

# CADENCE

Er ist mein Lied! Er ist er.  
er siehe No. 204.

J. J. Rolze,  
Kantor und Musikdirektor zu Potsdam, 1768.

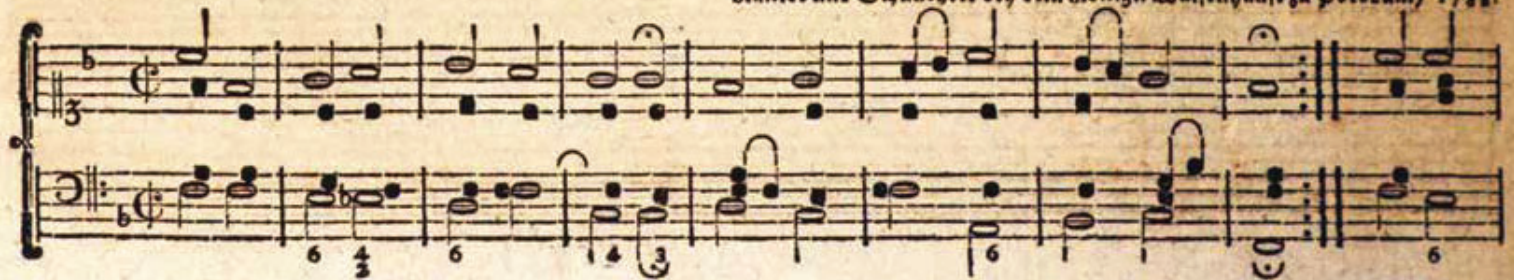


(V. 8.) Er kennt mein Flehn und allen Rath der See, le. Er weiß, wie oft ich Gutes  
thu und seh, le, und eilt, mir gnädig bey, zu, stehn.

206. Sollt ich meinem Gott nicht singen?

Oder siehe No. 102.

G. G. Boltze,  
Kantor und Schullehrer bey dem Königl. Waisenhause zu Potsdam, 1788.



## Melody's Triumph over Darkness *The Life of G. G. Boltze*

by James R. Eggert

### Introduction

The hymn "Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus," with text by Sigismund von Birken (1626–1681) and melody by G. G. Boltze (1721–1794), is one of the top twenty-five favorite hymns sung in Lutheran congregations in the United States.<sup>1</sup> It has been included in many Lutheran hymnals in the US for over a century.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite his tune's endearing line and enduring use, Boltze's biography is largely unknown and even his name is partly forgotten. This is unfortunate, because Boltze overcame considerable adversity to give the world his melody. This essay tells his story.

*Boltze's well-known 1788 melody is shown above (# 206) as printed in Johann Christoph Kühnau, Vierstimmige alte und neue Choralgesänge, pt. 2 (Berlin: 1790), 230–31. This tune is used for the hymn "Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus," included in many Lutheran hymnals in the US for over a century.*



Generally available information about Boltze has derived solely from two sources: the books where his melodies first appeared and an unsourced note in a history of hymns. Boltze's three known melodies<sup>3</sup> were first published in a volume of chorales printed in 1790 in Berlin by Johann Christoph Kühnau. Kühnau's book tells us only that Boltze was cantor and schoolteacher at the royal orphanage in Potsdam, and that he produced the three melodies in 1788 and 1789. To this source can be added a problematic 1834 history of hymns by Johann Ernst Häuser,<sup>4</sup> which asserts that Boltze was a cantor in Potsdam in 1750, though it gives no source for this information. Subsequent authors have relied on Kühnau and Häuser directly or indirectly, and sometimes imperfectly, for all biographical information about Boltze.<sup>5</sup>

***Boltze overcame considerable adversity to give the world his melody.***

Even Boltze's name has long been a mystery. His given names appeared at first only as the initials "G. G." By 1872 the composer's name was claimed to be "G. Gottfried Bolze."<sup>6</sup> By 1941 his name was fully spelled out as "Georg Gottfried Boltze."<sup>7</sup> Today many refer to him as "Georg G. Boltze." But these expansions are entirely inventive: records from five churches in Berlin and Potsdam uniformly show that his name was in fact Gabriel Gottlieb Boltze.

