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A Musical Reformation: Martin Luther's Influence on Sacred Music

On October 31, 1517, a small-town monk boldly nailed his 95 Theses to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, unleashing a rift in the Catholic Church that would forever change the course of history. Martin Luther stands at the focal point of the Protestant Reformation, and while history glorifies him as a groundbreaking theologian, little attention is given to his liturgical reformation. Studies that do observe Luther's hymns generally focus on Luther's appreciation for music as a tool to promote the message of the Reformation in the vernacular, thereby neglecting Luther's systematic understanding of music and its impact on future compositions.¹ Luther was not merely a theologian who dabbled in the arts. Music historian Paul Henry Lang describes Martin Luther as anything but a musical amateur. "Nothing is more unjust than to consider him a sort of enthusiastic and good-natured dilettante."² Just as he is acclaimed for his theology, this feisty German should be recognized as an excellent composer and philosopher of music who "lived with music ringing in his ears."³ Martin Luther's musical proficiency and theological expertise combined to create music that significantly influenced the development of sacred music, impacting future composers, including the work of J. S. Bach.

Luther's philosophy of music was first inspired by his upbringing. In a preface to a book written by fellow reformer Urban Regius, Luther recalled that his mother loved singing to him as a child. This along with his father's advice to replace drunkenness with singing and rejoicing indicate that Luther's parents intended for their son to be a musician.⁴ Luther's first experience

¹ J. Andreas Loewe, "'Musica est optimum': Martin Luther's Theory of Music," *Music and Letters* 94, no. 4 (2013): 574.

² Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1941), 207.

³ Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, 207.

⁴ Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 21.

with liturgical music originated in Mansfield, Germany at the church and school of St. George. On March 12, 1491, at the age of seven, Luther entered the Latin Trivialschule, named for its three-fold trivium curriculum: grammar, logic, and rhetoric.⁵ The foremost goal of the education was promoting the use and understanding of the Latin language as found in the Mass and Daily Office. Not only did the Mansfield pupils memorize Latin liturgical texts such as the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Ave Maria, but they were also taught notation and sight-singing.⁶ At the age of fourteen, Luther went to Eisenach, where he would spend the most formative years of his education. Like other German schools, Eisenach allowed poor Luther to sing as a *Kurrende-Knabe* (a schoolboy who sang in the streets for money and food).⁷ Luther wrote in one of his letters, "Do not despise the little boys who go singing through the streets, begging a little bread for the love of God; I also have done the same."⁸ A charitable woman named Dame Ursula Cotta, noticed Luther's bright, pure soprano voice over the other pupils and invited him into her house.⁹ After conversing with him and taking pity in his difficult situation, she became his adoptive mother while at school.¹⁰ Cotta gave the boy his first instrument, a flute, which he quickly learned and availed himself of all the music he could. Luther reported singing motets and part-songs with an inner circle of students associated with one of the priests, Johannes Braun.¹¹

In 1501, at the age of eighteen, Luther went on to the University of Erfurt where his music accomplishments would progress even further. While there, his fellow students donned him with

⁵ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 22.

⁶ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 22.

⁷ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 6.

⁸ Eva Mary Grew, "Martin Luther and Music," *Music & Letters* 19, no. 1 (1938): 70.

⁹ Grew, "Martin Luther and Music," 70.

¹⁰ Grew, "Martin Luther and Music," 70.

