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Abstract

While Martin Luther's message of the Reformation was circulated through a variety of sources, music was highly regarded by Luther and had an undeniably crucial role in spreading his ideas. Luther's theological stance determined his purpose for music. He emphasized the value of God's Word and saw music as a means to share truth from the Bible. Luther even compared the importance of music to that of theology. He claimed that music was a gift from God, capable of fighting evil and promoting good. This research traces the effects of music on the transmission of Luther's message by considering Luther's reasoning behind his high regard for music, his use of music to share his beliefs, and the lasting impact of his music philosophy. Through understanding Luther's esteem for music, its purpose becomes clear: Luther utilized the gift of music to spread the message of God's Word and the Reformation.

Keywords

Martin Luther, Luther, Music, Reformation

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Music as a Means to Spread Martin Luther's Message

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“There are, without doubt, in the human heart many seed-grains of precious virtue which are stirred up by music.”¹ Written in a letter to composer Ludwig Senfl, this quote by Martin Luther reveals his belief in music's ability to positively influence the human soul. Luther was a very influential leader during the Protestant Reformation, a time during the sixteenth century when strong voices questioned and opposed the control of the Catholic Church. Among these voices are the reformers Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Martin Luther. These men and others noticed the corruption that had been integrated into the Church and desired to remedy it. Each had varying perspectives on theological topics as he diverged from Catholic traditions. Questions surrounding the practices of indulgences and the authority of the Church versus the authority of God's Word developed as reformers searched for truth. As traditions changed, it was necessary to consider the role of music in the Church, a topic with which some reformers were very strict.² Of the reformers, Luther had the most lenient view regarding the use of music. Zwingli removed music from his church in Zürich, and Calvin was strict in his use of sacred music, contending that the texts sung should be based on scripture, like the Psalms.³ In contrast, Luther greatly valued music, recognizing it as a powerful tool to communicate his theological beliefs. Luther's inclusion of music greatly impacted the circulation of his message and was a vital asset to its success.

¹ John Derksen, “‘Music is next to Theology’: Martin Luther and Music,” *Touchstone*, Spring 2019, 50. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLAI9KZ190610000610&site=eds-live>.

² Philip M. Soergel, ed., *Renaissance Europe (1300–1600)*, Arts and Humanities through the Eras, vol. 4 (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), 193–194.

³ *Ibid.*, 196.

Luther's favor toward music was influenced both by his musical background and theological views. He began performing at a young age.⁴ As a child, he sang in choirs and learned how to play both the flute and the lute. Luther learned Gregorian plainsong while in the monastery and enjoyed singing in a group.⁵ While at the University at Erfurt as a young man, Luther was known as "The Philosopher" and "The Musician" by his peers.⁶ These nicknames reveal that, even early in life, Luther was regarded as an intellectual who valued music. Not only had Luther learned how to play instruments and sing, but he was also knowledgeable about historical musical figures who composed or wrote about music, such as Josquin des Prez⁷ and Augustine.⁸ According to Walter Buszin, Luther's appreciation of both Senfl and Josquin is evidence of his musical intelligence. In addition, Buszin argues that because Luther wrote much about music, it is apparent that his views on the subject were not fleeting but rather knowledgeable.⁹ Consider, for example, Luther's remark concerning the music of Josquin: "God has preached the gospel through music, as may be seen in Josquin des Prez, all of whose compositions flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules, and are like the song of the finch."¹⁰ John Derksen describes Luther as a "well-informed critic" because Luther interacted with musicians and composers and was capable of critiquing both compositions and performances.¹¹ Luther's positive regard for music was based on his knowledge and experience and influenced by his musical abilities.

Luther's approval of music was not simply preferential but was grounded in his theological beliefs. Luther considered music to be a "gift" that should be used to praise God.¹² Luther's appreciation of the gift of music is well summarized by his remark, "Next to the Word of God, music

⁴ Eva Mary Grew, "Martin Luther and Music," *Music and Letters* 19, no. 1 (January 1938): 70. doi:[10.1093/ml/xix.1.67](https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/xix.1.67).

⁵ Derksen, "Music is next to Theology," 49.

⁶ Grew, "Martin Luther," 70.