### Birth and Early Life

Boltze’s parents, Andreas—a career soldier garrisoned in Berlin—and Anna Dorothea, had five children, born 1705 to 1723. Gabriel Gottlieb was their fourth. Andreas died in 1744, but the fate of Anna Dorothea is unknown. She probably died when Gabriel Gottlieb was still a child. Her death likely set the boy’s future course.

The young Gabriel Gottlieb was consigned to the royal military orphanage in Potsdam, probably by 1733. This would have occurred after the death

*Boltze was termed an “invalid orphan”; the nature of this disability, however, is unknown.*

of his mother. The orphanage accepted boys and girls up to the age of twelve who had lost both parents or, if space was available, only one parent. Boltze was termed an “invalid orphan”;<sup>8</sup> the nature of this disability, however, is unknown. Most orphaned boys in this institution were trained to become soldiers or tradesmen.<sup>9</sup> Boltze, perhaps because he was an invalid, took a different path.

In those days, the orphanage had its own church (Waisenhauskirche, “orphan’s church”). The orphanage church organ was built in 1737 by the renowned Joachim Wagner; it had a single manual, eight registers, and no pedals.<sup>10</sup> It is likely that this instrument was the one on which Boltze learned to play.

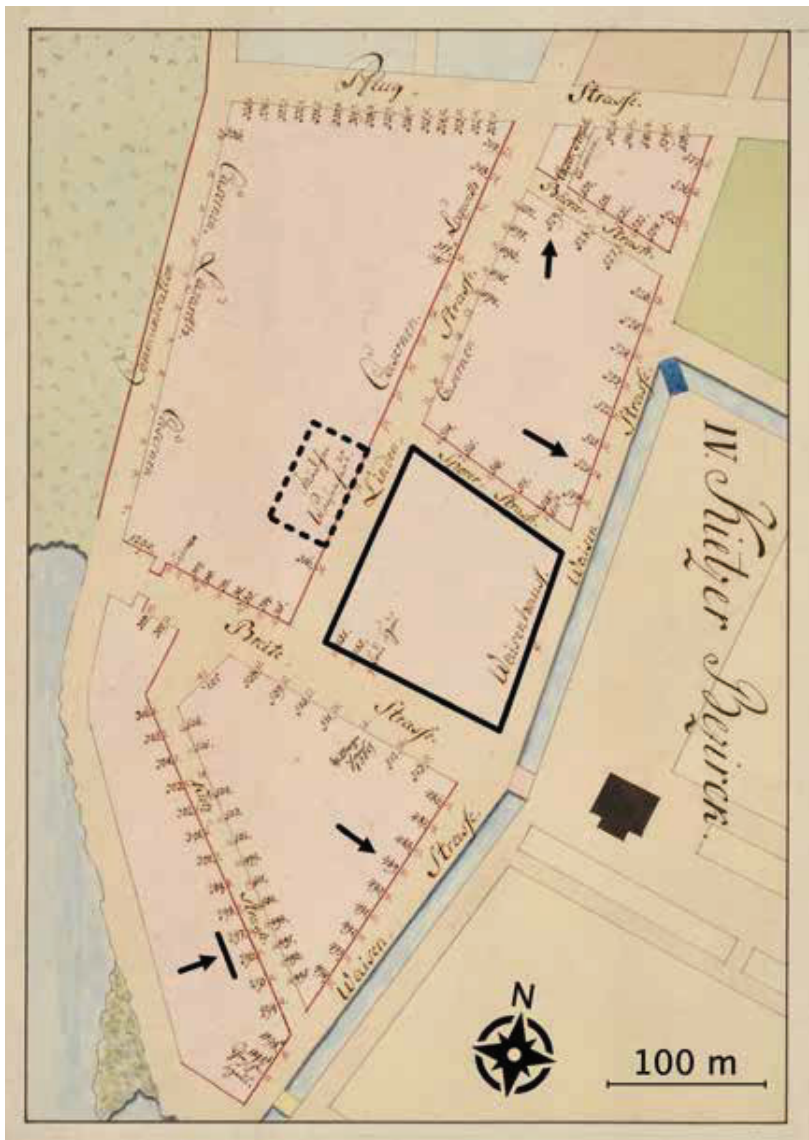
### Career

Boltze assumed the role of organist at the orphanage church in 1741; he was then about twenty years old. In 1757 he also became an assistant teacher. Starting in 1761, Boltze was listed as cantor for the orphanage church. Then by 1768 he became a regular teacher in the girl’s school of the orphanage and, as such, he was required to be married.

