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Abstract

Martin Luther is regarded as a seminal figure in 16th-century Europe, having a profound impact on the development of the Protestant Church as it separated from the Roman Catholic Church. Though Luther is most commonly known for his theological influences during the time, his upbringing and musical education strongly influenced his theological beliefs. Not only did this result in a development of a new Christian denomination, but Luther permanently changed the way music was written and performed in the church. How is it, though, that we can credit this musical change to Luther? Through an examination of Luther's musical understanding and preferences as well as his theological beliefs regarding music, one is able to connect the role that Luther believed music should play in the church and the changes that followed in late 16th and early 17th-century European churches. By analyzing his theological impact along with the stylistic components of music that followed, Luther is found to have shifted the use of music in the church from a ritualistic practice towards being a meaningful method of worship.

Keywords

Martin Luther, Luther, Reformation, Lutheran, Church music, hymn, chorale, Reformers, Wittenberg, 16th Century

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Europe during the sixteenth century can be characterized by extensive cultural progress. After the height of the Renaissance, there was a growth in economics as well as intellectual and creative life, which impacted the world's understanding of science, logic, and art. Music in particular became much grander and began to progress away from the musical guidelines that defined the medieval period. During this time, there was also much religious reform. On October 31, 1517, a German theologian named Martin Luther publicly shared his Ninety-Five Theses, all of which condemned the Roman Catholic Church for their lack of theological consistency.¹ Legend claims that Luther's Theses were defiantly nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church; whether or not it happened this way, Luther started a critical religious movement that would eventually impact all of Christianity and change church music permanently. Martin Luther's passion for theology and advocacy for congregational singing led to permanent changes in how worship was carried out in the Lutheran Church.

The Reformation was a result of Luther's long-term frustration with the Catholic Church regarding their theological interpretations and practices. The Roman Catholic Church is the oldest religious institution in the Western world. Through the sixteenth century, it held its position in Germany and other European countries as the primary religious establishment. Though Luther agreed with the Catholic Church on some theological principles, there were practices that he believed were biblically unsound. The Catholic Church used "indulgences," or donations to the church that could reduce one's time spent in purgatory.

¹ Leaver, "The Whole Church Sings," 33.

Luther believed the Gospel of Jesus Christ to bring salvation by grace through faith alone; he sought to abolish the idea that human works could earn God's favor. Additionally, the pope during this time, Leo X, authorized the use of the revenue from these indulgences to construct St. Peter's Basilica in 1506. Luther strongly disapproved of not only these morals, but also their approach to worship. It was generally focused on piety, being "right" with God, and the good works of Mary and the saints. Luther condemned the worship of anyone other than Jesus himself and believed worship should be approached out of devotion and humility to God, corresponding to his view of the Gospel.

Luther had a strong musical background from childhood. As a boy he loved to sing, was a *Kurende* choirboy, and played the lute. He began writing music as he grew older, and as an adult regarded it as crucial to the education of both children and adults.² He admired Josquin des Prez and other renowned musicians and also understood the functions of polyphony.³ Not only did Luther have a deep love and affinity for music, but he believed it played a critical role in worship. To Luther, music had the power to provide peace and lift one's spirits.⁴ He firmly understood music to be part of God's original creation and that it had been intended for human enjoyment since the beginning of time. Luther claimed that music is closely tied to theology and contains similar power to the Bible as a way to grow in a relationship with God.⁵ John Witte and Amy Wheeler note that music was given to people by God "for their pleasure and delight, to enrich human life. This is Luther's commonest affirmation about music, and it is securely rooted in his doctrine of creation and in his belief in the Creator as giver."⁶ For Luther, the use of music finds its supreme expression in the gospel itself, the gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ. Music, Luther believed, was so powerful that it could even protect one's heart from evil.⁷ This differed from the view of music portrayed through Catholicism. The words included in the Catholic mass and their music centered on "heroic sanctity, miracles, piety, and virtuous conduct,"⁸ while Luther believed worship should center around humility, undeserved grace, and pure awe of God.

² Westermeyer, 143.

³ Westermeyer, 143.

⁴ Willis, 46.

⁵ Westermeyer, 144.

