

2010

Conservative Radical: Martin Luther's Influence on Congregational Singing

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Recommended Citation

Knight, Jonathan T. (2010) "Conservative Radical: Martin Luther's Influence on Congregational Singing," *Musical Offerings*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2010.1.2.1

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol1/iss2/1>

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Document Type

Article

Abstract

Martin Luther played an influential role in the transition from the priest-dominated Catholic worship to congregationally accessible evangelical services. This study demonstrates that, though his musical reforms were not dramatic, they were intentional and effective. Luther's understanding of music theologically, theoretically, and practically enabled him to effectively utilize available musical resources to make music increasingly accessible, for the purpose of teaching the Word of God. Through Luther's hymns, people began proclaiming the Word of God musically. Through liturgical reform, Luther provided congregations with a framework through which to incorporate congregational song in the liturgy. Through music education, Luther increased musical literacy, enabling congregations to effectively participate musically in services.

Keywords

Martin Luther, congregational singing, Reformation

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Conservative Radical: Martin Luther's Influence on Congregational Singing

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Great men of history have a tendency to change with time; the longer they are dead, the more their actual achievements become exaggerated. New generations chisel great men into myths, just as they fashion them into statues. Take, for example, Pope Gregory the Great, who is falsely credited with composing the entire canon of chant for the Catholic Church, or Palestrina, who supposedly saved polyphony single-handedly from the Council of Trent. Opinions of both Pope Gregory and Palestrina are riddled with distortions. People latch onto such significant historical figures and give them credit for doing what they never did. Martin Luther (1483-1546), the great figurehead of theological integrity and musical ingenuity for the Protestant church, is one such individual. While being venerated for promoting hymns and congregational singing, his actual musical contribution to the church is widely misunderstood. The goal of this project is to rescue Martin Luther from the proverbial flannel graph, and to accurately assess his accomplishments, specifically in the realm of church music.

I submit that Luther influenced a conservative and systematic transition from the priest-dominated worship of the Catholic Church to congregationally accessible evangelical services through hymn composition, liturgical reform, and music education. Luther's understanding of music theologically, theoretically, and practically enabled him to effectively utilize available musical resources to make music increasingly accessible, for the purpose of teaching the Word of God.

In supporting this thesis, this project will address a number of specific misconceptions which surround Luther's approach to liturgical and sacred music. First, while Luther's theological rebukes to the Roman Catholic Church were fierce, his conservative revisions to the Mass reveal he had no desire to completely discard the liturgical or musical practices of the Catholic Church (LW 1965, 53:11). Also, many view Luther as the pioneer of the German Mass, while in actuality, many examples of vernacular Masses existed in Germany before Luther's. In addition, Luther is often either accused of (or venerated for) borrowing extensively from secular music (bar songs) for his hymns. In reality, while Luther employed secular song forms in his hymn texts and musical idioms in his melodies, he did not simply re-write secular songs as hymns (Leaver, 13).

When investigating the musical influence of Luther, enthusiastic Protestants must leave behind their romanticized images of Luther as a liturgical rebel to understand his unique approach to and impact on church music. While resisting the Catholic Church in theological matters, Luther had great respect for the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Yes, Luther strongly attacked Catholic heresies as evidenced in his *Ninety-five Theses*, but he never condemned their music. To the contrary, he had great admiration for fine Catholic music, particularly polyphony (Stevenson 1953, 3). In fact, his support for the continued use of polyphony in Protestant churches demonstrates his high view of Catholic music. His musical training in the Catholic musical tradition greatly influenced his musical contribution to the Protestant church.

Born in 1483, Luther's training in music began as a boy in Mansfeld where his schooling included not only reading and writing, but also Latin and music (Schalk 1988, 12). Lambert writes that in elementary school, "...he acquired knowledge of the Psalter, and of a number of the classical hymns which, in future years, he translated, amplified and adopted to popular use." (Lambert 1917, 6) Learning basic musical skills (including theory) was part of a good Roman Catholic education (Schalk 1988, 13). Throughout each week, schoolboys would sing the offices of matins and lauds (16).

He left home in 1498 at age 14 to continue his education in Eisenach. Joining the school choir there, he supported himself according to the custom of the day: by singing door to door as a *Kurrende Boy* (*Kurrende* comes from the Latin *currere*, "to run") (Dau, 228). During his studies he became acquainted with Johannes Braun, a priest who greatly valued music. Leaver writes that, "In Braun's circle of pupils in Eisenach music making was a frequent activity, especially monodic songs and polyphonic motets." (Leaver 2007, 26) Luther's musical gift was already developing beyond the rudiments. In fact, the wife of a wealthy merchant so appreciated his sweet voice and character that she provided him with food and lodging during his three-year education in Eisenach (Lambert 1917, 7).

Luther then attended the University of Erfurt to pursue his Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Music continued to be an important part of Luther's life during his graduate studies, during which he built on his earlier musical training by studying polyphony and composition (Schalk 1988, 14). He also expanded his knowledge of folk songs, or *Volkslieder*. Though it is not known when he began playing the flute and lute, by 1505 he was quite accomplished, particularly on the lute. Years later his fellow students recalled exquisite performances by Luther during his student years (Leaver 2007, 30). In fact, music was such a part of Luther's persona that one of his university friends, humanist and satirical poet Crotus Rubianus, later reminisced, "You were the musician and erudite philosopher of our old circle" (Schalk 1988, 15).