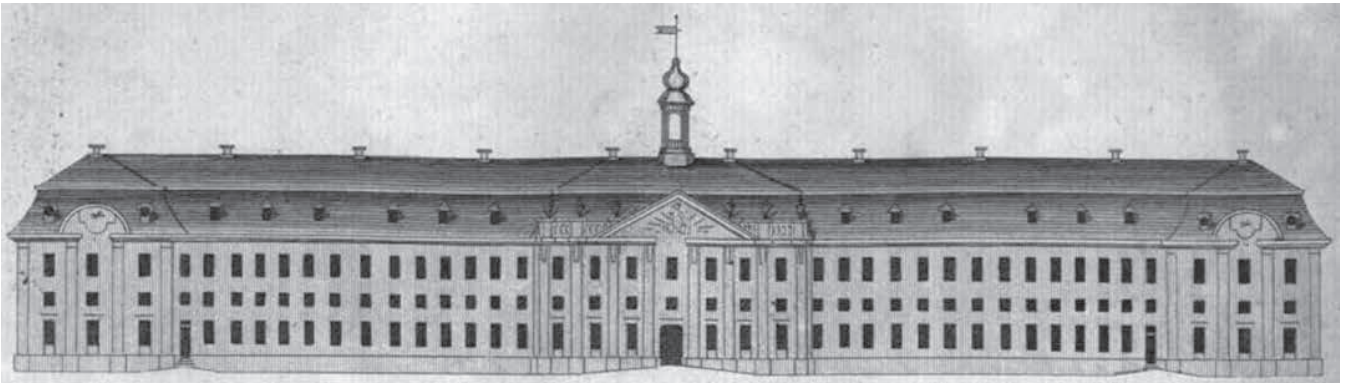
Boltze was indeed married, three times. He married his first wife, Anna Sophia Pose, in 1745. They were blessed with eight children between 1746 and 1763. During these years, Boltze was a contemporary in Potsdam of one of J. S. Bach’s sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who was serving as court musician to Frederick the Great. Boltze may have met the elder Bach when J. S. Bach toured the organs of Potsdam in May 1747<sup>11</sup> in the days after J. S. Bach’s famous first encounter with the Prussian king. J. S. Bach also played an organ concert on May 8 to a large crowd in Potsdam, and Boltze may have attended.<sup>12</sup>

Boltze’s first wife apparently passed away

*The Potsdam Kiez district, with the orphanage (center) and its girls’ school (dashed), the Boltze residences Waisenstraße 34 (on canal north of orphanage), Waisenstraße 40 (on canal south of orphanage), Kiezstraße 10–11 (south), and Bäckerstraße 6 (north), and the garrison church (solid black, east).*



Potsdam Museum - Forum für Kunst und Geschichte / Michael Lüder (CC BY-NC-SA)



Geschichte des Königlichen Potsdamschen Militärwaisenhauses ... (Berlin: 1824), Fig. 1

during or shortly after her last childbirth in 1763, because he married his second wife, Anna Sophia Schellhorn, in the fall of 1763. They were granted three children between 1764 and 1768. His second wife then passed away also.