⁶ Witte and Wheeler, 76.

⁷ Loewe, "Why do Lutherans Sing," 71.

⁸ Brown, 24.

Luther asserted that in addition to impacting individuals, music possessed the power to draw an entire congregation closer to each other and to God. He saw music in three general forms: *musica mundana*, the natural sounds of the world, *musica humana*, the sounds of humans and animals, and *musica caelestis*, the music of heaven itself.⁹ Luther was expanding upon the idea of *musica caelestis* when he advocated wholeheartedly for music to be used, without the traditional limits, in the church.¹⁰ Luther believed that heavenly music “offered humankind a glimpse of heaven in the world around them in the same way in which the scholastic anagogical sense of Scripture revealed something essential about heaven.”¹¹ In this way, *musica caelestis* was accessible to all, and was a necessary component to worship. His advocacy was for the entire congregation to sing together; he argued that every instrument, voice, and sound of praise should be raised to God joyfully.¹² Not only was music itself powerful, but when paired with a scriptural or scripturally inspired text, Luther believed it to have extraordinary power to cause the human heart to respond to the words being sung.¹³

In publishing his Ninety-Five Theses, Luther addressed all the theological issues he saw in the Catholic Church. The very first thesis reads, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”¹⁴ This statement in turn “catapulted the Reformation of the church beyond the point of no return, but also with his first thesis he indirectly yet profoundly redefined (or, perhaps better, *reclaimed*) the role of music in the church.”¹⁵ Rather than worship being a ritualistic act, Luther argued it must come from a posture of humility, repentance, and the understanding that sinners cannot be saved aside from the grace of God. This led him to write new texts for pre-existing melodies and compose new hymns which corresponded with this reformed ideology. The introduction of this grace-based theology led to the birth of the Protestant church. The denomination that adopted Luther’s music and closely followed his theology has come to be known as the Lutheran Church, though Luther himself never chose the term. He

⁹ Loewe, “Musica est optimum,” 583.

¹⁰ Grew, 67.

¹¹ Loewe, “Musica est optimum,” 588.

¹² Witte and Wheeler, 77.

¹³ Witte and Wheeler, 73.

¹⁴ Luther, 23.

¹⁵ Van Neste and Garrett, 137.

advocated for this denomination to be called the “Evangelical church,” preferring his name to be unaffiliated; nevertheless, over time, the term “Evangelical Lutheran Church” became standardized. This denomination differed from the Catholic Church in both theology and church practice. Furthermore, this movement separated Luther from his contemporary, Jean Calvin, who led the Reformation in France beginning around 1536, a few decades after Luther did in Germany.

Though Luther and Calvin agreed on the theological basis of the Reformation, they differed greatly in their beliefs regarding the methods and content of congregational worship. Both men contributed greatly to church music in creating new melodies. Luther expanded upon counterpoint and polyphony, but Calvin denied any beneficial qualities of these methods. Calvin considered anything other than monophony to be unholy or improper.¹⁶ He believed that polyphony was a distraction in worship; the contrasting melodic lines blurred the lyrics, which made it, in his opinion, a less worthy method of praise. On the other hand, Luther argued that counterpoint was remarkable; he was fascinated by the intertwining of voices, singing independent lines simultaneously.¹⁷ For Calvin, music had to be directly tied to biblical texts,¹⁸ while Luther wrote many of his own original chorales simply inspired by the Scriptures. This also differed from the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In “Catholic and Calvinist thought alike, religious song was primarily a human activity intended to satisfy a debt of worship, whether due to the saints or to God himself. . . . For Lutherans, the hymns were a form of God’s Word, through which God himself was active to strengthen and comfort his people in faith.”¹⁹ While all of these groups saw worship as a way of communicating with God, the Calvinists saw any music that was not directly scriptural as being sensuous and unfit for worship.²⁰ Luther, however, saw the power of all music to be genuine and applicable to church worship in every way. Furthermore, he believed that denying oneself of the enjoyment of music is to blatantly reject a gift that God has given to mankind.²¹

¹⁶ Westermeyer, 159.

¹⁷ Witte and Wheeler, 76.