While studying the liberal arts, he was immersed in classical philosophy (Schalk 1988, 14). His conception of music's power was significantly influenced by the

Greek idea that music has inherent moral virtue. Aristotle once said, “It is plain that music has the power of producing a certain effect on the ethos of the soul, and if it has the power to do this, it is clear that the young must be directed to music and must be educated in it” (Oettinger, 37). Having already developed significant musical abilities, Luther resonated with the ancient philosopher. He later championed the value of musical training for children, agreeing with Aristotle in saying, “If I had children and can manage it, I would have them study not only languages and history, but also singing and music....The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines; yet they grew up to be people of wondrous ability, subsequently fit for everything” (Schalk 1988, 16).

In contrast to classical and renaissance thought, however, which tended to consider music primarily as a speculative science (*musika speculativa*), Luther conceived of music in a highly tangible, practical manner (Schalk 1988, 18). Luther’s own musical creations reveal that he took the actual creation and performance of music very seriously, in contrast to Greek thinkers like Boethius, who considered earthly music (*musica instrumentalis*), the lowest form of music compared to the higher, perfect music of the universe.

After Luther received his bachelor’s degree, his father intended for him to become a lawyer, but Luther intended to become a priest. In 1505 he secretly sold all his law books, and after a celebration with his closest friends, entered the Augustinian cloister at Erfurt to become a monk (Leaver 2007, 30). Life in the cloister included extensive singing of Gregorian chant, as the monks were trained in the complicated rituals accompanying the many services observed by the Church (Schalk 1988, 16). As previously noted, Luther had taken part in the daily offices of matins and lauds as a schoolboy, but now he plunged into the antiphons, hymns, and responsories which attended each of the eight daily offices, according to the time and season. Each week the entire Psalter was sung by the monks as part of the offices, and Luther’s cloister was renowned for its exquisite renditions. Schalk explains that brothers in the cloister “...occupied themselves solely with singing, praying, and other ascetic practices conducive to sanctification of self” (15). Luther approached his duties with great solemnity, meticulously memorizing the Mass and accompanying chants. His theoretical knowledge of and naturally excellent ear for music were further developed. It was said that, “he was able to detect offenses against strict canonic part-writing, and that he would...rectify such passages, ‘according to his own intelligence’” (Rau, 229). He was known for severely criticizing mediocre musical performances, a reputation which he retained throughout his life (Leaver 2007, 31).

He was ordained to the priesthood in 1507, and celebrated his first Mass soon thereafter. Following a longstanding tradition, Luther fulfilled not only the spiritual duties essential to the service but performed a substantial musical role, since all musical elements of the liturgy fell to the priest and the choir. The priest was required to sing the lectionary and other chants of the service. As a whole, music in the Catholic Church was viewed as a clerical or semi-clerical function.

Having its basis in Gregorian chant, music of the Mass was, in the words of Dickinson, “official, prescribed, liturgic, unalterable...” (Dickinson 1970, 223). Liemohn observes that, “As early as the fourth century the Council of Laodicea had ruled that ‘Beside the Psalm singers appointed thereto, who mount the Ambo and sing out of the Book, no others shall sing in church’” (Liemohn 1953, 6). Such measures were taken (in part) in response to heretical groups like the Arians and Gnostics, which made use of congregational singing to proliferate their false doctrines (6). During the centuries that followed, congregational participation in liturgical music remained almost nonexistent, being allowed only for certain special services. Dickinson writes that,

The Gregorian chant was never really adopted by the people—its practical difficulties, and especially the inflexible insistence upon the use of Latin in all the offices of worship, virtually confined it to the priests and a small body of trained singers. The very conception and spirit of the liturgy, also, has by a law of historic development gradually excluded the people from active participation (Dickinson 1970, 240).

Interestingly, despite discouragement of such practices by Catholic clergy, the Germans retained some hymn singing (Liemohn 1959, 33). The history of German hymnody will be investigated in greater depth in the context of Luther’s hymns.

As an Augustinian monk, Luther was required to make a journey to Rome, which he took in 1510. Along with witnessing firsthand the corruption and worldliness of the Pope’s rule, Luther experienced the finest European musical tradition of his day, embodied in the works of Josquin Desprez, whose sacred polyphonic motets and Masses were considered by Luther to be unparalleled in their natural beauty. In fact, Luther revered Josquin above all other composers (Nettl 1967, 11). In the words of Luther, “[Josquin] is a unique master of the notes. They must do as he wills, whereas other masters are forced to do as the notes will” (20). Luther’s high respect for fine music revealed his developing artistic sensibilities.

Following his eye-opening Roman pilgrimage, Luther completed his doctorate, and in 1513 began teaching at Wittenberg University. In the years that followed, he grew increasingly vocal about his disagreements with the theology of the Catholic Church (Leaver 2007, 32). Luther published a number of controversial pamphlets, including his famous *Ninety Five Theses*. These brought increasing anger from the Catholic Church, until he was forced to escape for his life. But after a year in exile in Wartburg Castle, Luther was compelled to return to Wittenberg in March of 1522 to combat the anti-catholic stand of Andreas Karlstadt, Luther’s fellow professor at Wittenberg. Karlstadt had gained influence over Luther’s congregation, and was attempting to radically overturn Catholic

tradition, completely contrary to Luther's intentions. Luther's disagreement reveals his conservative approach to liturgical reform.