Boltze married his third wife, Anna Sophia Wilhelmina Sabina Brückman, in early summer, 1771. This union produced five children between 1772 and 1780. His last known child was born when Boltze was fifty-nine years old.

A double crisis upended Boltze’s life in this period. At some point between 1768 and 1771, he retired from the position of cantor and organist for the orphanage church and was thereafter listed in the church records as the cantor emeritus. He would have been somewhat shy of fifty years old. He had become blind while serving in his office, and it is likely that his retirement was at least in part due to this blindness, which must have compounded the disability he had suffered from childhood. It is notable that his last wife married him in 1771 and that his melodies are dated 1788 and 1789, when he was already retired and likely blind. She reportedly had to guide him to church to attend services; even so, as cantor emeritus he still had duties, which he served “*mit Fleiß, Geschicklichkeit und Treue*” (“with energy, finesse, and diligence”).<sup>13</sup>

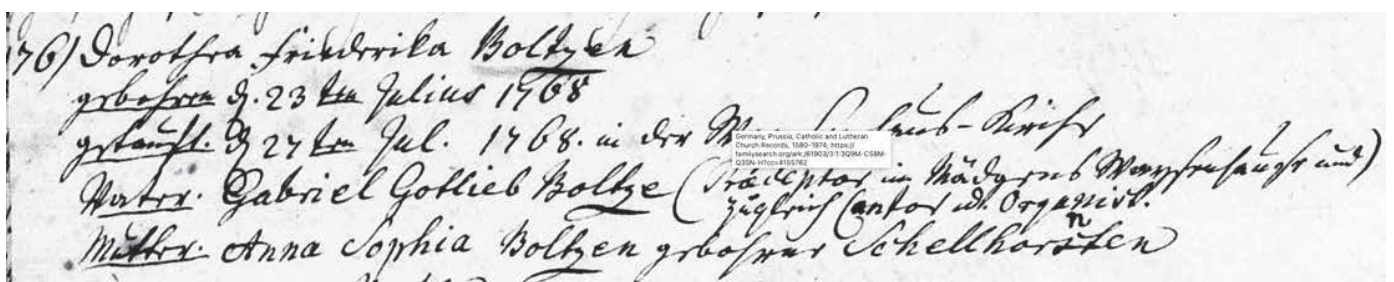
The second component of the crisis occurred when the organ that Boltze had played since at

*The front of the boy’s section of the royal military orphanage in Potsdam.*

least 1741 lost its home. The orphanage, including the orphanage church, was torn down in stages from 1772 to 1777 to make way for a new edifice. The organ was dismantled and put into storage with the hope that it would find later use. Church services for the orphanage were transferred in 1771 across the street to the royal garrison church. The larger organ there was built 1731/1732, also by Joachim Wagner. That organ was judged by Johann Sebastian Bach in 1747 as a “*gar prächtig Werck*” (“quite a nice piece”) and described in 1757 by Karl Gottfried Meyer.<sup>14</sup> It is unknown whether Boltze, then blind, could have played the larger Wagner organ, and perhaps the move contributed to his retirement.

The small Wagner organ from the orphanage church did indeed find later use, not in Potsdam, but in the small town of Pritzerbe, whose church had been badly damaged in a fire in 1773.<sup>15</sup> The Pritzerbe pastor at the time knew the Boltze family, having been a baptismal sponsor for one of Boltze’s granddaughters. Whether this acquaintance seeded the idea to transfer the Potsdam orphanage church organ to Pritzerbe or arose from

*The 1768 baptism record of Dorothea Friederika Boltze lists father Gabriel Gottlieb Boltze as teacher, cantor, and organist in the orphanage and mother Anna Sophia nee Schellhornen.*



Militär-Waisenhaus Potsdam Lutherische Gemeinde, Kirchenbuch 1728-1834



*Keyboard of the Wagner organ from the Potsdam orphanage church, now in Pritzerbe.*

Photo courtesy of the Evangelischer Kirchenkreis Mittelmark-Brandenburg.

it is unknown. In any case, the organ was installed in the rebuilt Sankt Marien “Unser lieben Frauen” church in Pritzerbe in 1789, with added registers and now with foot pedals. The augmented version of the organ that Boltze played for thirty years is still in use in Pritzerbe today.