⁷ Paul J. Grime, "Changing the Tempo of Worship," *Christian History* 12, no. 3 (1993): 16. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=99624&site=eds-live>.

⁸ Walter E. Buszin and Martin Luther, "Luther on Music," *Musical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 1946): 89. doi:[10.1093/mq/xxxii.1.80](https://doi.org/10.1093/mq/xxxii.1.80).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰ Grime, "Changing the Tempo," 16.

¹¹ Derksen, "Music is next to Theology," 49.

¹² Buszin and Luther, "Luther on Music," 82.

deserves the highest praise."¹³ One factor that led to Luther's theology on music came from his belief in God as the Creator, determining his position that humans should practice creativity through art as a reflection of God.¹⁴ Luther also believed that there is a battle between God and the devil that influences life.¹⁵ Since he considered the devil to be active and saw music as a gift from God, Luther believed that music could be used to fight against evil. He claims, "For we know that to the devil music is something altogether hateful and unbearable.... There is no art which is the equal of music, for she alone, after theology, can do what otherwise only theology can accomplish, namely, quiet and cheer up the soul of man."¹⁶ Luther believed that the devil hated most music since it had power over evil, and this encouraged Luther to value it all the more.

Although Luther regarded music highly, he did recognize its possible negative consequences. The reformers, including Luther, perceived that music had power. Some argued that music could move people away rather than toward God and that it could "cloud and obscure the pure word of God."¹⁷ Luther retorted, "I am not of the opinion that all the arts should be stricken down by the Gospel and disappear, as certain zealots would have it; on the contrary, I would see all the arts, particularly music, at the service of him who created them and gave them to us."¹⁸ Though Luther knew that music could be used negatively,¹⁹ he also believed it had the power to heal and therefore supported it when it was used for good. There are numerous references to Luther's use of music to calm his anxiety and remind himself of God's goodness. Mark S. Sooy comments, "Music, it seems, was the emotional expression of the joy [Luther] found in his theology. It is no wonder that the two—theology and music—are so integrally related in Luther's thought."²⁰ For example, Luther wrote about a time when he was very discouraged because of his animosity towards the world, during which he would sing the song, "Ich lieg und schlafe ganz im Frieden" (I Lie and Sleep Enwrapped by Peace),

¹³ Grime, "Changing the Tempo," 16.

¹⁴ Mark S. Sooy, *Essays on Martin Luther's Theology of Music* (United States: Blue Maroon, 2006), 30–31.

¹⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 56–57.

¹⁶ Derksen, "Music is next to Theology," 50.

¹⁷ Calvin Lane, *Spirituality and Reform: Christianity in the West, ca. 1000–1800* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁰ Sooy, *Essays*, 30.

which brought him peace as he longed for Christ to bring him home.²¹ Luther recognized that music, when used for good, had the power to calm the soul by reinforcing theological truths.

While Luther valued music as a comfort in times of personal hardship, his appreciation of music certainly did not end there. Luther considered music to be a powerful tool in transmitting the theological message of the Reformation, and ultimately, the Word of God. According to Calvin Lane, the most important aspect for Luther involving his theology was the belief that humans can only come to God through faith; therefore, they cannot work for salvation but must trust in Christ's work.²² This message is spread through God's Word, so sharing the Word was very important for Luther.²³ He writes, "The Word should be read, sung, preached, written and set in poetry. Wherever it may be helpful and beneficial, I should gladly have it rung out by all bells and played on all organ pipes and proclaimed by everything that makes a sound."²⁴ Andreas Loewe describes that Luther wanted the young generation to be excited about God's Word, and he saw all forms of artistry as a means to accomplish this goal. As a result, many people were "making the Word of God known through their skills; organists and town pipers found ways of accompanying singers in praising God."²⁵ Therefore, the emphasis of music was to share the Word of God.

Luther adapted traditional sacred music with the desire of spreading God's Word, beginning with his early masses and expanding to his hymns. One of the most significant reforms Luther made to sacred music was the inclusion of the congregation in church services. In evaluating corporate worship in scripture, Luther noted that everyone sang when meeting to worship, not just a choir. He asked, "Who doubts that originally all the people sang these which now only the choir sings or responds to while the bishop is consecrating?"²⁶ Therefore, Luther's study of music in the Bible established his argument that worship should include the congregation, which differed from the tradition that was passed down in the Catholic Church. Luther changed elements of music

²¹ Buszin and Luther, "Luther on Music," 84.

