

# THE COFFEE CANTATA

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

English Version  
by Donald Pippin

The clash between parental authority and youthful defiance has come to be known as the generation gap -- not an entirely new phenomenon. Few people have been better positioned to observe it than J. S. Bach, some three hundred years ago. Often called the father of modern music, he was in fact the father of twenty children.

Furthermore, he lived through an era of profound change and innovation -- a process that inevitably gives rise to conflict between the old and the new -- including at least two significant turning points in the wayward march of civilization. Both of them relatively bloodless, one of these was led by his own sons -- the shift from the baroque to the classical style in music. Bach, the baroque master, remained obstinately true to the losing side, and as a result suffered the indignity of being outdated in his own lifetime, outdone by his own offspring, who were wont to refer to him, in private, as "the old peruke".

There is a well-known quotation from Mozart: "Any of us who know any-thing at all about music learned it from Bach." Less well known, the fact that he was referring not to the Bach whom we love and revere, but to his son Carl Philip Emanuel, whom we seem to have forgotten. Not until very near the end of his own life did Mozart discover the music of Bach the father and realized pretty quickly that he had a good deal yet to learn.

This does not mean that J. S. Bach died in obscurity. In fact, he was esteemed and honored, even famous -- not as a composer, but as a church organist and choir master. Even so, in casting around for his successor, the local dignitaries probably reflected public opinion when they said, perhaps with a sigh of relief, "This time let's hire a musician, not a professor."

Meanwhile, his manuscripts were divided equally between his two elder sons, both of them prominent composers by then -- far too prominent, incidentally, to consider accepting the humble post vacated by their father. Carl Philip evidently did not consider these antiquated exercises worthy of publication, which could have been a costly undertaking. Nonetheless, he preserved his collection meticulously, neatly tied with ribbons, and stored in the attic where several generations later it was eventually discovered. The other son, whose name I shall not mention, apparently objected to the clutter. Almost the entirety of his collection has disappeared, no doubt after serving the

useful purpose of wrapping parcels. Despite this incalculable loss, the sheer quantity of Bach's music that has survived is staggering. It has been estimated that an efficient copyist assigned to write it out by hand could hope to finish the job in about seventy years. Bach died at the age of sixty five.

The second great innovation in taste that Bach witnessed has had perhaps a more immediate effect upon most people's daily lives. Coffee was introduced to Western Europe.

Now the introduction of anything new is seldom accomplished without resistance from some quarters. Here I must admit to some haziness on the details: whether laws were actually enacted, or whether these presumed laws pertained to the mere possession of coffee as opposed to the selling of it, whether they applied to the whole bean or the ground product. But unquestionably the consumption of coffee was widely denounced by those who aspired to respectability, and particularly by those who considered it their duty to supervise public morality. Thunder resounded from the pulpit. Passions were ignited. Tracts appeared, ablaze with eloquence vividly depicting the fires of hell, warning the tempted sinner of the grave hazards emanating from this devil's brew, dangerous not so much to the body as to the soul. Many minds were of the opinion that a cup of coffee was the first step towards complete spiritual and intellectual collapse. Of course, they were probably right.

Nonetheless, these warnings did little to impede the progress of the insidious concoction. On the contrary, people seem to have come to their usual perverse conclusion: if it's really as bad as they say, let's give it a try!

Inevitably, within a few years coffee was deemed acceptable *if* consumed discreetly, in private, and by a member of the male sex. But once corrosion begins, once standards start to slip, as the moralists are quick to point out, there is no telling where it will stop. Sure enough, it was eventually conceded that the judgment and reputation of a mature woman could withstand an occasional cup. But it is at the *next* stage along this inexorable road to perdition that tonight's powerful drama begins to unfold: the fateful clash between old father Schlendrian and his *daughter* Lizzie . . .

NARRATOR:

Attention! Quiet there!  
For drama hovers in the air.  
Old Schlendrian draws near.  
His daughter Lizzie seems obsessed!  
He growls and grumbles like a bear.  
Be patient! Let us hear the rest . . .

### ARIA

SCHLENDRIAN:

Worse than pox and plague are children.  
What a thousand miseries!  
What a thousand, hundred thousand miseries!

They can drive you up the wall  
When they pay no mind at all  
What a pox and plague are children,  
What a thousand miseries!

Day and night I'm in a tizzy  
Giving sound advice to Lizzie,  
But the point she never sees.  
At the table every morning  
I deliver words of warning,  
Hoping she will mend her ways  
By giving up the coffee craze.

Undeterred, however busy,  
I implore, I plead with Lizzie  
But the point she never sees.

At the table every morning  
I deliver words of wisest warning,  
Wasted like a passing breeze.  
In a tizzy over Lizzie,  
I am daily on my knees.

Worse than pox and plague are children.  
What a thousand miseries!  
What a thousand, hundred thousand miseries!

## RECITATIVE

SCHLENDRIAN: You stubborn girl! Can you not hear?  
Ah! You'll obey when I command.  
That coffee I'll not stand.

LIZZIE: But father, do not be severe,  
For have I not made it clear,  
I require at least three cups a day?  
My only joy you'd take away.  
My heart and soul you would destroy.