Boltze composed his enduring melody in 1788 for Paul Gerhardt’s 1653 text “*Sollt ich meinem Gott nicht singen?*”<sup>16</sup> This text was widely known, even appearing in a hymnal published for the royal military orphanage in Potsdam in 1776.<sup>17</sup> The melody commonly used for Gerhardt’s text, the one cited in the orphanage hymnal, was Johann Schop’s *LASSET UNS DEN HERREN PREISEN* of 1641.<sup>18</sup> Schop’s melody is also used for von Birken’s popular text “*Lasset uns mit Jesu ziehen,*” which appeared about the same time as Gerhardt’s text.<sup>19</sup> Boltze’s new melody, easier than Schop’s, was paired with von Birken’s text already by 1803.<sup>20</sup> The two melodies by Boltze and Schop, sharing meter but not tonality, are both used for both texts by Gerhardt and von Birken.

### Death and Legacy

Six years after he wrote his now-familiar melody, Gabriel Gottlieb Boltze died of old age, in 1794. He was seventy-two years old. But Boltze’s influence did not end at his death. Of his sixteen

listed children, nine are known to have survived childhood, and six of these to have married. His first two sons, Johann Gottlieb Lorenz and (somewhat confusingly) Gabriel Gottlieb Boltze,<sup>21</sup> were cantors, and his grandson Heinrich Friedrich Ludwig Boltze was a cantor, organist, and teacher. Another grandson,

Carl Leopold Wilhelm Boltze, was given national recognition in 1874 for fifty years of service as cantor and schoolteacher in a nearby town. A great-grandson, Heinrich Ludwig Boltze, was a teacher, rector, and author. Boltze was thus the progenitor of a veritable dynasty of cantors, organists, and schoolteachers.

An 1812 review<sup>22</sup> of J. C. W. Kühnau’s book on blind musicians explains the usual fate of these artists thus:

Normally, with the want or loss of one sense, the power of the others is all the more sharpened; hence it is no wonder if the number of the blind, driven by need of bread or work, that have taken up music and become masters of their art, is not small. Usually, however, the life of such unfortunates, confined to their place of residence, passes quietly; one meets them individually, takes pity on them, and forgets them.

Now, more than two centuries after his demise, Boltze has been rescued from such an ending.

### Conclusion

Gabriel Gottlieb Boltze, born the son of a soldier garrisoned in Berlin, faced considerable adversity as an invalid orphan in Potsdam. Undaunted by his circumstances, he learned to play the organ and served as organist, schoolteacher, and cantor, dedicating himself to the Potsdam orphanage church and school for thirty years. Tragically, he lost his sight while fulfilling these duties. Despite his physical challenges, he married three times and fathered sixteen children. Notably, even though blind, he composed melodies for publication, one of which is sung in Lutheran churches to this day as “Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus.” Boltze’s story shows that neither the dimness of history nor the darkness of blindness can restrain the beauty of melody.

