

“Ich steh mit einem Fuss im Grabe” BWV 156

[1. Sinfonia]

2. Ich steh mit einem Fuss im Grabe,  
Bald fällt der kranke Leib hinein,  
Komm, lieber Gott, wenn dirs gefällt,  
Ich habe schon mein Haus bestellt,  
Nur lass mein Ende selig sein!

**Machs mit mir, Gott, nach deiner Güt,  
Hilf mir in meinem<sup>1</sup> Leiden,  
Was ich dich bitt, versag mir nicht.  
Wenn sich mein Seel soll scheiden,  
So nimm sie, Herr, in deine Händ.  
Ist alles gut, wenn gut das End.<sup>2</sup>**

3. Mein Angst und Not,  
Mein Leben und mein Tod  
Steht, liebster Gott, in deinen Händen;  
So wirst du auch auf mich  
Dein gnädig Auge wenden.  
Willst du mich meiner Sünden wegen  
Ins Krankenbette legen,  
Mein Gott, so bitt ich dich,  
Lass deine Güte grösser sein als die Gerechtigkeit;  
Doch hast du mich darzu versehn,  
Dass mich mein Leiden soll verzehren,  
Ich bin bereit,  
Dein Wille soll an mir geschehn,  
Verschone nicht und fahre fort,

[1. Sinfonia]

2. I stand with one foot in the grave;  
Soon my sick body will descend into there;  
Come, dear God, [take my soul] when it pleases you;  
I have already put my house in order;<sup>3</sup>  
Just let my end be blessed.

**Deal with me, God, in accordance with your goodness;  
Help me in my suffering;  
What I beseech you, do not deny me.  
When my soul shall part [from my sick body],  
Then take it, Lord, into your hands.  
All's well that ends well.<sup>4</sup>**

3. My fear and need,  
My life and my death  
Stands, dearest God, in your hands;  
Then you will also turn  
Your merciful eye toward me.  
If, on account of my sins,  
You wish to put me in my sick bed,  
My God, then I beseech<sup>5</sup> you:  
Let your goodness be weightier than your judgment;<sup>6</sup>  
Yet if you have provided for me  
That my suffering shall consume me,  
I am ready [to die];<sup>7</sup>  
Your will shall be done upon me;

<sup>1</sup>The contemporary hymnbooks and the poet's printed libretto read in the singular, "meinem." The cantata's earliest surviving source material, however, reads in the plural, "meinen," presumably in simple (if trivial) error; Bach's own score and performing parts are now lost.

<sup>2</sup>The first stanza of this hymn.

<sup>3</sup>The expression "habe mein Haus bestellt" alludes to Isaiah 38:1, "Bestelle dein Haus; denn du wirst sterben und nicht lebendig bleiben" ("Put your house in order; for you will die and not remain living"); i.e., because you will die, it is time to put your affairs in order and make a will or testament.

<sup>4</sup>Literally, "Everything is good, when the end [is] good"; the standard German form is "Ende gut, alles gut."

<sup>5</sup>Possibly alluding to the saying "Das Siechbett lehrt beten!" ("The sickbed teaches [you] to pray!").

<sup>6</sup>The sentiments of this line, in contrasting God's justice and mercy, probably derive from Psalm 101:1, "Von Gnade und Recht will ich singen und dir, HERR, lobsagen" ("I will sing of [your] mercy and judgment, and to you, LORD, speak praise").

<sup>7</sup>Probably an allusion to the characteristic words of the apostle Paul in Acts 21:13, "Ich bin bereit ... zu sterben ... um des Namens willen des Herrn Jesu" ("I am ready to die for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus").

Lass meine Not nicht lange währen;  
Je länger hier, je später dort.

4. Herr, was du willst, soll mir gefallen,  
Weil doch dein Rat am besten gilt.  
In der Freude,  
In dem Leide,  
Im Sterben, in Bitten und in<sup>10</sup> Flehn  
Lass mir allemal geschehn,  
Herr, wie du willst.