¹⁸ Witte and Wheeler, 80.

¹⁹ Brown, 24.

²⁰ Tarry, 356.

²¹ Tarry, 357.

The Lutheran Church also held different theological beliefs than the Catholic Church. Luther's primary concern about Catholicism was their belief in "indulgences." Luther realized that this "preaching was not leading to a reformation of lives and communities but was rather allowing for license and depravity to proceed unchecked."²² Lutherans firmly believed that the central message of the Bible should be the center of their theology: "Human beings can't get right with God by anything they do, by any human merit or meritorious acts at all; God justifies us by grace alone through faith."²³ This was a blatant stance against the Roman Catholic Church, which preached that good works and indulgences could improve one's eternity. Along with their view of God's goodness and saving grace, Lutherans believed creation to be an important gift and considered worship a way to engage with it.²⁴ The foundation of Luther's beliefs was that music is the most natural form of worship because it can carry words and be used as a form of praise.²⁵ Not only was worship through music a way to connect with God, but it helped to foster congregational strength and unity.²⁶ This was accomplished both by providing a way to endure hard times and increasing boldness to share the Gospel with others. As a result, Lutheran Churches favored music of all kinds due to its power in both drawing the congregation together in fellowship and pointing them to Christ.

The beliefs that Lutherans held regarding musical worship closely affected the routines they quickly adopted in their Sunday services. Martin Luther himself did not oversee or manage every Evangelical church; he believed that the new church should not be limited by strict rules. As a result, he left Lutheran Churches free to borrow from other liturgies, maintain the habits of the Latin mass, or create their own new liturgy as they felt led.²⁷ In a Lutheran service, the "congregational chorales or hymns were mostly sung without instrumental accompaniment, by the congregation in unison, or occasionally by the choir with simple polyphonic harmonization."²⁸ Even from the beginning of the Reformation between 1517 and 1524, the use of wind instruments with chorale motets or along with choral music was

²² Van Neste and Garrett, 57.

²³ Westermeyer, 141.

²⁴ Witte and Wheeler, 77.

²⁵ Westermeyer, 145.

²⁶ Van Neste and Garrett, 143.

²⁷ Dowley, 87.

²⁸ Dowley, 89.

encouraged in the Lutheran Church.²⁹ This was vastly more inclusive and musically open-minded than the Calvinist church was at the time. In fact, even as Catholics and Protestants disagreed on the appropriate use of music in church, not all Protestants agreed on guidelines surrounding music even within their own churches.³⁰ In many ways, the visible disagreement over church music in the sixteenth century is closely related to the “worship wars” that are still present in churches today; though Lutheran Churches all supported the use of music as worship, “heated and polarized disputes emerged concerning the relation of music to the cosmos, music to words, music to the passions, instrumental to vocal music, the judgment of theory to the judgment of the ear.”³¹ Martin Luther simply led the Lutheran Reformation, but did not place restrictions or requirements on the Lutheran Church. As a result, there were various beliefs on the extent to which different types of music should be used during church services.

As a whole, however, the Lutheran Church demonstrated overwhelming support for congregational worship. In fact, the “Reformers’ chief contribution to church music comes from the legacy of songs that they initiated, created, and propagated....The songs of the Reformation continue to call us as believers to an entire life of repentance. Through them, we hear the Word proclaimed and we join in the life of the church that is reformed and always reforming.”³² Prior to the Reformation, church music was sometimes limited to trained musicians and scripted music, strictly clinging to the liturgy. In the Lutheran Church, Luther advocated for the inclusion of “all believers in corporate worship.”³³ Luther and his colleagues composed new songs, combining them with the familiar and traditional music of the past. These were designed to advocate the new theological thinking, centered on God’s Word and the Christian posture of humility before Him in worship. They were also designed, however, to be accessible to all members of the congregation, whether they were trained musicians or not.³⁴ The lyrics of Luther’s songs were also woven into sermons, being preached and reflected on as well as simply being sung. This new mindset laid the foundation for

²⁹ Dowley, 90.

³⁰ Willis, 45.

³¹ Witte and Wheeler, 80.

³² Van Neste and Garrett, 144.