²² Lane, *Spirituality and Reform*, 148.

²³ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁴ J. Andreas Loewe, "Why Do Lutherans Sing? Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation," *Church History* 82, no. 1 (March 2013): 88. doi:[10.1017/s0009640712002521](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0009640712002521).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Grime, "Changing the Tempo," 16.

in the Catholic Church that failed to support his beliefs; however, he did not change every aspect of the mass because he recognized that parts of it were “divinely instituted by Christ himself.”²⁷ For example, the messages of the Kyrie, the Gloria, the Credo, the Agnus Dei,²⁸ and the Sanctus²⁹ all supported Luther’s theological beliefs. Thus, he kept aspects of the mass that agreed with his reformed thinking but adapted the mass when needed to support his theology. Perhaps the most significant change included adding congregational singing and writing the mass in German with the exception of the Kyrie.³⁰ Luther was not completely opposed to worshiping in Latin; he simply wanted to add the vernacular to the service so that the people could understand.³¹ The Wittenberg Church is recorded to have sung Luther’s *Deutsche Messe* (German Mass) with the integration of the vernacular.³² There is a dispute over whether the congregation sang all the parts of *Deutsche Messe*. For example, Robin A. Leaver argues that sometimes the Introit was in Latin and would have been sung by the choir, while other times, the Introit was a German Psalm and would be sung by the congregation.

Hymnals created in the 1520s and 1530s included the *Deutsche Messe* in the vernacular, so the congregation could have participated when the songs were in German.³³ According to the 1533 Wittenberg Church Order, “The schoolboys shall not sing in German except when the people sing along.”³⁴ Therefore, when music was written in the vernacular, the congregation would participate. Since music was a way to spread God’s Word, people would be able “to learn and experience fundamental theology as they sang.”³⁵ Luther wanted the people to share God’s Word and truth with each other by participating in worship. Since many people were illiterate during this time, singing hymns was a means to circulate the message in a manner that did not involve reading.³⁶ Thus, adding the

²⁷ Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, Luther’s Works, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 20.

²⁸ Grime, “Changing the Tempo,” 17.

²⁹ Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, 28.

³⁰ Leslie P. Spelman, “Luther and the Arts,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10, no. 2 (December 1951): 167. doi:[10.2307/426851](https://doi.org/10.2307/426851).

³¹ Grime, “Changing the Tempo,” 17.

³² Robin A. Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 194–195.

³³ *Ibid.*, 195.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁶ Sooy, *Essays*, 6.

vernacular allowed for a greater audience to understand Luther's message. Luther prioritized singing in the vernacular because he claimed, "God can speak directly to the Germans only in the German language."³⁷ If the people could sing in their own language, then the truths could more readily be transmitted. Luther writes:

Everybody knows that not only the prophets and kings of Israel (who praised God with vocal and instrumental music, with songs and stringed instruments), but also the early Christians, who sang especially psalms, used music already in the early stages of the Church's history. Indeed, St. Paul encouraged the use of music 1 Cor. 14, and in his Epistle to the Colossians he insists that Christians appear before God with psalms and spiritual songs which emanate from the heart, in order that through these the Word of God and Christian doctrine may be preached, taught, and put into practice.³⁸

Luther not only modified the Catholic mass to include the vernacular, but he also wrote German hymns that became a major source for circulating the message of the Reformation. Luther recognized that hymns were beneficial in expanding the Reformation's impact because they "were able to reach people swiftly, regardless of their ability to read, their social standing or their actual location, and effortlessly crossed national, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries."³⁹ Since all members of the Lutheran Church could participate by singing hymns regardless of their background, hymns unified the people and hastened the spread of Lutheran thought, forming a "Lutheran identity."⁴⁰ Luther's most famous and impactful hymn was "Ein feste Burg," more commonly known as "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." "Ein feste Burg" was written during the 1520s and could be considered a "Psalm hymn" since it comes from Psalm 46.⁴¹ In addition to its reference to the Psalms, the hymn uses ideas from John 16–18. It is unique from other Psalm hymns because it does not directly quote from Psalm 46 but rather alludes to its themes.⁴²

³⁷ Grew, "Martin Luther," 76.

