

The Serious Nature of the Quodlibet in Bach's "Goldberg Variations"

by Michael Marissen

If there is one thing music lovers claim to know about the "Goldberg Variations," it is the continually trotted-out fun fact that in the final variation, titled "Quodlibet," J. S. Bach superimposed the melodies of two merry old German folk songs, "*Ich bin so lang nicht bey dir g'west*" ("For So Long I Have Not Been with You") and "*Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben*" ("Cabbage and Turnips Have Driven Me Away").

Scholars and enthusiasts have long found this knowledge attractive, for various reasons. Nationalists fixed on the "old German" element. Communists embraced the "folk" element. Most others focused simply on the "merry." For example, in his book *Music Comes Out of Silence*, renowned Bach interpreter pianist and conductor Andrés Schiff fervently backs the merry view: "As the title suggests, [Bach's "Quodlibet" is] boisterous and very funny. ... We can imagine the Bach family singing it together with a glass of wine (or was it beer?) in their hands. This is Dionysian music."¹

In an interview, he also said, "the [humorous] character of [Bach's "Quodlibet"] is formed by two folk tunes that would have been easily recognizable to Bach's contemporaries."² How plausible is this? In Schiff's hands, the "Quodlibet" certainly projects greater exuberance than in



anyone else's hands,³ but to my ears not even his phenomenal technique and artistry have rendered this music "very funny."

A musical quodlibet was a piece in which well-known tunes appeared either one after another or at the same time. Successive quodlibets did tend to be jocular, but simultaneous quodlibets could be serious, even melancholy. "*Was sind das für große Schlösser*" ("What Kind of Large Castles Are Those"), BWV 524, a secular work whose attribution to Bach has generally been accepted by scholars, provides a good example of the successive quodlibet. Melodic snippets from folk songs appear throughout,⁴ and musical and verbal jokes abound. Bach's church cantata "*Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott*" ("Lord Jesus Christ, True Man and God"), BWV 127, provides a good example of the simultaneous quodlibet. Three Lutheran hymn snippets appear in two combinations within the orchestral refrain of the opening movement. The title hymn tune is superimposed initially on "*Christe, du Lamm Gottes, der du trägst die Sünd der Welt*" ("Christ, You Lamb of God, You Who Bear the Sin of the World"), and then on a slightly ambiguous version of what is either "*Herzlich tut mich verlangen*" ("I Sincerely Long for a Blessed Ending [to my Life]") or "*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*" ("O Head Full of Blood and Wounds"). This is one very unfunny quodlibet.

So why is the simultaneous quodlibet from the "Goldberg Variations" supposed to be humorous? The persistently reiterated fact that Bach combined two folk songs—humorous or not—in the Goldbergs goes back to a single, uncorroborated source. In the early nineteenth century, Casper Siegfried Gähler—a lawyer, politician, and collector—scribed into his Goldbergs print:

Aus einer mündlichen Nachricht des berühmten Organisten Johann Christian Kittel, einem Schüler Joh. Seb. Bachs.

In dem letzten Quodlibet sind von zweyen ehemaligen Volksgesängen: Ich bin so lange nicht bey dir gewesen, Rück her, Rück her etc. und Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben etc.

die Melodien in eine künstreiche⁵ harmonische Verbindung gebracht.

From an oral account [given to me in c. 1801] by the famous organist Johann Christian Kittel, a student [in 1748–50] of Joh. Seb. Bach.

In the final "Quodlibet" the melodies of two folk songs from former times—"For So Long I Have Not Been with You, Come Closer, Come Closer" etc., and "Cabbage and Turnips Have Driven Me Away" etc.—are brought into an ingenious concordant combination.⁶

Gähler's copy of the Goldbergs later went to the Royal Library in Berlin, whose music librarian, Siegfried Wilhelm Dehn, eventually jotted down the song texts more completely, just below Gähler's note:

*Ich bin so lang nicht bey dir g'west
Rück her "—"—"—"
Mit einem [s]tumpfen Flederwisch
drüb'r her, drüb'r her drüb'r her.
&
Kraut u. Rüben haben mich vertrieben
Hätt' meine Mutter Fleisch gekocht
Wär' ich länger g'blieben./blieben.*

For so long I have not been with you,
Come closer, come closer, come closer;
With a run-down feather duster,⁷
Over here, over here, over here.
&
Cabbage and turnips have driven me away;
If my mother had cooked meat,
I would have stayed longer.