¹¹ Rebecca Oetinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001) 42.

the following nicknames: “The Philosopher” and “The Musician.”¹² German physician Matthäus Ratzeberger recorded that when Luther left to enter the monastery, his friends lauded his musical accomplishments and affirmed that he was “ein guter Musicus,” a good musician.¹³ As a monk, Luther was immersed in the singing of Gregorian chant, the Psalter, and parts of the Mass.¹⁴ Then in 1508, Luther was sent to the Augustinian priory in Wittenberg to pursue his doctor's degree. His degree was conferred in October 1512, and a year later Luther began teaching at Wittenberg University.¹⁵ While the professor lectured on theology, he was also being influenced by Wittenberg's new humanist musical ideas. At the start of the sixteenth century, the teaching of music at Wittenberg was "moving away from the late medieval tradition of focusing primarily on music as a theoretical science, a subdivision of mathematics, towards an understanding of music as a practical art in which theory is expressed in practice."¹⁶ *Musica practica* was emphasized rather than *musica theoretica*.¹⁷ This shift in value gave a central place to performed music which in turn affected Luther's philosophy of music in the church. Despite Luther's musical education, there are critics who assert that Luther was merely a music amateur who supplied his adherents with liturgy that conformed to his teachings.¹⁸ However, a look at Luther's statements concerning the art of music proves otherwise and gives insight as to his musical knowledge, understanding, and ability.

Of all the Protestant reformers of his time, Martin Luther stood alone in his commendation of church music. In contrast to John Calvin who barely gave music a place, and Ulrich Zwingli,

¹² Grew, “Martin Luther and Music,” 70.

¹³ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 30.

¹⁴ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 31.

¹⁵ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 32.

¹⁶ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 35.

¹⁷ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 35.

¹⁸ Walter E. Buszin, “Luther on Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1946): 80.

who banished it altogether from corporate worship, Luther gave music – aside from theology – the highest precedence. “Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise.”¹⁹ Far from pietist thinking, Luther accepted music wholeheartedly in every form and exhibition. In her article “Martin Luther and Music,” Eva Mary Grew describes this: “He clearly regarded [music] as not only necessary in religious worship, but as the most powerful of all factors in developing and sustaining the emotional fervour without which . . . full worship and praise cannot be effected.”²⁰ The necessity of music for any kind of meaningful life rests in the reformer's theory that music is a gift from God. In his preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae Iucundae*, a collection of motets, Luther gives the most articulate summary of his philosophy of music.

I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone. But I am so overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of its virtues and benefits that . . . as much as I want to commend it, my praise is bound to be wanting and inadequate. . . . For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate . . . what more effective means of music could you find?²¹

His deep awe for music and its effects is clearly seen. As Paul Nettl observed, “The jubilant faith of Luther, his joyful experience of God, his teaching of salvation by grace, caused him to break out in exultation before his God, and his feeling could find expression only in music.”²² In fact, the depth of music's power on the soul was so great that Luther felt it could not be fully expressed. In all of Luther's writings on music, the most recurring statement is that music is a gift of God.²³ Luther's *Table Talk* states that “music is a great gift and divine indeed (*Musica*

¹⁹ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 323.

²⁰ Grew, “Martin Luther and Music,” 67.

²¹ “Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*” (1538) in *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 321-23.

²² Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (Philadelphia: The Muhlenburg Press, 1948), 2.

²³ Miikka E. Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2013), 70.

maximum, immo divinum est donum)," or "a distinctive gift of God and close to theology (*Musica est insigne donum Dei et theologiae proxima.*)"²⁴ In one of his publications, he even goes so far as to say it is "the greatest gift of God" (*optimum Dei donum*).²⁵ To the modern mindset, these expressions may be interpreted as simple enthusiasm for music. However, it is not likely that Luther would use the word gift (*donum*) in a vague or carefree manner. As a theologian, the concept of a *gift* was essential to him. In *Dictata super psalterium*, Luther defines God as the following: *hoc est esse Deum: non accipere bona sed dare*, "this is what it means to be God: not to take good, but to give it."²⁶ Instead of placing God's omnipotence and all-knowing character as primary, God is all-giving first. According to Luther, to speak about God is to essentially speak what he gives, and this is seen in Luther's works. His hymn "Wir glauben all' an einen Gott," a paraphrase of the creed, is prime example of this.²⁷

Wir glauben all' an einen Gott,
Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden,
Der sich zum Vater geben hat,
Daß wir seine Kinder werden.
Er will uns allzeit ernähren,
Leib und Seel' auch wohl bewahren,
Allem Unfall will er wehren,
Kein Leid soll uns widerfahren;
Er sorget für uns, hüt't und wacht,
Es steht alles in seiner Macht.