Having been won over by the iconoclastic radical Thomas Münzer,¹ Karlstadt resorted to violence in "reforming" the Catholic Church in Wittenberg (Leaver 2007, 36). Karlstadt rejected the Latin Mass with its music, and proceeded to perform a Mass completely in German. Such sudden liturgical change, though not completely undesirable to Luther, was seen by him as inappropriate because it was "...thrust on people without warning" (Herl 2004, 4). Karlstadt's actions closely resembled the drastic measures taken by other influential reformers as well, most notably John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, who "...sought to establish their identity by emphasizing their differences from the Church Catholic, denouncing everything that might remind them of popish vanity" (Schalk 1988, 45). Though differing somewhat in their application, Calvin and Zwingli both viewed music (and all art) with intense suspicion because of its emotional power, and restricted it to a place of humiliation in the life of the Church (Westermeyer 1998, 141). As Rau puts it, "...in their attitude towards the fine arts [they] went far beyond the Scriptures. Being filled with antipathy to all existing usages, they purposed to arrest the growth of art" (Dau 1916, 229). Similarly, Karlstadt's *Fifty Three Theses* condemned the music of the Catholic liturgy. In its place he advocated (not unlike Calvin and Zwingli) only unaccompanied unison chant, ostensibly representing the unity of the God-head (Leaver 2007, 36).

Luther was greatly concerned by Karlstadt's rebellion and, despite threats to his life, returned to Wittenberg immediately. Two days after returning, he delivered a series of eight sermons in eight days, correcting the extreme actions of his colleague. These sermons reveal Luther's careful, conscientious approach to liturgical reform (Herl 2004, 4). His response to the situation is key to understanding his effectiveness in facilitating musical development. While holding many of Karlstadt's theological convictions, Luther's practical approach was drastically different.

In all aspects of his reforms, Luther was ultimately motivated not by a desire to be un-Catholic, but instead by an overwhelming belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a deep desire for that truth to be preached and understood. Reforming teaching, rather than ritual, was most immediately needful (Leaver 2007, 175). This conviction gave him the freedom to retain much that was good in the Catholic Mass. Having displaced the radicalism of Karlstadt, Luther now needed to fill the liturgical void. However, knowing his own influence, he feared that churches would adopt whatever he advocated as though it were law, which would make him no different from the papists. He desired for individual churches to freely determine how they worshiped, so he delayed publishing a new service order. In the meantime, he published a summary of his expectations for an

¹ As a part of Münzer's campaign against the Catholic Church, he developed a completely German liturgy, including German hymns, which gained him considerable support from the common people (Nettl 1967, 73).

evangelical Mass in a pamphlet entitled, *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, which was published in 1523. He began this document with a concise summary of his feelings toward the Catholic Mass:

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as the latter has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the former has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but restore it again to its rightful use (LW 1965, 53:11).

The document's emphasis is on the priority of preaching the Word, going so far as to say, "When God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together" (53:11). His great zeal for God's Word was his primary motivation in ordering the affairs of the Church. Music clearly has a subordinate role to theology, though Luther considered music's role in teaching theology to be of the greatest significance.

The publication of Luther's liturgical principles in his pamphlet, *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, was not satisfactory to his followers. His friends greatly desired to know exactly how Luther would apply his convictions in Wittenberg. So Luther translated his principles into a practical order for other Protestant churches. Later in 1523, he published a detailed evangelical Mass in Latin, commonly referred to as the *Formula Mass* (LW 1965, 53:17). He begins the document with another insightful statement of his liturgical conservatism:

I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange all old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off (LW 1965, 53:19).

Luther's revisions to the Mass were clearly conservative. The small changes he did make were careful and well informed (Leaver 2007, 175). Except for the sermon, the entire *Formula Mass* remained in Latin (though Luther alludes to his hope that "in the future the vernacular be used in the Mass" [LW 1965, 53:24]). The original Latin chant was retained, performed by the Bishop and choir as it was in Catholic services (53:13). However, several phrases were altered to avoid "sacrificial" language. In the traditional Catholic view, the Mass is seen as a sacrifice to God made by the priest. The Eucharistic canon in particular used

strongly sacrificial language, emphasizing the work of man, especially the priest, while concealing the completed sacrifice of Christ, a gift offered to us by God. Luther understood the error of the Catholic Church, and recognized from Scripture that justification is the real emphasis of the Eucharist. He therefore carefully changed those parts which contained such distortions (Leaver 2007, 176).

