.e., it is obvious, from the nature of this tree, what the right choice would be).

⁶The allegorical characters Wollust (Pleasure) and Tugend (Virtue) are both grammatically feminine in German and are referred to in the cantata's text with feminine grammatical inflections. In artistic representations they were typically depicted as female. It is not certain whether the singer of Pleasure (a soprano) in Bach's performance was male or female; Virtue was sung by a (presumably male) tenor. Hercules, an alto, was probably male, given the kinds of voices cultivated in Bach's environs.

⁷"Lieber" ("dear") in Picander's 1737 print; "Liebster" ("dearest") in Bach's own performing materials; both "Lieber" and "Liebster" in Bach's own score.

⁸"Lust" ("delight") in Picander's 1737 print and in a 1748 reprint. (Presumably a typographical error.) Bach clearly wrote "Last" ("burden") in his own score, and his original performing part, copied out by an assistant, was corrected to "Last," apparently from "Lust."

⁹The verb "verziehen" is apparently being used here in one of its older-German senses, as a synonym for "wartend verharren" ("to remain waiting," "to tarry"). In the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "nicht verziehen" ("not tarry") is employed in this way, e.g., in Hebrews 10:37.

Sich kann sein wahres Heil erwerben?
TUGEND
Das heisst: sein wahres Heil verderben.

5. HERCULES

Treues Echo dieser Orten,
Sollt ich bei den Schmeichelworten
Süsser Leitung irrig sein?
Gib mir deine Antwort:¹² Nein! ECHO: Nein!
Oder sollte das Ermahnen,
Das so mancher Arbeit nah,¹³
Mir die Wege besser bahnen?
Ach so sage lieber: Ja! ECHO: Ja!

6. TUGEND

Mein hoffnungsvoller Held!
Dem ich ja! selbst verwandt
Und angeboren bin,
Komm, und erfasse meine Hand
Und höre mein getreues Raten,
Das dir der Väter Ruhm und Taten
Im Spiegel vor die Augen stellt.
Ich fasse dich, und fühle schon
Die folgbare und mir geweihte Jugend.
Du bist mein echter Sohn,
Ich deine Zeugin, die Tugend.

[When] he¹⁰ is able in leisure
And playful contentment
To secure for himself his true prosperity?¹¹
VIRTUE
That is: To ruin his true prosperity.

5. HERCULES

Faithful Echo of these environs,
Would¹⁴ I be mistaken [in following] these flattering words
Of [Pleasure's] honeyed guidance?
Give me [as] your answer: "No." ECHO: "No."
Or would the exhorting [of Virtue],
Which [is] connected with so much labor,
Blaze the trails [to true prosperity] better for me?
Ah, then declare, rather: "Yes." ECHO: "Yes."

6. VIRTUE

My promising¹⁵ man of courage/strength!,¹⁶
To whom I—yes!—[Virtue] myself am akin
And inborn,
Come, and grasp my hand
And hear my faithful giving of advice
That sets before your eyes the renown and deeds of your fathers
In the mirror [as a reflection of your natural affinity for virtue].
I embrace you, and already sense

¹⁰The antecedent for the (grammatically masculine) "der" in line 2 is "Wer" ("Who") in line 1, not the (also grammatically masculine) "Schweiss."

¹¹In religious discourse, the fairly common expression "Heil und Wohlergehen" would refer to "[eternal] salvation and wellbeing"; but in secular panegyrics, "Heil und Wohlergehen" typically refers to "[temporal] prosperity and wellbeing."

¹²"Gib mir doch zur Antwort" ("give me, please, as the answer") in Picander's 1737 print.

¹³"Nah" ("close") in Bach's own score and Picander's 1737 print. The word might possibly be read as "nach" ("in accordance with") in Bach's own performing materials in m. 73 (which would ruin the poetry's rhyme with "ja" ["yes"]). Although messily written, it is apparently given as "nah" in m. 103.

¹⁴Many translations render the subjunctive "sollt[e] ich" ("would I") with the indicative "shall I" (and some also incorrectly give the original German text as "soll," not "sollt").

¹⁵Like the English word "hopeful," the German "hoffnungsvoll" can mean "hopeful" or "full of hope" either in the sense of hope-possessing or of hope-giving. Assuming the latter here, we have rendered the adjective as "promising."

¹⁶The word "Held," in its use in classical mythology, refers to "a man of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favored by the gods; especially one regarded as semi-divine and immortal" (the definition given as sense 1 in the entry "hero" in the Oxford English Dictionary).