*We all believe in one true God,
Who created earth and heaven,
The Father, who to us in love
Hath the right of children given.
He both soul and body feedeth,
All we need He doth provide us;
He through snares and perils leadeth,
Watching that no harm betide us.
He careth for us day and night,
All things are governed by His might.*

This first stanza portrays God as one who has given himself to us as Father. This was a self-giving act that began at creation. In Luther's opinion, God is creator because he is giver. This basis of belief extended to Luther's doctrine of justification that transformed the church.

²⁴ Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music*, 70.

²⁵ Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music*, 70.

²⁶ Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music*, 71.

²⁷ Antilla, *Luther's Theology of Music*, 72.

Salvation is a "gift" of God and not of works. The gift of salvation is pictured in Luther's hymns as well. The hymn *Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmeyn*, says God has mercy on humans and "gave his dearest treasure" (*es liess seyn bestes kosten*) to save them.²⁸ Because we have been granted with such a gift, we must steward it well. Luther expressed that "Music is a fair gift of God, and near allied to divinity. Whoso hath skill in this art, the same is of good kind, and fitted for all things."²⁹

Furthermore, Luther believed that music was a good gift because it creates joyful hearts. His poem on music "Frau Musica" expresses this:

Of all the joys upon this earth none has for men a greater worth than what I give with my ringing And with voices sweetly singing.³⁰

In a letter to composer Ludwig Senfl (1530), Luther wrote that "except for theology [music] alone produces what otherwise theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful disposition."³¹

However, this joyful nature came about not only through the human voice. In Luther's commentary on the Psalms, he encourages the use of instruments in worship. ". . . all pious, Christian musicians should let their singing and playing to the praise of the Father of all grace sound forth with joy from their organs, symphonias, virginals, regals, and whatever other beloved instruments there are."³² We see Luther following through on this statement in his use of instruments in Wittenberg. This was confirmed by fellow German composer Martin Agricola who in 1545 wrote of students engaging in singing with each other and playing instruments such as fiddles, lutes, winds, harps, and others.³³ This excerpt from a letter to Prince Joachim of Anhalt on June 16, 1534 sums up Luther's perspective on the sacred use of musical instruments:

²⁸ Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music*, 74

²⁹ Grew, "Martin Luther and Music," 67.

³⁰ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 91.

³¹ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 91.

³² Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 91.

³³ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 92.

So Elisha was awakened by his minstrel [2 Kings 3:15] and David himself declares in Psalm 57 that his harp was his pride and joy: "Awake up, my glory; awake psaltery and harp." And all the saints made themselves joyful with psalms and stringed instruments.³⁴

Luther strongly proclaimed the necessity and worthiness of music in liturgy, and then followed through with composing that music himself.

Luther began his musical reformation with the German Mass. While Luther put careful attention and thought into the theology of his liturgy, the music was just as important. He was greatly concerned that people were not participating in worship because the chants were in Latin and not in the vernacular. He therefore desired new hymns and chants in German along with more German translations that better matched the music and text.³⁵ Luther put it this way:

I'd like to have today a German Mass. . .but I'd like it to have a proper German art It must be both text and notes, accent, melody, and manner of rendering ought to grow out of the true mother tongue and its inflection; otherwise all of it becomes an imitation as monkeys do.³⁶

Therefore, Luther sought to put this ideal relationship between text and music in his own songs. In humility, knowing his limitations, the composer worked with principal artists of his day to help him. He knew he would never compose a motet like Ludwig Senfl even "if I tore myself in pieces."³⁷ So, he called on the aid of Conrad Rupsch (1475-1530) and Johann Walter (1496-1570) who both came to Wittenberg in 1525 to work on the German Mass with Luther.³⁸ Johann Walter's record of the visit, written in Michael Praetorius' *Syntagma musicum* (1615-20),

³⁴ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 92.