³⁸ Buszin and Luther, "Luther on Music," 87–88.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴¹ J. Andreas Loewe and Katherine R. Firth, "Martin Luther's 'Mighty Fortress,'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 126. doi:[10.1353/lut.2018.0029](https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2018.0029).

⁴² *Ibid.*

Differing arguments exist for the purpose and the history behind “Ein feste Burg.” According to Andreas Loewe and Katherine Firth, the hymn was written both to strengthen members of the Lutheran Church and to fight Luther’s enemies spiritually.⁴³ Sooy claims that the hymn was used as an exhortation and as an encouragement to its audience.⁴⁴ Mark Galli proposes that Luther wrote the hymn during a trying period in his life.⁴⁵ Regardless of its exact intent, “Ein feste Burg” was very popular, becoming Luther’s most well-known hymn and “an anthem of Lutheranism.”⁴⁶

Not only did hymns help transmit Luther’s theology within the Lutheran Church, but they were also a means to share his message with the outside world. Specifically, some places had prohibited access to Luther’s writings, but they were unable to hinder the spread of hymns sung by travelers. For example, both “Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir” (From the Depth of Woe I Cry to You) and “Es woll uns Gott genädig sein” (May God Have Mercy on Us All) were hymns used by travelers to circulate Lutheran ideas.⁴⁷ The singing of hymns provided many more people access to Luther’s message. Loewe quotes Gustav Hertel: “Husband and wife, young women and men, so many people learnt [Luther’s hymns] that his German hymns and psalms became so well known that they were sung by the people daily in all churches before the sermons commenced, publicly, over and over again.”⁴⁸ Hymns became a part of the Lutheran tradition as many people sang them wherever they went. Consequently, Luther’s hymns greatly impacted the spread of his message.

Luther was intentional with the music of the Lutheran Church, drawing from a great variety of sources. For example, Luther rewrote text of existing songs from Gregorian chant, used folk music⁴⁹ and plainsong,⁵⁰ and rewrote Latin hymns in the German language. He also wrote some of his own compositions in order to inspire other, more skilled

⁴³ Loewe and Firth, “Mighty Fortress,” 125.

⁴⁴ Sooy, *Essays*, 12.

⁴⁵ Mark Galli, “The ‘Weak’ Man behind ‘A Mighty Fortress,’” *Christian History* 12, no. 3 (1993): 19. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=99625&site=eds-live>.

⁴⁶ Loewe and Firth, “Mighty Fortress,” 129.

⁴⁷ Loewe, “Why do Lutherans Sing?” 75.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Derksen, “Music is next to Theology,” 54.

⁵⁰ Grew, “Martin Luther,” 72.

composers to follow his example.⁵¹ Luther had help from composers Conrad Rupff and Johann Walther as he wrote music for the Lutheran church,⁵² and Hans Sachs wrote church music that supported Luther's ideas.⁵³ One of the first examples of a song that endorsed Luther's theology was "Morgan weiß," composed by Sachs.⁵⁴ Sachs's lyrics for "Morgan weiß" came from *Das Walt got*, a poem he had written previously, which outlines Luther's teachings about mankind, Christ, and God. The poem portrays the pope as a lion and Luther as a nightingale, who continues singing despite the wild animals' efforts to silence him.⁵⁵

Music successfully transmitted Luther's message in part because of the diverse settings at which it was sung. Specifically, Luther's chorales were sung at church, at home, and at school so that Lutheran thought pervaded all of life.⁵⁶ Since Lutheran music and theology took place in the home,⁵⁷ people were not only reminded of truth when they attended church, but their beliefs were also reinforced in daily life. Luther also stressed the importance of music in schools, as his desire was to educate young people.⁵⁸ Luther longed to help them "rid themselves of amorous and carnal songs, and in their stead learn something wholesome, and so apply themselves to what is good with pleasure."⁵⁹ This model of education included music so that even children could sing.⁶⁰ Derksen describes the impact of incorporating music in schools in the following way: "The teaching of composition in Lutheran schools became increasingly allied with the expressive arts of grammar and rhetoric, suggesting that music had become closely allied with preaching, and was intended now not only to delight, but also to teach and to move."⁶¹ Music became associated with the sharing of truth, and Luther's message could be shared through music as it extended to multiple settings.