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## Endnotes

1. Scot A. Kinnaman, *Lutheranism 101* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2010), 233.
2. *Wartburg Hymnal* 344 (1918), *American Lutheran Hymnal* 220 (1930), *The Lutheran Hymnal* 409 (1941), *LBW* 487 (1978), *Lutheran Worship* 381 (1982), *CW93* 452 (1993), *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* 236 (1996), *LSB* 685 (2006), *ELW* 802 (2006), and *CW21* 704 (2021).
3. Boltze's first melody is the chorale SOLLT ICH MEINEM GOTT NICHT SINGEN; it is now often used for "Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus." His other two melodies form the appendix of children's songs: KINDER, GEHT ZUR BIENE HIN! and HERR MEINER JUGEND, DANK SEY DIR!
4. Johann Ernst Häuser, *Geschichte des christlichen, insbesondere des evangelischen Kirchengesanges ...* (Quedlinburg: 1834), 192. This work is problematic because it has sometimes been misinterpreted to produce a fictitious birth year for Boltze.
5. See, for example, F. M. Böhme, "Beitrag zur Hymnologie," *Urania* 11, no. 8 (1854): 113–18; Johannes Zahn, *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*, vol. 5 (Gütersloh: 1892), 451; and Peter C. Reske, "Boltze, Georg Gottfried," in vol. 2 of *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, ed. Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2019), 228–29. Böhme also erroneously claims a death date for Boltze of 1788.
6. Hermann Mendel, *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexicon*, vol. 2 (Berlin: 1872), 126.
7. *The Lutheran Hymnal* 855.
8. *Geschichte des Königlichen Potsdamschen Militärwaisenhauses ...* (Berlin: 1824), 222.
9. Friedrich Nicolai, *Beschreibung der Königlichen Residenzstädte Berlin und Potsdam ...* (Berlin: 1769), 544–47.
10. Institut für Orgelforschung Brandenburg, "Pritzerbe (ev. Kirche)," <https://www.orgellandschaftbrandenburg.de/orgelinventar/potsdam-mittelmark/pritzerbe/>.
11. Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig: 1802), 10; and Benjamin Lassiwe, "Wie zu Zeiten Bachs: Die bedeutendste Orgel Brandenburgs wird 300 Jahre alt," *Tagesspiegel PNN* (June 21, 2023), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/potsdam/brandenburg/wie-zu-zeiten-bachs-die-bedeutendste-orgel-brandenburgs-wird-300-jahre-alt-10019830.html>.
12. Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: 1880), 711.
13. Johann Christoph Wilhelm Kühnau, *Die blinden Tonkünstler* (Berlin: 1810), 29–30. Though the text gives his name only as "Boltze," the table of contents lists him as "G. G. Boltze in Potsdam."
14. Karl Gottfried Meyer, *Sammlung einiger Nachrichten von berühmten Orgel-Wercken in Teutschland* (Breslau: 1757), 78.
15. Willi Blasek, *Chronik der Stadt Pritzerbe, 948–1998* (Pritzerbe: "Pritzerber Kulturerben" e.V., 1998), 63.
16. Johann Crüger, *Praxis Pietatis Melica* (Berlin: 1653), 422–26. The Gerhardt–Boltze pairing is still used, for example, in *CW21* 611.
17. *Sammlung erbaulicher Lieder zum gottesdienstlichen Gebrauch des Königlichen Großen Waisenhauses zu Potsdam* (Potsdam: 1776).
18. Johann Rist, *H. P. Himmlischer Lieder* (Lüneburg: 1641), iv.
19. Sigismund von Birken, *Geistlicher Weibrauchkörner ...* (Nürnberg: 1652); and Johann Michael Dilherr, *Heilige Karwochen* (Nürnberg: 1653), 412–14. The original melody for von Birken's text was JESU, DU MEIN LIEBSTES LEBEN, also by Johann Schop, which appeared in Johann Rist, *H. P. Himmlischer Lieder*, part 5 (Lüneburg: 1642), 4.
20. Carl Martin Franz Gebhard, preface to Georg Peter Weimar, *Vollständiges, rein und unverfälschtes Choral-Melodienbuch ...* (Erfurt: 1811 [Gebhard's preface dated 1803]), xix.
21. The younger Gabriel Gottlieb may have been named not after his father but after his cousin Gabriel Gottlieb Boltze who had died of smallpox.
22. Chr., "Literaturgeschichte," in *Jenaische allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* 137 (July 10, 1812): 63–64; my translation.