³⁵ Paul Robinson, *The Annotated Luther*, Vol. 3; *Church and Sacraments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 135.

³⁶ Schilling, *Martin Luther and the Arts*, 11.

³⁷ Schilling, *Martin Luther and the Arts*, 11.

³⁸ Schilling, *Martin Luther and the Arts*, 11.

demonstrates that Luther once again truly understood music.³⁹Walter wrote forty years after the visit, and attests the following:

[Luther] discussed with us the Gregorian chants and the nature of the eight modes, and finally he himself applied the eighth mode to the Epistle and the sixth mode to the Gospel Luther himself wrote the music for the lessons and the words of institution of the true body and blood of Christ, sang them to me, and wanted to hear my opinion of it One sees, hears, and understands at once how the Holy Ghost has been active not only in the authors who composed the Latin hymns and set them to music, but in Herr Luther himself, who now has invented most of the poetry and melody of the German chants. And it can be seen from the German Sanctus how he arranged all the notes to the text with the right *accent* and *concent* in masterly fashion.⁴⁰

Even Walter, one of the foremost respected composers of his time, praises Luther for his musicianship.

Luther composed more than thirty spiritual songs from 1523 to the end of his life.⁴¹ Twenty-four of those songs were written in a one-year time frame (1523-24) which is fittingly called the "spring of songs."⁴² After this, four more songs were composed before 1529, among which was the famous "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God).⁴³As typical in 16th century hymns, only the melody line was included, usually in the male vocal range and the composer's name was never given. The lack of clear authorship led to an attitude that prevailed until the nineteenth century that Luther did not really author both the words and music of his hymns.⁴⁴ Today, however, musicologists tend to accept Luther as the composer of most of the new melodies that appeared with his hymns, especially if they were in the Wittenberg

³⁹ Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 27.

⁴⁰ Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 27.

⁴¹ Johannes Schilling, "Martin Luther and the Arts: Music, Poetry, and Hymns," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, (2017): 13.

⁴² Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 13.

⁴³ Schilling, "Martin Luther and the Arts," 13.

⁴⁴ Ulrich Leupold, *Luther's Works: Liturgy and Hymns*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 202.

hymnals.⁴⁵ This is largely due to Luther's already discussed musicianship, and the fact that in the sixteenth century, poet and composer were most always the same person. Furthermore, at that time, a hard line between plagiarism and creativity did not exist like it does today.⁴⁶ It was extremely common for a poet to take a well-known folk song and arrange it to fit his rhymes. In fact, it was even considered an honor or homage to quote another composer. Although that generally applied to art music, it also extended to sacred music. Moreover, Luther would have been an oddity if he left all of his tunes to others. With his thorough musical grounding from school, university, and monastery, it would be foolish to say Luther did not have the means for creative work.

Another piece of evidence towards Luther's musical composition lies in the visible traits of his tunes that line up with his known musical ideas and style. Luther had a strong conviction that melismatic plainchant was not suitable for German prose, and we see a tendency toward syllabic style in his hymns.⁴⁷ Even when it comes to his "daring and daunting temperament," his music prefers disjunct over conjunct movement, bold fourths and fifths, and frequent obstinate beginnings on the highest note of the scale.⁴⁸ His melodies are mostly modal in nature and contain complicated rhythmic structures as typical of the sixteenth century polyphonic style. Luther's style has also been compared to living contemporary Ludwig Senfl (c. 1490–1543) and the famous Josquin des Prez (d. 1521) of whom Luther called "the greatest master." It is reasonable to say that Luther had help from his music colleagues in arranging his hymns into larger polyphonic works. Besides, he was after all a great theologian and could not devote the entirety of his time to music. Luther expressed this to Walter and Rupsch when they came to Wittenberg:

⁴⁵ Leupold, *Luther's Works*, 202.