It may come as a surprise that music was by no means the emphasis of the *Formula Mass*. In fact, it might almost be concluded that Luther failed to address the congregation's involvement in the Formula Mass. But he includes a paragraph near the conclusion of the document that reveals his long-term goals for singing in the service:

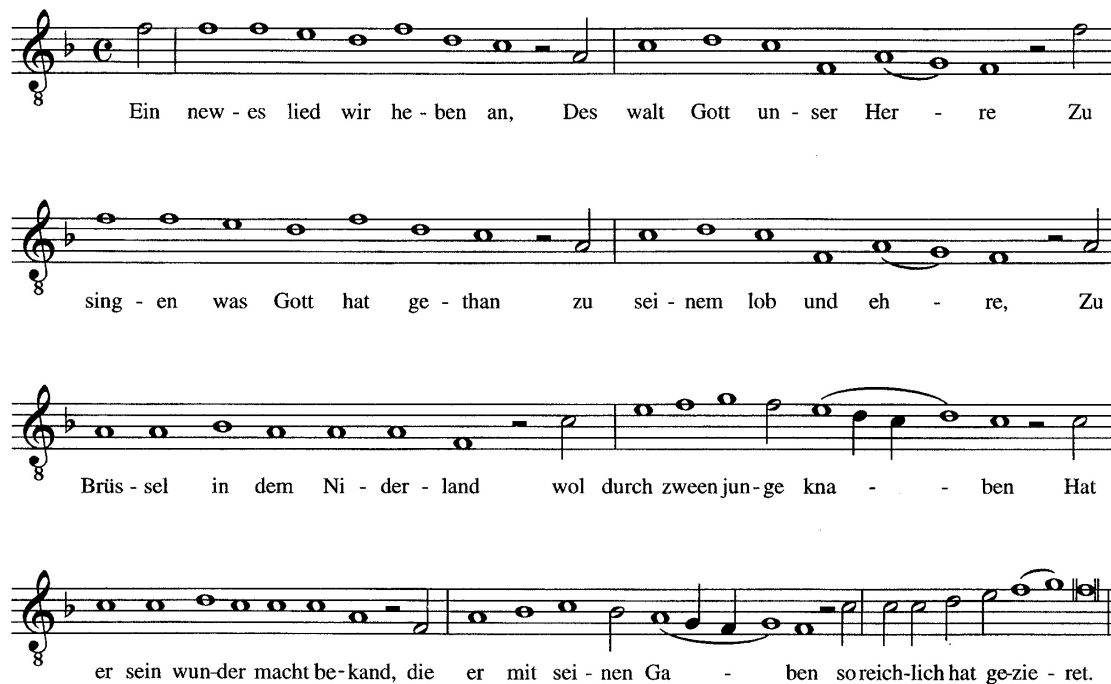
I also wish that we have as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during Mass, immediately after the Gradual and also after the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. For who doubts that originally all the people sang these which now only the choir sings or responds to while the bishop is consecrating? The bishop may have these [congregational] hymns sung either after the Latin chant, or use the Latin on one [Sun]day and vernacular on the next, until the time comes that the whole Mass is sung in the vernacular (LW 1965, 53:36).

Luther clearly desired for congregations to take on a larger musical role in the liturgy in the future. Luther wished for a collection of vernacular songs which could appropriately be sung at the three above mentioned points in the service: after the Gradual, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. He immediately began working toward that end. His first step toward collecting vernacular hymns was writing letters to several of his associates requesting Psalms to be rendered in German verse. One letter has been preserved, which Luther sent to George Spalatin, private secretary to Prince Frederick the Wise and close associate of Luther and Melanchthon (Leaver 2007, 27).

Following this example of the prophets and fathers of the Church, I intend to make vernacular Psalms for the people, that is, spiritual songs so that the Word of God even by means of song may live among the people. Everywhere we are looking for good poets. Now since you are skillful and eloquent in German, I would ask you to work with us and to turn a psalm into a hymn as in the enclosed sample of my work (Leaver 2007, 144).

Spalatin never acted on Luther's request. But the lack of response fueled Luther's growing drive to move forward himself. The letter indicates that Luther included a sample Psalm paraphrase which he had personally completed, likely a rendering of Psalm 130, entitled, "From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee" (LW 1965, 191). Luther did not consider himself to be a skilled poet, and showed extreme caution in entering the realm of hymn text and music composition. However, rather than a lack of skill, his misgivings show his reverence for sacred music and his high regard for fine artistry. Once unleashed, his unique poetic skill became a vital vehicle for spreading the theology of the Reformation.

His first significant, original poetic text was inspired by the first martyrs of the Reformation. In July of 1523, two Augustinian brothers were executed in Brussels after being convicted as "Lutherans." Luther was deeply moved by his personal implication in their deaths, and in response penned "Ein Neues Lied." The text of this narrative song was written in the style of a secular court song, known as a *Hofweise* (literally "court wisdom") (Leaver 2007, 13). Songs in the *Hofweise* style were written in AAB, or "bar form." The term "bar form" has clearly been misconstrued through time, to such an extent that Luther is accused of (or venerated for) using melodies from the taverns. While Luther's contemporaries, such as Hans Sachs, drew directly from secular music for melodic as well as textual material, Luther did not make this his practice, but rather made careful and creative use of many musical sources, which were mainly religious in origin. Leaver writes that, "secular influence on...[Luther's] hymn texts was primarily textual rather than musical" (13). Example 1.1 show a version of "Ein Neues Lied" in modern notation.



Ein new - es lied wir he - ben an, Des walt Gott un - ser Her - re Zu
sing - en was Gott hat ge - than zu sei - nem lob und eh - re, Zu
Brüs - sel in dem Ni - der - land wol durch zween jun - ge kna - ben Hat
er sein wun - der macht be - kand, die er mit sei - nen Ga - ben so - reich - lich hat ge - zie - ret.

