Homilius' “Unser Vater in dem Himmel”

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A previously well known and loved German teacher and composer of the 18th century, Gottfried August Homilius’ (1714-1785) music was a mix of styles. His setting of the Our Father, however, reflects an aim of music “to touch the heart and move the affections;” the empfindsamer Stil. “Unser Vater in dem Himmel” contains “intensely expressive text-setting, replete with musical ‘sighs’, [and] chromatic harmonies.” Alongside its expressive music, he employed lovely melodies and sought to “bring out the meaning of words and their underlying context, all … essential elements of his style.”

It was in 1734 at the Anneschule in Dresden where Homilius composed his first notable work “Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild.” He earned a degree in Law from the Leipzig University in 1735, but always loved music. Bach, among, likely, others, taught him musical composition and keyboard skills. At the time of his appointment as Kantor at the Kreuzkirche in Dresden, he taught Latin, Greek, and music at the Kreuzschule and served as the “music director of Dresden’s three principal churches – the Kreuzkirche, Frauenkirche and Sophienkirche.” His compositions include over 200 sacred cantatas, “Magnificat” settings, and organ works.

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3. Ibid.
5. Ibid
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
Ludwig Gerber “was led to conclude in 1790 that ‘without question he was our greatest church composer’”\textsuperscript{10}

“Unser Vater in dem Himmel” was composed in 1766.\textsuperscript{11} The piece is through-composed to allow freedom with the text and is scored for 4 voices. It would not have been uncommon for basso continuo to also participate.\textsuperscript{12} As do some of his other biblical text-based motets, the piece contains tempo changes, dynamic contrasts, text painting, and many imitative phrases.\textsuperscript{13} Its distinct sections are based upon the portions of the prayer. Mainly, the piece is syllabic, although melismas occur and neumatic writing is employed.

The text is the Our Father, or Lord's Prayer, taken from Matthew 6:9-13. It includes the familiar conclusion, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” Although the doxology was not included in the oldest manuscripts and was likely not part of the original text it is not an uncommon addition.\textsuperscript{14} The doxology is likely derived from 1 Chronicles 29:11 (‘Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; tine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all.’) – though Revelation 4:11 (‘Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power’) and other texts may also have been considered – and echoes the “thou-petitions” in the first part of the prayer: “‘Thine is the glory’ is reminiscent

\textsuperscript{10}. Ibid.


\textsuperscript{13}. Ibid.

of ‘hallowed by thy name’; ‘thine is the kingdom’ repeats ‘thy kingdom come’; and ‘thine is the power’ corresponds to ‘thy will be done.’”\textsuperscript{15}

Melismatic and neumatic writing is used to stress the word “come” in the repetition of the text “Thy kingdom come.” After a whole note received the longest stress, the word “come” is suddenly sung for 14 beats in measures 23-25 by each of the voices. Although the melismas sung by the soprano in portions of measures 121-132 are aurally striking, this is the most notable of the non-syllabic writing because the choir unanimously joins together in their use of non-syllabic singing and its abrupt use adds to hint at the depth of its plea for God’s kingdom to finally come.

Example 1 Gottfried August Homililus, “Unser Vater in dem Himmel,” mm. 23-25

![Example 1](image)

The shortest portion is “Our daily bread give us today.” It is a brief, four measure homophonic phrase, beginning at measure 42, that is, sequentially, notated a whole step higher.

Example 2 Gottfried August Homililus, “Unser Vater in dem Himmel,” mm. 36-49

![Example 2](image)

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 198.
Perhaps the use of repeating the material implies the routines and certainties of daily life while the different pitch level implies the variances of each new day. The phrases’ rich, major harmonies may hint at the pleasures of enjoying a meal with friends and family or other earthly gifts such as sunshine and clothing.

A supposedly “splendid chromatic passage” 16 is used at “and forgive us our debts.”