In his little-known book on comic opera (1774),⁸ Johann Friedrich Reichardt had described Bach-family gatherings in which humorous quodlibets were sung. Johann Nikolaus Forkel, in his often-quoted Bach biography (1802),⁹ supplied the extra detail that these quodlibets were made up of folk songs. Reichardt does not mention the



Fig. 1. Jan Philips van der Schlichten, *Der Bettelmusikant*, 1731, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich (Art Resource, NY)

Goldbergs quodlibet. Forkel does, but he says nothing about folk songs or humor. Link parts of Gähler’s and Forkel’s data together, however, and one could suggest the idea that Bach designed his “Goldberg Variations” to culminate in a jokey quodlibet.

A 1934 essay by the philosopher Otto Baensch,¹⁰ whose interpretation is now widely parroted but rarely attributed, dove more deeply into this ostensible merriment. The twenty-nine variations

preceding the quodlibet, Baensch proposed, are the “cabbage and turnips” of the second folk song, which have “driven away” the “I” of the first folk song; and the soprano line of the Goldbergs’ opening “Aria” is this “I” who comes back right after the quodlibet, along with the bass line of the “Aria” as the fancied “meat.” Not exactly laugh-out-loud stuff. In any event, Baensch’s extended metaphor rests on a verbal setup that appears to have been accepted uncritically by countless scholars and enthusiasts.

So, in addition to the question of whether the character of this quodlibet is truly jocular there are related questions concerning the precise identifications of both of Bach's tunes as folk songs. Historians have searched high and low to confirm a link between Gähler's words and Bach's music.

The second tune proved less difficult to contend with. The structure of its melody is generated by the simple I-IV-V-I chord progression underlying a famous dance called the "bergamasca." But a wide variety of texts were sung to a wide variety of bergamasca-inspired tunes. The music historian Paul Nettl reported in the 1920s that Bach's tune is nearly identical to one that shows up within a successive quodlibet published in Vienna in 1733 by Johann Valentin Rathgeber.¹¹ Here the words, however, are "*Kraut und Ruben fressen meine Buben; hätten sie was bessers, wetzen sie das Messer*" ("My lads wolf down cabbage and turnips; if they had something better, they would get their knife out").

It turns out that the text given by Gähler and Dehn was demonstrably well-known in Germany in Bach's day. I have now found the whole thing quoted by Johann Lorenz Helbig in a 1701 book of sermons, where it is noted that "Cabbage and

Turnips" was routinely sung by children, who "*das Gemüß ... weit nicht so angenehm als das Fleisch [finden]*" ("[find] vegetables not remotely as pleasant as meat"). Helbig gives the text as:

*Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben;
Hätt mein Mutter Fleisch gekocht,
So wär ich länger geblieben.*

Cabbage and turnips have driven me away;
If my mother had cooked meat,
Then I would have stayed longer.¹²

What is more, I have discovered a nigh-identical tune to Bach's, underlaid with words matching Helbig's, on a depiction of a wrinkled sheet of paper in the lower-left corner of the painting called "Sitting Musician with a Pochette [dance-master's violin]"¹³ (1731) by Jan Philips van der Schlichten, a Dutch artist who was active in Germany (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Regarding Bach's other tune, however, there have been intractable problems in finding any place where Gähler's or Dehn's text and Bach's tune appear together. For a start, in Gähler's version, there are too many accented syllables to fit Bach's melody: "*Ich BIN so LAN-ge NICHT bey DIR ge-WES-en.*" Also, despite the massive holdings of folk-song archives in Germany, no one has ever been able to find any version of Bach's first tune that properly fits any version of Gähler's or Dehn's words. I have now located at least a text-only source for their song that does properly mesh with Bach's tune. Within the spoken dialogue by Christian Felix Weisse that precedes the second musical number in Act III from Johann Adam Hiller's 1773 opera *Die Jubelhochzeit* ("The Golden Anniversary"), a character is directed to sing just the words "*Ich BIN so LANG nicht BEY dir ge-WEST, rück HER, rück HER, rück HER!*" Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Gähler did not say Kittel had claimed "*Ich bin so lang*" was Bach's association of text for his tune, and Gähler did not say anything about humor, either.