Example 1.1 Martin Luther, “Ein Neues Lied” (Oettinger 2001, 63).

The early Reformation hymns written by Luther and his associates, which consisted mainly of Psalm-hymns similar to “From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee,” and other “Germanizations” of Latin hymns, were printed and distributed on individual leaflets. In the summer of 1524, an enterprising printer in Nürnberg collected eight of these increasingly familiar hymns, and printed them under the title *Etlich Christlich Lieder, Lobgesang und Psalm* (Some Christian songs, canticles, and Psalms), also known as the *Achtliederbuch*, or eight-song-book (Leaver 2007, 108). Because copyrights did not exist, several larger collections were also published without Luther’s supervision (LW 1965, 53:193). The first collection of hymns sanctioned by Luther was published later in the summer of 1524. *Das Geistliche Gesangbüchlein*, or *The Spiritual Hymn-booklet*, was a collection of Protestant hymns arranged by Johann Walter, who later acted as a musical advisor to Luther, and became the first Lutheran cantor (Schalk 1988, 23). The collection, considered the most important hymnbook of the Lutheran Church, included compositions by Luther and Walter, as well as others (Nettl 1967, 86). Thirty-eight German chorales were included, twenty-four of which were ascribed to Luther, though the musical authorship of many has since been challenged (LW 1965, 53:193). Significantly, this hymn book was not organized like modern hymnals. Instead, it was a collection of polyphonic hymn settings intended for use by the choir, rather than the congregation (LW 1965, 53:193). Example 1.2 provides an example of the polyphonic texture which characterized Walter’s *Geistliche Gesangbüchlein*, also in modern notation.

evangelical, mixed with crudity, superstition, and crass realism” (Dickinson 1970, 234). Expressing the religious feelings of German laymen, religious German folk songs consistently showed similarities to secular folk song. The austere, scholarly Latin plainchant of the cloister and the church found no home in the hearts of the peasants of the Middle Ages (Dickinson 1970, 235). Somehow, Luther’s forefathers maintained a small measure of religious autonomy despite the rule of the Catholic Church. Liemohn writes,

The Germans were little interested in the Gregorian style of music, and since the church was unable to maintain a strict adherence to uniformity in liturgical practice in Germany, the congregation retained certain privileges of participation in the service not otherwise generally condoned (Liemohn 1959, 33).

As a consequence, some ancient German hymns were filled with extreme distortions of scriptural teaching, such as the “preexistence of Mary with God,” or “the power of the saints to save one from the pains of hell” (Dickinson 1970, 236-7).

There were many theologically sound songs too, such as those based on Greek *Kyrie* hymns, which the Germans expanded, inserting German verses in between the Latin ones. These adapted *Kyrie* hymns were then “used as responses by the German congregation” (Liemohn 1959, 33). Hymns were written to accompany the medieval “Mystery Plays,” and the thirteenth century Minnesingers added to the accumulation of German hymns as well. These hymns were not attached to the liturgy, however, but instead were primarily for private devotion and some informal gatherings (Liemohn 1959, 34-35). Luther joined this legacy of German religious song, but in contrast to past practices, desired hymns to have a liturgical function. Luther did not simply give congregations “something to sing,” but intended for them to actively sing certain segments of the liturgy in hymn form, a foreign concept to sixteenth century hymnody. As a result, Reformation hymns were primarily confessional statements of faith, rather than expressions of personal emotion and devotion (Schalk 1995, 22). Therefore, Johann Walter’s first publication of Lutheran hymns included exclusively confessional hymns.² Five years later, these hymns were used to address the first two sections of Luther’s catechism: Commandments and Creed. Leaver writes, “These early Lutheran hymns were thus clearly and self-consciously the Word of God in song that would allow the people to learn and experience fundamental theology as they sang” (Leaver 2007, 108).

Poetically, Luther’s hymn texts show his remarkable skill of expression in the German language (Reed 1947, 3). In contrast to the strict metric regularity of

² Five of these confessional hymns were explicitly focused on the doctrine of justification, a doctrine which held incredible importance to Luther (Leaver 2007, 108).

modern hymns, Luther's hymns are much freer. Helmut Lehmann, primary editor of *Luther's Works*, describes Luther's poetic rhythm in this way:

Like the Meistersänger, Luther counted syllables, and the accents vary from line to line. Sometimes they're quite regular; other times they seem to clash with the rhythm or arbitrarily to change from trochaic to iambic and more complicated feet. This rhythmic freedom, however, is not necessarily a defect, as it may appear to the modern immunologist. Instead of taking sentences into the rigid mold of metrical feet, Luther was able to stress certain words your respective of the surrounding of "light" and "heavy" accents (LW 1965, 198).

Compositionally, Luther's hymn tunes have come under intense skepticism. Critical scholarship of the nineteenth century questioned whether any of Luther's melodies were actually his own compositions, due to melodic fragments which can be traced to pre-Reformation motets based on plainsong. Today, while the debate has lessened, scholars still disagree on how many hymn tunes can be attributed to Luther. Nettl puts the debate in perspective:

In the seventeenth century the authorship of more than 100 hymns was attributed to Luther. This overestimation of the reformer in musical matters was refuted in the eighteenth century. And the exacting and skeptical research of the nineteenth century, step by step, denied Luther the authorship of any hymns (Nettl 1967, 28).