⁵¹ Spelman, "Luther and the Arts," 168–169.

⁵² Grew, "Martin Luther," 72–73.

⁵³ Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 44–46.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 48–51.

⁵⁶ Derksen, "Music is next to Theology," 54.

⁵⁷ Loewe, "Why Do Lutherans Sing?" 83.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 78–80.

⁵⁹ Spelman, "Luther and the Arts," 169.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Derksen, "Music is next to Theology," 51.

The impact of Luther's music affected many beyond his surrounding influence. As stated by Eva Mary Grew, "Within his lifetime [Luther's] hymns became a national possession, so that his enemies said he had destroyed more souls by them than by all his speeches and other writings."⁶² Even Luther's enemies recognized the power of Luther's music in spreading the message of the Reformation. Several of Luther's followers also utilized music to spread the Word, and Luther inspired a myriad of others "to use their craft in the service of God."⁶³ While Luther wrote thirty-six hymns,⁶⁴ many others followed in his steps to produce music in the Lutheran tradition. Lutheran chorales influenced musical structure and "nonverbal theological connections and allusions" used by composers after him.⁶⁵ Luther's idea of bonding music with theology was passed down and continued to help spread the message of the Reformation. Philip Soergel expands this idea.

It is difficult to overestimate the popularity of hymns in the Lutheran Church. Throughout the sixteenth century Lutheran pastors, musicians, and composers combed through the medieval tradition in search of tunes in sacred and secular music that were appropriate for the new chorales. They adopted texts and music from traditional plainsong, composed new texts that they set to the music of popular secular songs, and wrote many hymns from scratch.⁶⁶

Many people followed Luther's example of writing music with theological intentionality, and hymns remained a major part of the Lutheran tradition even after Luther's death.

One of the most significant effects of Luther's musical ideas was not realized until a few hundred years later through his influence on Johann Sebastian Bach. Many authors have noted the connection between Luther's music and the works of Bach. According to Soergel, "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Lutheran tradition's major musical figures, from Heinrich Schütz to Johann Sebastian Bach, elaborated and embellished the Reformation chorale tradition, elevating

⁶² Grew, "Martin Luther," 72.

⁶³ Loewe, "Why Do Lutherans Sing?" 72.

⁶⁴ Grew, "Martin Luther," 72.

⁶⁵ Derksen, "Music is next to Theology," 55.

⁶⁶ Soergel, *Renaissance Europe*, 195.

it to the level of high art.”⁶⁷ Luther established a tradition that impacted many composers, like Heinrich Schütz and Michael Praetorius,⁶⁸ leading up to Bach. The influence of Luther on Bach can be seen in Bach’s cantatas as they were used “as elevated preaching.”⁶⁹ Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* also bears Luther’s influence. Many Lutheran composers including Bach favored Christ’s Passion as a theme for their work, reflecting Luther’s gospel-centered theology and music.⁷⁰ Grew takes Luther’s influence one step further: “By this work [congregational song] he created a national art of music, in the religious sphere, and by this he changed the face of art music in Europe. But for him there would have been no seventeenth century of German competition, and so no Johann Sebastian Bach.”⁷¹ Grew continues by proposing that Bach influenced many other composers, and without Luther’s influence on Bach, Bach might not have influenced others.⁷² Luther’s ideas about music clearly transcended his immediate influence, expanding to Bach, and through Bach, to many others.

Martin Luther highly valued music, and his influence through music was profound. His purpose in all musical endeavors was to spread the message of the Reformation, which he based on his understanding of God’s Word. While elements like preaching and writings helped spread his message, Luther’s music greatly enhanced the circulation of his reformed ideas through enabling illiterate church members to bring truth into their homes and lives. Luther’s songs also allowed his message to enter places that rejected his writings, so that his ideas were spread to a wider audience. Luther’s theology of music influenced his use of music, which affected the dispersion of Luther’s beliefs. Music, therefore, led to increased transmission of Luther’s theological message.

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⁶⁷ Soergel, *Renaissance Europe*, 195.

⁶⁸ Derksen, “Music is next to Theology,” 55.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁰ Lane, *Spirituality and Reform*, 153.

⁷¹ Grew, “Martin Luther,” 71.

⁷² *Ibid.*

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