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Music Next to Theology: The Impact and Influence of Martin Luther's Reformation on Johann Sebastian Bach

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Music Next to Theology:

The Impact and
Influence of Martin
Luther's Reformation on
Johann Sebastian Bach



Johann Sebastian Bach

- One of the greatest composers of all time
- Composed music both sacred and secular in function
- Quantity of his sacred music raises the question of what Bach thought of God



The Question

- Was Bach just a musician employed by the church who wrote good sacred music?
- Or, was he a theologian of sorts as well?



The Answer

- Bach was more than just a musician
- Strongly knowledgeable in theology
- Heavily influenced by the Protestant Reformation, and more specifically, Martin Luther



Martin Luther

- Father of the Protestant Reformation
- Owned broad views on the use of music in the liturgy of the worship service.
- Famously once said of music: “Music is next to theology.”



Gospel Communication

- Music was an art form through which to communicate the truth of Scripture.
- An alternative route through which fundamental theology could be taught and expounded.
- It was the “living voice of the Gospel.”



Gospel Response

- Luther considered music to be the only natural human response to the Gospel.
- “And we see how David and all the saints put their pious thoughts into verse, rhyme, and song.”



The Lutheran Church

- Music and theology were not mutually exclusive of each other, but rather, complementary
- Bach's employment by the Lutheran church suggests that he had a strong understanding of Lutheran theology.



Evidence in Bach's Life

- Ancestor's religious heritage was saturated in Protestantism
- Gerhard Herz: "Johann Sebastian Bach's profession and religion were traditional in his family long before he was born. Bach's religion was so deeply embedded in the old Lutheran faith that no new trends...could become a serious problem for him."



Evidence in Bach's Life

- Even in his adult years, Bach held true to Lutheran orthodoxy against the rising cultural changes
- “None of the attempts to see Bach’s religion in another light than the orthodox Lutheran can be supported theologically. ...Bach biographers have shown convincingly that Bach does not transgress the realm of the confessional church.”



Bach as Cantor

- Signed the Formula of Concord twice
- Not only required to be competent in Lutheran theology, but also required to be able to teach it.
- Responsible to provide music befitting certain liturgical and homiletic contexts, each containing specific theological meaning



Bach's Music

- The *Magnificat*
 - Michael Linton: “substantial evidence that major passages of the work are structured in accordance with Luther’s exegesis of the Canticle. Here, Bach read the Scripture, consulted Luther, and structured his music.”
- *St. John Passion*
 - Bach creates a tonal motion that follows the trajectory of Christ
 - The work descends in flats to the crucifixion, symbolizing Christ being humiliated and taking on sin
 - The work ascends in sharps for the remainder of the work, symbolizing the future resurrection and the cross as the act of salvation.



Conclusion

- Just as Luther was a theologian with a good understanding of music, so Bach was a musician with a good understanding of theology.
- Incorporated into his music Luther's belief that music was both a communication of the Gospel and a response to the Gospel.