The difficulty arises because sixteenth century composers did not demand originality in the same way as composers of the modern era. Reed writes that,

[It is] now generally understood by historians, that sixteenth century makers of melody were arrangers rather than composers, craftsmen rather than artists. Like the Meistersinger's, they provided their texts with melodies which, however, were generally adaptations rather than original features. Luther, with all his force, was respectful of the past and committed to the principle of retaining the best from it. Many of his melodies carried phrases reminiscent of plainsong and folk song. (Reed 1947, 7)

In this historical context, Luther's melodies, though not perfectly original, must still be considered artistically rich, particularly in light of the various musical sources which he adapted into a rich musical line like *Ein' Feste Burg*, which so

effectively “expresses Luther’s personality in all its vigor, boldness and joyous confidence” (Reed 1947, 7). His melodic construction was informed both by the folk traditions of his people as well as the artistry of the Catholic Church. Melodies were also supplied by Latin hymns and sequences, the melodies of which he modified to better accommodate his German language (Liemohn 1953, 8). Examples 1.3 and 1.4 demonstrate such transformation: Example 1.3 is a plain song melody, the Latin text of which was easily translated into German. However, the melody needed considerable alteration (8). Example 1.4 shows the melody after being modified in 1525 to more effectively support the German translation (9).

VENI CREATOR SPIRITUS



Example 1.3 Plain song melody (Liemohn 1953, 8).

KOMM GOTT SCHOPFER, HEILIGEN GEIST



Example 1.4 Plain song melody, modified to fit the German translation, 1525 (Liemohn 1953, 9).

In 1525, Luther began developing a Mass in the vernacular, which became the primary vehicle for congregational singing. He had purposefully delayed, partly because he did not desire to remove all Latin from the service, “as if the reformation of the church depended on the exclusive use of the German language” (LW 1965, 53:53). In contrast to the prevalent assumption that Luther led the way in establishing a vernacular Mass, history reveals that many undertook the task prior to Luther. In fact, Karlstadt, the iconoclastic radical, was the first to introduce an entirely German Mass in 1522, three years earlier (Herl 2004, 4). During the years following Karlstadt’s revolutionary action, German liturgies multiplied. Few included any music at all, and those which did attempted to fit the

German syllables to the original plainchant melodies of the Mass (53:54). Such unimaginative translation proved awkward and problematic. Luther addressed such artistically bankrupt Mass attempts directly:

I would gladly have a German Mass today, and I am going to work on it, but I should like it to be of a genuinely German nature, for, although I will tolerate a translation of the Latin text and the Latin notes and tunes, I do not approve of it, for it sounds neither right nor pleasant. Both text and music (accent, melody, and gesture) must come from the mother tongue and voice. Otherwise it is but an imitation like that of monkeys (LW 1965, 40:141).

Though clearly a gifted musician, Luther was reluctant to attempt a German Mass, saying modestly, “I am not qualified for this task, which requires both a talent in music and the gift of the Spirit” (Schalk 1988, 26). Taking his personal limitations seriously, he desired the input of professional musicians who could assist him in developing and notating the music for a German Mass which was not only theologically grounded, but musically cohesive. He convinced the Elector of Saxony to send for two leading court musicians to aid him (Schalk 1988, 41). One was Johann Walter, the composer who arranged and published Luther’s hymns, and the other was Conrad Rupsch, Kapellmeister of Torgau (Nettl 1967, 75).

When the two composers arrived in Wittenberg, Luther had already pieced together chant for much of the service, as evidenced by a loose leaf sheet of music, written by Luther, which shows chant-sketchings for the Introit psalm, as well as for the Epistle and Gospel (LW 1965, 53:55). Forty years later, Walter recalled that Luther specifically desired his and Rupsch’s input regarding the nature of the eight Church modes (or tones), in order to know how best to musically set specific parts of the service. Luther’s understanding of music theory stems from classical, medieval, and Renaissance humanists, who “associated particular attributes with each of the eight modes” (Leaver 2007, 181). Walter recalled that Luther “finally...appointed the eighth tone for the Epistle and the sixth tone for the Gospel, saying: ‘Christ is a friendly Lord, and his sayings are gentle, therefore, we want to take the *Sexton tonum* for the Gospel; and because St. Paul is a serious apostle, we want to appoint the *Octavum tonum* for the Epistle’” (181). Luther’s poetic sensibility and musical sensitivity which produced many effective hymns are also evident in his careful reworking of chant formulas, which comprise nearly all the music of the German Mass. In keeping with his goal to make a Mass which fit naturally with the sound and rhythm of the German language, he abandoned the melismatic characteristics of the Gregorian style, and set the German text monosyllabically (Nettl 1967, 77). Moreover, speech patterns are reflected rhythmically, taking into account the heavily accented nature of German, in contrast to Latin (LW 1965, 53:58).