³³ Dowley, 87–88.

³⁴ Leaver, 81.

church music for years to come, setting apart a style of Protestant worship that is distinctly different from the Catholic practice.

Throughout Luther's lifetime, music itself changed substantially. The sixteenth century brought about changes to compositional approaches and performance practices. The Reformation occurred during the Renaissance period; during this time, composers explored the relationship between language and music and the emotional effects thereof. Music became more expressive and dramatic, eventually leading to the rise of opera and the dramatic arts. Luther grew up and developed his compositional style with the influence of the Renaissance, leading to his desire for larger, more expressive, and more polyphonic writing. Three music theorists from Wittenberg also influenced music during Luther's lifetime; Georg Rhau, Martin Agricola, and Nicolaus Listenius worked to compose new music and introduce a universal approach to music theory and education.³⁵ Agricola published *Ein kurtz deutsche Musica*, or *A Brief German Music*, which was the first textbook that was designed for teaching music in schools.³⁶ Luther shared this passion for music education and advocated for its standardization himself. Luther also was deeply inspired by the music of Josquin des Prez and his ability to achieve unprecedented levels of musical expression. Though this was not demonstrated in Luther's monophonic hymns, his chorales and motets that gained popularity in the 1520's reflected his inspiration he gained from Josquin.

Luther himself played a prominent role in developing the Lutheran style of music that is still recognizable today. Much of the music he wrote was not entirely new, but was inspired by pre-existing traditions. He wrote thirty six hymns; "five are original, seven are metrical versions of psalms, eight are metrical expansions of passages of Scripture, ten are adaptations of Latin hymns, and the rest are modifications and improvements of already existing German hymns."³⁷ Due to his differing theological standpoint, Luther rejected the hymns that centered on the Virgin Mary, the saints, or the rituals of the mass.³⁸ Though Luther was a conservative Reformer and sought to keep as much traditional music as possible, he also wanted to maintain his theology and found few lyrics

³⁵ Schilling, 4.

³⁶ Schilling, 4.

³⁷ Grew, 72.

³⁸ Leaver, 69.

that were salvageable from the Catholic mass.³⁹ However, Luther gleaned inspiration from other sources as well, such as Gregorian chant, sacred folk songs, and the Bible itself. In order to maintain familiarity for the congregation, he drew from old tradition and melodies while adding new harmonies and lyrics. Specifically, Luther wrote in a way different than that of Jean Calvin and other Protestants; he mixed unison, polyphony, choral, instrumental, and congregational singing, even within individual hymns.⁴⁰ To create ease in learning this new music, Luther adopted a mindset of complete practicality. He took over many familiar melodies, and simply changed their texts, resulting in hymns such as *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott* and *Mitten wir im Leben sind*.⁴¹ He wrote metrical Psalms, setting Scripture itself into song form. Additionally, he followed the example set by Minnesingers and Meistersingers and wrote many of his hymns in bar form, where each stanza followed the form of AAB.⁴² Luther understood that bar form allowed for easier memorization, so this was his preferred form of composition, to aid the general congregation in its transition to a different musical tradition.⁴³ He also wrote multiple sets of lyrics to the same melodies, to maintain melodic familiarity while introducing new texts; this also provided some simplicity as more music was introduced.

Though Luther's focus was more theological than musical, it is important to acknowledge his musical understanding and consideration in adapting the liturgy. Andreas Loewe insists that "Martin Luther's appreciation for music as a practical instrument to promote the message of the Reformation by the creation of vernacular hymnody and specifically Lutheran liturgical music has dominated studies of Luther and his music. His systematic understanding of music, on the other hand, has been consistently neglected."⁴⁴ He had a strong sense of aural recognition and was able to detect and correct errors in part-writing. He also composed with consistency and accuracy, even in larger choral settings. Luther also proofread copies of manuscripts and was able to correct them, demonstrating extensive knowledge of music theory and composition.⁴⁵ It is because of the importance with which Luther regarded music that he

³⁹ Dowley, 86.

⁴⁰ Westermeyer, 149.

⁴¹ Leaver, 70.

⁴² Westermeyer, 148.