The youth [that deserves] to be imitated¹⁷ and [is] consecrated to me.¹⁸
You are my true-born son;¹⁹
I [am] your birth mother,²⁰ Virtue.

7. TUGEND

Auf meinen Flügeln sollst du schweben,
Auf meinem Fittich steigst du
Den Sternen, wie ein Adler, zu.
Und durch mich
Soll dein Glanz und Schimmer sich
Zur Vollkommenheit erheben.

7. VIRTUE

On my wings you shall hover;
On my pinion you ascend
To the stars, like an eagle.²¹
And through me
Shall your splendor and luster
Soar to perfection.

8. TUGEND

Die weiche Wollust locket zwar;
Allein,
Wer kennt nicht die Gefahr,
Die Reich und Helden kränkt,
Wer weiss nicht, o Verführerin,
Dass du vorlängst und künftig hin,

8. VIRTUE

Soft-featured Pleasure indeed allures;
Except,
Who does not know the danger [of pleasure]
That weakens²² the rich [in spirit] and the strong in body;²³
Who does not understand, O seductress,
That long ago and from that time forward—

¹⁷“Folgsam” is an older-German synonym for “nachahmbar/imitierbar” (“imitable,” in the older-English sense of “deserving of imitation”).

¹⁸In the scholarly Bach literature a variant reading for this line is reported to have appeared in Picander’s 1737 print, but in fact the print’s reading is the same as Bach’s.

¹⁹Hercules was the semi-divine, illegitimate child of Zeus (the head of the gods), as his mother was Alcmena (a mortal), the wife of Amphitryon (also a mortal). Biblically literate listeners may also readily have heard this line, “Du bist mein echter Sohn” (“You are my true-born son”), as a sort of religious blessing, as it is a near echo (but with the very same scansion) of what God declares to Jesus in Mark 1:11, “Du bist mein lieber Sohn” (“You are my beloved son”).

²⁰Literally, “Zeugin” is “(female) begetter,” i.e., birth mother; and “Zeuger” is “(male) begetter,” i.e., birth father. The (logically somewhat convoluted) idea here is that Virtue has not “adopted” Hercules but is in a sense his “real” begetter. Biblically literate listeners may have heard a reference here to Psalm 2:7, where God’s anointed king, understood by Christians to be a foreshadowing of Jesus as God’s messiah, recalls what God had said to the king (according to Luther’s rendering, a passage that is also quoted verbatim in Acts 13:33, Hebrews 1:5, and Hebrews 5:5), “Du bist mein Sohn, heut habe ich dich gezeugt” (“You are my son, today have I begotten you”).

²¹Biblically literate listeners may readily have heard these lines as a sort of religious blessing, as they draw on what is said in Deuteronomy 32:11 of God as a hovering eagle, bearing his people as a fledgling on his pinion (which is given in the singular in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day). A similar metaphor is employed in Exodus 19:4.

²²“Kränken” is apparently being used here in its older-German sense of “schwächen” (“to weaken/debilitate”).

²³“Die Reich und Helden kränkt” would on the face of it seem to mean “which affronts empire[s] and [military] heroes.” But Picander’s “Reich und Helden” is probably a clipped version of “Reiche und Helden,” an expression that was sometimes employed in older German to refer to the “materially/spiritually rich and bodily/mentally strong,” as, e.g., in some renderings of Revelation 6:15, “Die Könige der Erde aber, Fürsten und Heeresführer, Reiche und Helden, alle Sklaven und alle Freien, verbargen sich in Höhlen und Felsenklüften der Berge” (“But the kings of the earth, princes and army commanders, [the materially/spiritually] rich and [the] strong/powerful, all [the] enslaved and all [the] free, hid themselves in caves and rock clefts of the mountains”). Note that in older German “the rich/poor,” in the plural, could be spelled either “die Reichen/Armen” or “die Reiche/Arme.”

So lang es nur den Zeiten denkt,
Von unsrer Götter Schar
Auf ewig musst verstossen sein?

9. HERCULES

Ich will/mag²⁵ dich nicht hören, ich will/mag²⁶ dich
nicht wissen,
Verworfenne Wollust, ich kenne dich nicht.
Denn die Schlangen,
So mich wollten wiegend fangen,
Hab ich schon lange zermalmet,²⁷ zerrissen.

10. HERCULES

Geliebte Tugend, du allein
Sollst meine Leiterin
Beständig sein.