Kittel's identification is most likely a "zebra" (from the medical-diagnostics aphorism, "When



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Fig. 2. Detail, Jan Philips van der Schlichten, Der Bettelmusikant. (Art Resource, NY)

Fig. 3. J. S. Bach, “Goldberg Variations,” variation 30, “Quodlibet,” bars 1-8, with text underlay of identified tunes

1. Was Gott tut, das ist wohl ge-tan. 2a. Kraut und Rü-ben ha-ben mich ver-trie-ben;

2a. Kraut und Rü-ben ha-ben mich ver-trie-ben; 1. Was

1. Was Gott tut, das ist wohl ge-tan.

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2a. Kraut und Rü-ben ha-ben mich ver-trie-ben;

Gott tut, das ist wohl ge-tan.

2a. Kraut und Rü-ben ha-ben mich ver-trie-ben; 2b. hätt mein Mut-ter Fleisch ge-kocht, so wär ich läng-er blieb-en.

you hear hoofbeats behind you, do not expect to see a zebra”). The more-likely “horse” that people in Bach’s milieu would instantly have envisaged was the exceptionally familiar Lutheran hymn tune “*Was GOTT tut, DAS ist WOHL-ge-TAN*” (“What God Does, That Is Done Well”), a melody as well-known to them as “Happy Birthday” is to the general public today.¹⁴ With the hymn, Bach’s quodlibet could be heard as proclaiming that ultimately the “Goldberg Variations” were God’s handiwork, not Bach’s alone. Signing off in this way would certainly chime well with Bach’s frequent practice of inscribing *Soli Deo gloria* (“To God alone the glory”) at the end of his musical scores.¹⁵

How, then, might Bach’s use of this hymn tune jibe with his use of the other tune, “Cabbage and Turnips”? In several eighteenth-century German dictionaries, the word “quodlibet” was defined as “*ein Durcheinander*” (“a hodgepodge”). There were also various expressions in the vein of “*Es liegt wie Kraut und Rüben durcheinander*” (“It is like cabbage and turnips in a hodgepodge”). Just as van der Schlichten’s painting is a visual “*Kraut-und-Rüben*,”

where musical and domestic objects are mindfully strewn about the room, Bach’s quodlibet is a sonic “*Kraut-und-Rüben*,” where contrasting spiritual and worldly songs are harmoniously pitched together above a prior bass line.

While there is plenty of humorous material to seek in Bach,¹⁶ it seems the Goldbergs quodlibet is not a good place to find it. Some performers and listeners, and even Herr Bach himself, may well have smiled with pleasure at its extremely clever and witty combination of hymn and folk song, but in light of new evidence the now traditional notion that this quodlibet would have been received as simply jocular does look rather unlikely.

What is so remarkable and marvelous about the concordant motley “space” of Bach’s joyous quodlibet is that—as with such sublime quodlibets as “You’re Just in Love” from Irving Berlin’s *Call Me Madam*¹⁷—the whole is a lot more than the sum of its parts.

In many segments of the real world of eighteenth-century Europe, the authoritative voices of Enlightenment reason, individual experience, and art-as-entertainment were getting louder and

louder.¹⁸ But throughout the world of Bach’s music, most palpably and impressively in the “Quodlibet” from his “Goldberg Variations,” the suprapersonal spheres of the “secular” and the “sacred” were put forward together in an all-embracing harmony. Bach will have written the “Goldberg Variations” not as jokesome entertainment nor as self-expression but as a religious act of premodern Lutheran tribute to the heavenly and earthly realms of God.