⁴³ Leaver, 79.

⁴⁴ Loewe, "Musica est optimum," 598.

⁴⁵ Grew, 70.

desired church music to be of a high quality and musically pleasing, even to the trained musician.

Although Luther did not entirely overhaul church music or the liturgy in starting the Lutheran Church, his ideology helped redirect the course and purpose of worship in the Protestant church. As previously mentioned, a large portion of works attributed to Luther are based on Latin liturgical and other familiar melodies. Even chorale singing “was not new; some fifty years before Luther, Jan Hus and his Bohemian Brethren (Moravians, or Hussites) had practiced the congregational singing of hymns adapted from Gregorian melodies or popular airs.”⁴⁶ While Luther was writing music for the new liturgy, other poets such as Johann Böschenstein and Heinrich von Zutphen were also composing vernacular hymns. Both Böschenstein and von Zutphen studied with Luther in Wittenberg. Though scholars cannot be certain of whether or not Luther knew these men were also writing hymns, the styles seem to reflect one another and imply that he was inspired by their writings.⁴⁷ It is for reasons such as these that Luther’s “greatness lies in his establishment of the new Lutheran liturgy and in the importance he placed on music” rather than his compositions themselves.⁴⁸ Additionally, his accomplishment lies in the distinctiveness that Lutheran music gained, which separated it from the Catholic Church and other Protestant churches.

At the time, the Reformers considered their movement to be a failure. Luther’s main arguments in the Reformation were against the indulgences and theology of the Catholic Church. He was able to present many arguments for biblical theology and successfully founded the church that believed in salvation through grace and faith alone. However, at the time, the Catholic Church was tied closely to the government. As a result, marriages were only legal if they were carried out through the Catholic Church. Luther and his counterparts sought to change marriage laws, disagreeing with the connection between the Church and the state. This separation of the Lutheran Church from the Catholic Church also resulted in a separation from the Lutheran Church and the law; because of this, marriages were illegitimate, and children produced by Lutheran marriages were considered to have been born out of wedlock. Ultimately, the Reformation did not achieve all the Reformers hoped that it would,

⁴⁶ Dowley, 88.

⁴⁷ Leaver, 72–73.

⁴⁸ Dowley, 90.

especially in regard to legal separation of the Catholic Church and state.⁴⁹

From a musical perspective, however, Luther's impact on the church was incredibly successful. Eva Mary Grew writes, "Luther himself wrote thirty-six hymns."⁵⁰ Not only was the impact of these chorales notable in the sixteenth century Protestant church, but it can still be observed today. The chorales that Luther established within the church altered congregational singing and ultimately inspired both the choral and instrumental works of composers for generations to come.⁵¹ These chorales were arguably the most influential component of the entire Reformation, remaining in importance even today.⁵² For example, Johann Sebastian Bach's music has been analyzed and determined that it is rooted in the musical philosophy founded by Luther. Witte and Wheeler assert that a significant portion of his music "bears witness to an imagination of music's relation to language, set within a generous vision of the created world under God, that resonates strongly with what we have discerned, albeit in a fragmentary way, in Luther."⁵³ Luther is also remembered for his ability to rework what was traditional and loved in church music without replacing it with the new entirely. His intention was never to fully recreate music as they knew it in the sixteenth century, but he advocated for its new purposes and, in doing so, drew attention to the possibilities that it held.⁵⁴ It is clearly too broad to assume that all music today stems from the Lutheran chorales, but Grew argues that most of the music that is popular today was born from sources which Lutheran chorales explored and deemed worthy of inspiration.⁵⁵ Not only did the Lutheran Reformation bring forth new compositional techniques in church music, but set Protestant worship apart from that of the Catholic Church by defining the biblical purpose of worship. Martin Luther's music may not have been entirely new or revolutionary, but his advocacy for the role of music as worship permanently affected how music was carried out in the church.

⁴⁹ Witte, 293.

⁵⁰ Grew, 72.

⁵¹ Van Neste and Garrett, 145.

⁵² Dowley, 88.

⁵³ Witte and Wheeler, 81.

⁵⁴ Leaver, 80.

⁵⁵ Grew, 71.

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