[For] as long as only the ages [can] imagine²⁴—
You [should] have to be expelled
From our band of gods, forever?

9. HERCULES

I do not wish/care²⁸ to hear you; I do not wish/care²⁹ to
understand you;
Depraved/Cast-out³⁰ Pleasure, I do not know you.
For the [innately depraved] serpents
Who wished to snatch me³¹ reposing in the cradle³²
I have long since crushed, torn apart.

10. HERCULES

Beloved Virtue, you alone
Shall constantly
Be my guide.

²⁴The use of “denken” as a “bivalent stative verb” with “objective subject” and “dative object” can be employed to express either something that is in one’s memory or something that is someone’s opinion.

²⁵Bach’s own materials read “mag nicht [dich hören]” (“do not care [to hear you]”) only in mm. 27 and 55.

²⁶Bach’s own materials read “mag nicht dich wissen” (“do not care to understand you”) only in m. 61.

²⁷In Picander’s 1737 print, “zerdrücket,” a synonym for “zermalmet” (“crushed”).

²⁸See fn. 25, above.

²⁹See fn. 26, above.

³⁰The adjective “verworfen” is likely meant here to be read both in its sense of “verdorben” (“depraved,” or “[morally] corrupt”) and in its sense of “weggeworfen” (“cast off,” or “rejected”). The penultimate line of the previous movement refers to Pleasure being “verstossen” (“expelled,” or “cast out”) from the band of gods, and the Lutheranism of Bach’s day continually made a distinction between a “vernünftige Wollust” (“reasonable pleasure”) that is of God and a “verderbte Wollust” (“corrupted pleasure”) that is of the world.

³¹The story was that when Hercules was eight months old, the goddess Hera (wife of Zeus), out of jealousy of Alcmene (the birth mother of Hercules; see fn. 20, above), sent two snakes into Hercules’s chamber, and the infant strangled them.

³²On their own, the sentiments of the B section (lines 3–5) of this movement might seem like something of a non sequitur. Biblically literate listeners among Bach’s audience, however, probably understood Pleasure here to be interpreted as “satanic,” linking this line’s use of “Schlangen” (“serpents”) and “wiegend” (“cradled”) with the standard Lutheran, christological interpretation of the Creation narrative in Genesis 3, where the first humans, Adam and Eve, disobey God in the Garden of Eden by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When confronted by God, Eve says that she was duped by a “serpent” into eating. In Genesis 3:15, God says to the serpent, in the rendering of the Luther’s Bibles of Bach’s day, “Ich will Feindschaft setzen zwischen dir und dem Weibe und zwischen deinem Samen und ihrem Samen. Derselbige soll dir den Kopf zertreten, und du wirst ihn in die Fersen stechen” (“I will put enmity between you and the woman [Eve] and between your seed and her seed. This same [seed] shall trample your head, and you will sting him in the heels”). In traditional Christian reading the “serpent” is the devil/Satan; and in Lutheran reading the “seed” of Eve who tramples Satan’s head is Jesus, God’s promised messiah. The New Testament infancy narratives depict Jesus (who is proclaimed to be the promised “king” that will defeat Satan) as a baby in a “manger” or “cradle.” The gospels go on to depict Jesus in his adulthood as being urged by the devil to make the choice of following the seductive path of Satan rather than the difficult path of God.

Wo du befehlst, da geh ich hin,
Das will ich mir zur Richtschnur wählen.

TUGEND

Und ich will mich mit dir
So fest und so genau vermählen,
Dass ohne dir und mir
Mein Wesen niemand soll erkennen.

HERCULES, TUGEND

Wer will ein solches Bündnis trennen?

11. HERCULES

Ich bin deine,

TUGEND

Du bist meine,

Küsse mich,

HERCULES

Ich küsse dich.

HERCULES, TUGEND

Wie Verlobte sich verbinden,
Wie die Lust, die sie empfinden,
Treu und zart und eiferig,
So bin ich.

12. MERCUR³⁵

Schaut, Götter, dieses ist ein Bild

Von Sachsens Kurprinz, Friedrichs, Jugend!

Der muntern Jahre Lauf

Weckt die Verwunderung schon itzund auf.

So mancher Tritt, so manche Tugend.

Schaut, wie das treue Land mit Freuden angefüllt,

Da es den Flug des jungen Adlers sieht,

Da es den Schmuck der Raute sieht,

Und da sein hoffnungsvoller Prinz

Der allgemeinen Freude blüht.

Schaut aber auch der Musen frohe Reihen

Where you command, there will I go;

This I wish to elect as my precept.