Luther's instructions regarding the *German Mass* direct the congregation to take on a small singing role in the service, though the actual extent is not clearly spelled out (Herl 2004, 10). Luther begins his description of the Sunday morning service by saying, "To begin the service we sing a hymn or a German Psalm..." (LW 1965, 53:69). It is not immediately apparent whether "we" refers to the choir and priest together, or the choir, priest and *congregation* together. But considering Luther's desires for flexibility in liturgical practices from church, he intentionally leaves room for individual churches to shape the liturgy to their needs. Similar to the *Formula Mass*, Luther clarifies that this Mass is not to be seen as a standard, but merely an example: "For I do not propose that all of Germany should uniformly follow our Wittenberg order" (LW 1965, 53:62).

The next portion of the service involving congregational singing is explicitly stated as such. Following the chanting of the epistle, Luther instructs that the Gradual be replaced by a German hymn, which the people are to sing with the whole choir.³ Eskew observes that this Gradual hymn later came to be a musical and poetic commentary of the scripture lesson just read, reflecting the theme of service (Eskew, 98). Next, the gospel is chanted by the bishop, after which Luther again suggests a corporate song: "After the gospel the whole congregation sings the Creed in German: 'Wir Glauben All an Einen Gott'" (LW 1965, 53:78). Published in Walter's 1524 hymn collection, this hymn is an amplified version of the Nicene Creed for liturgical use, which is to be sung immediately preceding the sermon (Lambert 1917, 83). During the administering of the communion bread, Luther suggests a number of musical selections that might be appropriate to sing, possibly with the congregation. He writes, "Meanwhile the Germans Sanctus⁴ or the hymn, 'Gott sey gelobet,' or the hymn of John Huss, 'Jesus Christus unser Heiland,' could be sung. Then shall the cup be blessed and administered, while the remainder of these hymns are sung, or the German Agnus Dei" (LW 1965, 53:82).

Some scholars argue that Luther's passive language ("could be sung") implies choral rather than congregational singing, since performance of liturgical music remained the role of the priest or choir (Herl 2004, 10). However, considering Luther's abhorrence of "decreed" liturgical practices, and his clear intention for local churches to decide how to perform the German Mass, his ambiguous tone here should be understood as an attempt to make room for liturgical variation. Specifically, this freedom included deciding whether the choir or congregation (or both) would sing particular portions of the service.

³ He suggests "Nun Bitten Wir den Heiligen Geist" (Now let us pray to the Holy Ghost), a Pentecost in written during the 12th century which Lambert describes as being "one of the very few examples of popular vernacular hymns used in the church during pre-Reformation times" (Lambert, 69). But Luther leaves open the option of using another hymn (LW 1965, 53:74).

⁴The German Sanctus is a paraphrase of Isaiah 6:1-4, and the melody is a plain chant adapted by Luther, which Johann Walter says,... shows his [Luther's] perfect mastery in adapting the notes to the text" (LW 1965, 53:60).

Luther's liturgical reforms were purposefully sluggish, as he carefully introduced practices with which congregations were not immediately familiar or comfortable. Luther anticipated resistance, and had no desire to force new rituals upon people if they were not ready. In fact, his desire for each church to have liturgical freedom appears to be stronger even than his desire for congregational singing, or any other specific way of performing the liturgy. In the preface to the *German Mass*, Luther says, "Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage,...we are certainly bound to forgo our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone" (LW 1965, 53:61).⁵ With this in mind, it is clear that the *German Mass* took only a small step toward greater congregational involvement in the liturgy. However, the portions which Luther does direct the congregation to sing correspond with his stated goal in the *Formula Mass*, that vernacular songs be sung following the Gradual, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei (LW 1965, 53:36).

Example 1.5 offers a visual breakdown of Luther's *Formula Mass* and *German Mass* in comparison to the Roman Mass.

Roman mass	<i>Formula missae</i>	<i>German Mass</i>
Introit	Introit	German psalm or song
Kyrie	Kyrie	Kyrie
Gloria	Gloria (optional)	
Collect	Collect	Collect
Epistle	Epistle	Epistle
Gradual	Gradual and/or Alleluia	German song
Alleluia		
Sequence	Sequence ^a	
Gospel	Gospel	Gospel
Credo	Credo	Creed
Offertory	Sermon	Sermon
Secret		Paraphrase of Lord's Prayer and exhortation to communicants
Sursum Corda	Sursum Corda	
Preface	Preface	
Sanctus & Benedictus with Elevation	Consecration Sanctus & Benedictus with optional Elevation	Consecration with Elevation, then distribution, during which there is singing (optionally including the Sanctus and Agnus Dei)
Canon major (conclusion)		
Pater Noster	Pater Noster	
Pax Domini	Pax Domini	
Agnus Dei	Agnus Dei	
Communion antiphon	Communion antiphon	
Postcommunion collect	Thanksgiving collect	Thanksgiving collect
Dismissal	Benedicamus & Benediction	Benediction

Example 1.5 Luther's Mass orders compared with the medieval Mass order (Herl 2004, 29).

⁵ While desiring for each church to practice the liturgy as they think best, he does encourage uniformity of services within a particular region, or "principality."