Example 3 Gottfried August Homilius, “Unser Vater in dem Himmel,” mm. 50-59

“In the Baroque era the use of chromaticism was closely linked with the Doctrine of the Affections,” 17 so Homilius’ employment of it here is not of great surprise. The alto line in measure 50 through the first beat of 51 is repeated by the bass a half-step higher in the second half of measure 50. Imitation at the fifth occurs in the second half of measure 51 while the soprano sings a sequence based on the alto line. The overlapping of the text in measures 50-52,


creates a sense of distress. The threefold, homophonic repetition of “forgive us” that occurs in measures 53-55 counters the tension with its repentant, hopeful request. According to the Theory of the Affections, multiple moods in a section are not permissible as one ought to move only one affect.\(^{18}\) However, the text requires it, for the law’s threat is certainly in full force, yet full hope of forgiveness stands. The text asks one be forgiven as they forgive, yet it says – indirectly – they have erred (“forgive us our debts”) and seemingly requests the remission of error to depend upon their ability to not err in that way; (“as we forgive our debtors”) which they previously admitted they are not able to do.

Lutheran pastors, such as Homilius’ father, note the baptized’s life is hidden in Christ as Colossians 3:3 and other verses teach.\(^{19}\) So the request “forgive us as we forgive our debtors,” though certainly a reminder of the law’s demands, also acts as a baptismal reminder; their life is hidden in Christ, so they do forgive as Jesus forgave. There is still conflict as it could seem not all have been forgiven, though John 3:17 states “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (ESV) and 2 Corinthians 5:19 confirms “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (ESV). It is a difficult text and the music reflects any struggle.

Homilius’ word painting helps lead the listener to note the perpetuity of God’s reign. About forty-five percent of the piece, from measure 80-149 the text is, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” It is joyously set in a quick, simple-duple meter.


Both of the recordings take this final section at a lively tempo. A six measure phase begins in the soprano.

Example 4 Gottfried August Homilius, “Unser Vater in dem Himmel,” mm. 80-91

![Example notation]

The initial (there are multiple entries in each of the voices except the tenor) imitations in the other voices (measures 86, 97, 103) enter a voice lower (alto, tenor, bass). It is as though the phrase is stretched across the scale as God’s kingdom, power, and glory come down to man. The use of major triads reflect this to not be of concern, rather it is good. Possibly, Homilius read a chapter further in the Matthew text and aims the music reflect Matthew 7:11b “how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (ESV).

Both of the recordings feature chorale ensembles without basso continuo. The

Projectkoor Oude Kerk Zoetermeer recording was a bit more solemn and reverent in tempo than the Dresdner Kreuzchor recording, although they both seemed to begin at similar paces. They differed in length by about one and a half minutes; a notable amount of time for that is approximately twenty-five percent of the longer recording. The relaxed, slow conclusion of the Projectkoor Oude Kerk Zoetermeer recording was personally more enjoyable than the Dresdner Kreuzchor ending, but each decelerated the tempo. I appreciated the familiarity of the Projectkoor Oude Kerk Zoetermeer recording females’ timbre compared to the boys’ choir in the Dresdner Kreuzchor recording. The strong rest in measure 144 helped solidify the finality of the
piece more so in the Projectkoor Oude Kerk Zoetermeer recording than the other and their interpretation of measure 25 felt clearer. A dotted whole note is notated in the soprano, but they shortened it to a whole note and employed rubato to create a pleasing pause at the end of the phrase. Dynamically, I did not notice a striking difference between the performers’ interpretation; each recording sought to follow the phrasing and natural flow of the musical lines.

Homilius made use of musical practices, or altered them, to fit his purpose of expressing the text. It is not surprising he was considered a “main representative in church music of the transitional empfindsamer Stil” especially if you consider one of his composition teacher’s (J. S. Bach) son’s (C. P. E. Bach) was the “most important exponent” of the style. His use of sectioning the music and text so as to allow each petition a mood is well done. Although visually striking, the changes from duple and triple meter flow well aurally and do not seem out of place. Most, if not all, of Homilius’ music was composed in the vernacular German which additionally highlights the importance he placed on the listener understanding the words alongside the music rather than purely enjoying the music for the sake of the music. Conveying the meaning of the texts he worked with was assuredly of import, though, as confirmed by multiple settings of the “Magnificat,” not his sole objective. The music elevates the text and urges the hearer interpret it rather than simply passing portions of it by. Textual interpretation, both by Homilius’ and the listener is more readily achieved for the music’s concordance or dissimilarity in relation to the text can be contemplated. The Our Father is made more enjoyable alongside the music of “Unser Vater in dem Himmel.” To separate the two is possible, but each would lose an ally.


Bibliography


Oxford Music Online.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh26Bf4Vk8I.

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Oxford Music Online.