## ARIA

LIZZIE: Ah, coffee offers a rapture  
Not even kisses recapture,  
Milder yet sweeter than wine.  
So, so, so good especially --  
Oh, oh! -- when roasted freshly.

Coffee's aroma expresses  
More than a thousand caresses,  
Pleasure more pleasing than wine.  
Coffee, coffee, coffee I adore so!  
Like celestial ambrosia, though more so.  
No! No! Nothing else but coffee!  
Oh, a gift come rain or shine!

Coffee, coffee, coffee I adore so!  
Like celestial ambrosia, though more so.  
No! No! Take away my coffee,  
Take away my life!  
Coffee, coffee, I live for coffee,  
For coffee come rain or shine!

Ah, coffee offers a flavor  
Long to remember and savor,  
Moment no less than divine.  
Oh! Oh! Rapture repeated!  
Yes! Yes! Even reheated.  
A swallow, a swallow  
Fit for Apollo!

Coffee's aroma expresses  
More than a thousand caresses,  
More than the magic of wine.

### RECITATIVE

SCHLENDRIAN: Unless this craving you subdue,  
No more festivities for you.  
(We'll fight this fire with fire.)

LIZZIE: Too bad! But coffee's all that I require.

SCHLENDRIAN: And further, for your information,  
No party dress for you unless  
You curb this inclination.

LIZZIE: My cup will be my consolation.

SCHLENDRIAN: Until you put this craze behind you,  
All stepping out you'll be denied.

LIZZIE: With coffee, again I remind you,  
I'm just as happy here inside.

SCHLENDRIAN: I've got a brooch inlaid with gold,  
But till you do as you are told,  
Not once are you to wear it.

LIZZIE: Ah, well. My cup will help me bear it.

SCHLENDRIAN: (Each time the same result!  
What makes the girl so difficult?)

### ARIA

SCHLENDRIAN: Daughters bold and hard to handle  
Pave the way for shame and scandal.  
If only she'd recognize  
That age, not youth, is wise!  
How much better off she'd be  
By listening to me,  
Just by listening to me,  
By simply listening to me!

## RECITATIVE

- SCHLENDRIAN: Take notice when your father speaks.
- LIZZIE: In all ways, save the one he seeks.
- SCHLENDRIAN: Enough! I've one more final threat:  
Any husband you can just forget.
- LIZZIE: Oh, dear! No husband! Oh, father!
- SCHLENDRIAN: I swear you're not to be a bride.
- LIZZIE: Until I put my cup aside?  
Then coffee, it's goodbye forever!  
Look, father, see! Now are you satisfied?
- SCHLENDRIAN: A husband is our next endeavor.

## ARIA

- LIZZIE: What a day! Happy day!  
Darling father, don't delay.  
What a day! Happy day!  
Hasten, father, on your way.
- Oh, for a man! Inquire, explore.  
Find the husband I'll adore.  
What a day! Happy day!  
Dearest father, I'll obey.
- Go! Go! Find the one  
Worthy, sir, to call your son.  
What a day! Happy day!  
Dearest father, I'll obey.
- What a day!  
Darling father, don't delay.  
Happy day! Happy day! Happy day!  
Dearest father, I'll obey.
- Soon to say "I do, I do!"  
Paradise, a dream come true!

Hear the toll of wedding bells  
Blend with hugs and fond farewells.

Go! Go! Find the one  
Worthy, sir, to call your son.  
What a day! Happy day!  
Dearest father, I'll obey.

Hurry, lose no time in leisure.  
With a pearl beyond a price,  
Coffee now I'll sacrifice  
For a grander, sweeter pleasure.

Hurry, lose no time in leisure.  
I await a sweeter pleasure,  
Mine to cherish, mine to treasure.

Who would choose to go to bed  
With a coffee cup instead?  
Love is far the sweeter pleasure.

Farewell, coffee! I foresee  
Greater joys ahead for me,  
Mine to treasure.  
Love is far the sweeter pleasure. (*Da capo*)

NARRATOR:

Old Schlendrian goes searching far and wide  
To find the promised man  
Who'll take an obedient daughter for his bride.

But Liz announces on the sly,  
"No candidate need here apply  
Unless he'll sign an affidavit --  
I want it in the wedding contract, too --  
That I shall be allowed to brew  
My coffee whenever I crave it."

## **CHORUS**

Like pouncing cats, our wives pursue  
The coffee cup once they have tried it.

If mother loves and craves the brew  
And grandma has to have some, too,  
Can daughters rightly be denied it?

If mother cannot get enough  
And even grandma loves the stuff,  
Can daughters be denied it?  
Maybe you can decide it.

Like pouncing cats, our wives pursue  
The coffee cup once they have tried it.

If aunts and cousins love the brew  
And frankly, what of you and you?  
Can daughters rightly be denied it?

If mother likes to sit and sip  
And grandma sneaks another nip,  
Can daughters be denied it?  
How can daughters be denied it?

Like pouncing cats, we all pursue  
The coffee cup once we have tried it.

## **THE END**