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(New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), and *Tainted Glory in Handel’s Messiah* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), and essays in *Lutheran Quarterly*, *Harvard Theological Review*, *Huffington Post*, and *The New York Times*.

Notes

1. András Schiff, *Music Comes Out of Silence* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020), 156.
2. Martin Kettle, “Bach at His Best,” *The Guardian* (Oct. 3, 2003).
3. András Schiff (piano), *Goldberg Variations* [by] J. S. Bach, recorded in Basel, Oct. 30, 2001 (Munich: ECM Records, 2003), compact disc.
4. Details in Günther Kraft, “Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des ‘Hochzeitsquodlibets’ (BWV 524),” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 43 (1956): 140–54.
5. This word has sometimes been mistranscribed as *künstliche* (“artful” or “artificial”).
6. This is a transcription of the facsimile of Gähler’s note provided in Ingrid Kaußler and Helmut Kaußler, *Die Goldberg-Variationen von J. S. Bach* (Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 1985), 224. Gähler’s copy of the Goldbergs print is now held at the British Library in London, Hirsch Collection III.40; see also the transcription of Gähler’s note in Hans-Joachim Schulze and Andreas Glöckner, eds., *Dokumente zu Leben, Werk und Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs, 1685–1800* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2007), 263.
7. *Flederwisch* (“feather duster”) was slang, in Bach’s day, for a maiden who constantly rejects suitors as a matter of course.
8. Johann Friedrich Reichardt, *Über die Deutsche comische Oper* (Hamburg: 1774), 4, quoted in Hans-Joachim Schulze, “Notizen zu Bachs Quodlibets,” in his *Bach-Facetten: Essays—Studien—Miscellen* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 164–65.
9. Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke—Für patriotische Verehrer echter musikalischer Kunst* (Leipzig: 1802), 3–4.
10. Otto Baensch, “Nochmals das Quodlibet der Goldbergvariationen,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 5 (1934): 322–23.
11. Paul Nettel, “Die Bergamaska,” *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 5 (1922/1923): 294.
12. Johann Lorenz Helbig, [“Sermon on Luke 2:33”], in his *Weiß und Schwartz*, vol. 2, *Feyertägliche Predigen* (Nuremberg: 1701), 296.
13. This painting is listed as *Der Bettelmusikant* in the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, where it is in storage at the time of this writing. Its German title, which would be rendered “The Beggar Musician” in English, is not the artist’s, and it is not clear that the musician depicted is indeed a beggar.
14. Occasionally a similarity to *Was Gott tut* is mentioned by writers on Bach, but the scholarly literature has not entertained this as the most likely association for Bach’s “Quodlibet,” on account of the purportedly established “fact” that Bach’s source was the folk song “*Ich bin so lang nicht bey dir g’west*.” For a key example, see Christoph Wolff’s passing assessment in his *Kritischer Bericht* (“critical commentary”), in Walter Emery and Christoph Wolff, *Zweiter Teil der Klavierübung* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1981), 112: “although the melody [that Bach quoted in part—the folk song *Ich bin so lang*] is in its entirety no longer at hand, [it may at least be mentioned that] the same incipit is found in a range of further folk tunes or even sacred melodies [‘oder auch geistliche Melodien’] (e.g., ‘*Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan*’)” (my translation).
15. For a close consideration of this practice of Bach’s, see Michael Marissen, “Bach against Modernity,” in *Rethinking Bach*, ed. Bettina Varwig (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021), 317–20.
16. See especially David Yearsley, “Bach the Humorist,” in Varwig, 193–225.
17. Sung by Donald O’Connor and Ethel Merman, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LaiJDQ2cIE>. My thanks to Eric Schorr for this reference.
18. For discussion of Bach’s sense of vocation and music, see Michael Marissen, “The Biographical Significance of Bach’s Handwritten Entries in His Calov Bible,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 375–78.