VIRTUE

And I wish to wed myself to you

So closely and so exactly

That without [me with] you and [you with] me,³³

No one shall recognize my [good] character [in me without you].

HERCULES, VIRTUE

Who wishes to sever such an alliance?

11. HERCULES

I am yours;

VIRTUE

You are mine.³⁴

Kiss me;

HERCULES

I kiss you.

HERCULES, VIRTUE

Just like [the] betrothed [who] join together

[And] just like the delight that they experience

[Are] faithful and tender and ardent,

So am I.

12. MERCURY

Behold, gods; this is a portrait

Of Saxony's Electoral-Prince Friedrich's youth.

The [life] course of [his] lively years

Arouses wonderment already now [in his youth].

So many a step, so many a virtue.

Behold how the faithful land [is] filled to the brim³⁶ with joy,

Because it sees the young eagle's flight;

Because it sees the decoration of the rue plant [on the Saxon coat of arms];³⁷

And because its promising³⁸ prince

Flourishes, to the common joy [of his future subjects].

³³A simple “without you and me” would be (the accusative) “ohne dich und mich.” The poet’s dative “ohne dir und mir” (apparently, “without [me with] you and [you with] me”), with “mir” in the second position, accommodates the need for a rhyme with the “dir” of Virtue’s first line here.

³⁴“Ich bin dein und du bist mein” (“I am yours and you are mine”), adapted from Song of Songs 2:16 and 6:3, was an engagement formula, with binding legal power, in Bach’s Germany.

³⁵This is Picander’s spelling.

³⁶In modern German, “anfüllen” would mean “to replenish,” but in older German it meant “to fill from top to bottom.”

³⁷“Raute” is the herb known in English as “rue”; and “Rautensäfte” (literally, “rue juices”), e.g., are extracts that were thought to have protective powers. The various Saxon coats of arms have traditionally featured depictions of the leaves of rue plants.

³⁸See fn. 15, above.

Und hört ihr singendes Erfreuen:

13. CHOR DER MUSEN⁴⁰

Lust der Völker, Lust der Deinen,
Blühe holder Friederich!
Deiner Tugend Würdigkeit
Stehet schon der Glanz bereit,
Und die Zeit
Ist begierig, zu erscheinen:
Eile, mein Friedrich, sie wartet auf dich.
Lust der Völker, Lust der Deinen,
Blühe holder Friederich!

Christian Friedrich Henrici (Picander)

But behold, too, the Muses' merry ring-dances,³⁹
And hear their songful regaling:

13. CHORUS OF THE MUSES

Delight of the peoples [of Saxony and Poland], delight of
[those who are] yours,
Flourish, fair Friederich.⁴¹
Splendor assuredly⁴² stands at the ready
For the worthiness of your virtue,⁴³
And the time [of your full flourishing]
Is eager to appear.
Hasten, my Friedrich; it [the time] awaits you.⁴⁴
Delight of the peoples, delight of [those who are] yours,
Flourish, fair Friederich.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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³⁹Grammatically, “der Musen frohe Reihen” could mean “the glad ranks of muses,” but in context it is more likely that the “Reihen” refers to ring-dancing. This sense of “Reihen” was usually given as “Reigen” in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, but Bach gives “Reihen,” e.g., in his setting of Psalm 149:3 in the motet “Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied” BWV 225, at the phrase “sie sollen loben seinen Namen in Reihen” (“they [the saints of God] shall praise his name in ring-dancing”).

⁴⁰The Leipzig Collegium musicum sometimes styled itself as a “Musen-Chor.”

⁴¹To fit the poetic meter, Friedrich’s name was rendered in this movement also with three syllables.

⁴²“Schon” is apparently employed here in the sense of “gewiss” (“certainly,” “assuredly”).

⁴³The sentiments of lines 3–4 are convoluted. Other translators have rendered them into more straightforward-sounding English, but in the process, among other challenges, they have sometimes confused the subject and object. Note that it is the (nominative) “[der] Glanz” (“splendor”) that functions as the subject of the sentence.

⁴⁴Lines 3–7, scored for the vocal bass line alone, are sometimes editorially labeled as “Mercur” (“Mercury”) in modern editions and translations, but it is unlikely that the bass line within the “Choir of Muses” is meant to be understood as a setting of the declarations of Mercury (who is not one of the muses). The voices of the opening and closing choruses are not those of the characters in the drama, and the 1737 text reprint does not assign these lines to Mercury.