Evidently, Luther was not the passionate proponent of congregational participation which some make him out to be. Luther clearly demonstrates that his purpose was first to preach the gospel and teach theology. That being established, he viewed liturgical music as an effectively means of supporting theological teaching. Four years after the publication of the *German Mass*, he wrote these words to a pastor:

We...both beg and urge you most earnestly not to deal first with changes in the ritual, which changes are dangerous, but to deal with them later. You should deal first with the center of our teaching and fix in the people's minds what they must know about our justification....Adequate reform of ungodly rites will come of itself, however, as soon as the fundamentals of our teaching, having been successfully communicated, have taken root in devout hearts (LW 1965, 49:263).

Martin Luther's two published Mass orders, the *Formula Mass* in 1523 and the *German Mass* in 1526, do not supply detailed instructions for congregational song, but purposefully leave room for variations. They provided the framework from which churches built evangelical services, and the hymns written by Luther and his colleagues supplied the music with which to fill them.

Liturgical freedom was limited, and Luther insisted that the order of the church year remain, as well as the general content of the service (Liemohn 1959, 38). Churches readily embraced Luther's encouragement toward liturgical variety, and German congregations showed remarkable variety in their practices, depending on region and available resources (39). For example, many congregations in South Germany abandoned the Latin service by the end of the sixteenth century, while those in Leipzig continued the Latin Mass until the eighteenth century. While continuing to arrange services according to the church year, congregations exercised freedom in choosing which hymns to sing, whether to sing in Latin or German, and whether they would be sung contrapuntally by the choir, in unison by the choir and congregation, or antiphonally between them (Nettl 1967, 80). It must be remembered that congregational music was have been greatly limited because of low literacy; congregations needed to learn hymns by rote, led by the choir. Robin Leaver describes how this was practically worked out in worship at Wittenberg:

The first stanza of a hymn would be sung in a strong, unaccompanied unison, with the choir supporting the congregation. The second stanza would then be sung by the choir, a *cantus firmus* chorale motet. The members of the congregation, following along with the text of the stanza being sung, would also have the basic chorale melody reinforced in their ears before they joined

together to sing again, the third stanza in unaccompanied unison, and thereafter in alternation with the choir until all the stanzas has been sung (205).

Although publishing reformed liturgies gave congregations opportunity to sing, Luther recognized that lack of musical skill among laymen greatly hindered the effectiveness of congregational hymns. He addressed the problem directly, beginning with the development of his “educational manifesto” in February, 1524. Luther’s intended audience for this document is made clear by the title: *To the Councilman of All the Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*. Luther’s long term educational strategy for Christian children included strong musical training, particularly in Latin polyphony (Leaver 2007, 37). Alongside the reformed liturgy, Luther’s views on education lead to greater cultivation of theological and musical literacy in Lutheran congregations everywhere (37).

Luther addressed the lack of musical skill among churches by strongly insisting that pastors and schoolteachers be trained musicians (Stevenson 1953, 7). Luther believed that their musical competency would translate into effective musical training for school children, who would become well-versed in Scripture through consistently performing hymns and Latin chant (LW 1965, 53:69). His strategy proved effective, as schoolboys learned and performed the hymns and chants to be sung in church on Sunday (Liemohn 1959, 38). Along with contributing musically to services, “[The children] became the music teachers of the grown-ups and boys not infrequently were scattered among the worshipers to carry the latter along during the hymn singing” (Nettl 1967, 82). Growing musical ability in many churches increased the use of hymns in services, and a growing number of comprehensive hymn collections, published specifically for congregational use, extended the reach of Lutheran theology and increased the acceptance of hymn singing (Liemohn 1959, 39).

On one hand, Martin Luther’s alterations to church music practices appear minimal, especially in comparison to the dramatic musical changes made by reformers such as Karlstadt, Calvin, and Zwingli. Yet Luther’s approach, though less dramatic, was intentional and effective. His respect for historical practices caused him to build on rather than tear down the art of the past. The various musical sources used in his hymns retained the richness of Latin chant while employing song forms with which people were familiar, so that God’s Word was most effectively proclaimed.

Contrary to common understanding, Pope Gregory the Great did not mystically compose the canon of Catholic chant, but instead collected and developed available musical resources to influence generations to follow. Similarly, Palestrina did not single-handedly save polyphony from the Council of Trent, but rather considered the directions of the Council in developing his own style in accordance with current practices. In the same manner, Luther did not establish

German hymnody, the German Mass or even congregational singing, but by developing available resources he has influenced generations of Protestants, and provided musical inspiration for great composers such as J.S. Bach, Johannes Brahms, and Hugo Wolf (Nettl 1967, 37). His reforms to the Mass were not original or novel, but reveal artistic creativity and theological intentionality as he retained, modified, and developed historical practices in order to best communicate the Gospel. He thereby provided a framework through from which congregations formed unique liturgical and musical identities, a practice which Protestant churches continue to value today.

From the beginning, Luther's goal as a musician and a reformer was not musical distinctiveness but theological integrity. He believed that God's Word was most effectively taught and proclaimed with the aid of music, and he led the way in providing a musical language which inspired composers and choirs, and taught German laymen. In musical matters, the fiery reformer described himself as being "overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of music's virtue and benefits," and that "next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise" (LW 1965, 53:323). The famous Meistersinger Hans Sachs poetically summed up Luther's influence on both music and theology when in 1523 he described Luther's proclamation of the Gospel as the singing of the "Wittenberg Nightingale that one can now hear everywhere" (Leaver 2007, 75).

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