5. Und willst du, dass ich nicht soll kranken,  
So werd ich dir von Herzen danken;  
Doch aber gib mir auch dabei,  
Dass auch in meinem frischen Leibe  
Die Seele sonder Krankheit sei  
Und allezeit gesund verbleibe.  
Nimm sie durch Geist und Wort in acht,  
Denn dieses ist mein Heil,  
*Und wenn mir Leib und Seel verschmacht,  
So bist du, Gott, mein Trost und meines Herzens  
Teil!*<sup>12</sup>

Spare not [my soul from death], and keep up [your anger at  
me];<sup>8</sup>  
Let my need not last long.  
The longer here, the later there.<sup>9</sup>

4. Lord, what you will, shall please me,  
Because your counsel holds yet true as the best.  
In joy,  
In sorrow,  
In dying, in beseeching and in supplication,  
Let be done to me, indeed,<sup>11</sup>  
Lord, as you will.

5. And if you will that I shall not become sick,<sup>13</sup>  
Then I will thank you from the heart;  
But grant me yet also thereby  
That in my hale body  
My soul may be also without sickness  
And may always remain healthy.  
Take care of it [my soul], by [the Holy] Spirit and word [of  
God],<sup>14</sup>  
For this [the word of God] is my salvation;  
*And when my body and soul languishes,  
Then are you, God, my consolation and my heart's portion.*

<sup>8</sup>The sense of this cryptic line apparently derives from language used in Psalm 78:50, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "er seinen Zorn liess fortgehen, und ihre Seelen für dem Tode nicht verschonte" ("he [God] let his anger [at the Egyptians] go forward, and did not let their souls be spared from death").

<sup>9</sup>"Je länger hier, je später dort" is a time-honored saying in German (just as "The longer here, the later there" is in English) that was employed to spur on procrastinators to do their work more diligently and procure it earlier, to get the slumberer out of bed, to get the slow person to walk faster, and so on. In the context of the cantata's telling God to make haste in executing his will, the saying apparently extends its meaning here specifically to: "The longer [I am] here [on earth], the later [I will go] there [to heaven]."

<sup>10</sup>The surviving musical sources (none directly connected to Bach's performances) read "und in Flehn"; the printed text reads "und Flehn."

<sup>11</sup>"Allemal" was sometimes used in Bach's day as a synonym for "ganz bestimmt," "gewiss," "auf jeden fall" ("for sure," "indeed," "in any case").

<sup>12</sup>A nearly verbatim quotation of Psalm 73:26, "Wenn mir gleich Leib und Seele verschmachtet, so bist du doch, Gott, allezeit meines Herzens Trost und mein Teil" ("When my body and soul alike languishes, then are you, God, yet always [into eternity] my heart's consolation and my [spiritual] portion").

<sup>13</sup>Older German sometimes used the verb "kranken" in place of "erkranken" ("to become sick").

<sup>14</sup>The sense of this and the next line apparently derives from language used in Ephesians 6:17, "Nehmet den Helm des Heils und das Schwert des Geistes, welches ist das Wort Gottes" ("Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the [Holy] Spirit, which is the word of God"). "Des Geistes" was understood here to mean "of God the Holy Spirit."

**6. Herr, wie du willst, so schicks mit mir  
Im Leben und im Sterben;  
Allein zu dir steht mein Begier,  
Herr, lass mich nicht verderben!  
Erhalt mich nur in deiner Huld,  
Sonst wie du willst, gib mir Geduld,  
Dein Will, der ist der beste.<sup>15</sup>**

Christian Friedrich Henrici

**6. Lord, as you will, so may it be directed with me  
In living and in dying;  
Toward you alone is my desire;  
Lord, let me not [eternally] perish.  
Only uphold me in your favor;  
Whatever else, as you will, [only] grant me patience;  
Your will, it is the best.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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<sup>15</sup>The first stanza of this hymn.