⁴⁶ Leupold, *Luther's Works*, 203.

⁴⁷ Leupold, *Luther's Works*, 203.

⁴⁸ Leupold, *Luther's Works*, 203.

"You gentlemen understand your musica and your notes admirably: but as to what spirituality is and the Word of God, on that point I think that I too may put a little word in."⁴⁹

The musical culture that Luther set in motion had great influence on future German composers such as Michael Praetorius, Paul Gerhardt, Heinrich Schütz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn and Jochen Klepper.⁵⁰ Of these, Johann Sebastian Bach is most noteworthy for his library collection of Dr. Martin Luther's works. By his death, Bach owned twenty-one folio volumes of Luther's writings and several other smaller octavo volumes.⁵¹ Among these were a three-volume Bible with commentary (the "Calov Bible"), the ten-volume Alten-burg edition of Luther's works, the eight-volume Jena edition of Luther's works, one volume of the Wittenberg edition, and smaller works such as Luther's *Tischreden* and *Hauspostille*.⁵² The fact that Bach owned such an extensive library of Luther's works seems to indicate that Bach took the Reformer's theology very seriously, especially considering the expense of those volumes.⁵³ Does this provide evidence that Bach's reading of Luther affected his music? In "Bach, Luther, and the 'Magnificat,'" Michael Linton attempts to answer this question through studying Bach's *Magnificat*.⁵⁴ His research points to four areas of evidence that testify to Bach's use of Luther: 1) Expression of metaphors that Luther used in his *Commentary on Magnificat* 2) Formal decisions that emphasize specific passages in the *Commentary*; 3) Musical emphasis of certain words singled out by Luther; 4) Inclusion of hymns and texts that Luther refers to.⁵⁵ While the evidence

⁴⁹ Archibold Wilson, "The Melodies of Luther's Hymns." (*The Musical Times* 55, no. 857: 1914), 499.

⁵⁰ Schilling, "Martin Luther and the Arts," 17.

⁵¹ Michael Linton, "Bach, Luther, and the 'Magnificat,'" *Bach* 17, no. 2 (April 1986): 4.

⁵² Linton, "Bach, Luther, and the 'Magnificat'" 4.

⁵³ Linton, "Bach, Luther, and the 'Magnificat,'" 5.

⁵⁴ Linton, "Bach, Luther, and the 'Magnificat,'" 5.

⁵⁵ Linton, "Bach, Luther, and the 'Magnificat,'" 5.

is mostly circumstantial, it is strikingly plausible. Even if Bach was not influenced by Luther musically, he was most likely influenced theologically, which indirectly influenced him musically.

Luther made the congregation sing. By writing hymns in the vernacular, Luther was making sacred music easily accessible to the public, not solely in the church. At the time of the Reformation, German hymns were making their way into homes. Lutheran clergy recognized that political and ecclesiastical structures could switch allegiances easily.⁵⁶ They therefore promoted the family as the "great survivor" among institutions of society.⁵⁷ If a religious movement would survive, it could only do so by succeeding in the home. The focus of clergy was then on training Lutheran parents to teach their own children in the ways of the Lord. The fact that these hymns have survived amongst the chaos of history, is proof that hymns were carried in the homes and hearts of the German people.

Over five hundred years later, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" continues to sound from Protestant churches today. Its triumphant tune reflects the text beautifully and has been the hallmark hymn of the Protestant Reformation. Without Luther the composer, there would be no Luther the theologian. His work was completely intertwined in every way. Even from childhood, music encapsulated the Reformer's life. His rigorous education produced a highly adroit musician and philosopher whose hymns have endured for centuries. Colleagues attested to his expertise and even the legendary J.S. Bach gained musical and theological ideas from him. Martin Luther sparked a musical reformation that changed congregational singing for the better.

⁵⁶ Christopher Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 171.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 171.

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