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Music During the Reformation: Changing Times and Changing Minds

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Music During the Reformation: Changing Times and Changing Minds

Have you ever imagined yourself sitting in the cathedral of an old church in Europe, wondering what it would be like to worship through song with a believer of another time, culture and place? If one were to think about it deeply, one would arrive at the conclusion that not every church worships in the same way. A church service in the inner city of Atlanta, Georgia would look very different compared to a church service in the countryside of Montana. However, this is not just a phenomenon of the twenty-first century United States but also of Europe during the sixteenth century. It was in the period of these one hundred years that the Protestant Reformation occurred, a time in which men such as Luther, Calvin and Henry VIII split with the Catholic Church over differing theological and political views. However, not only did the theological and political views of the people change, but also the way music was viewed by many changed as well, and music in the church differed in each branch of Protestantism. The Protestant Reformation had a profound impact on the musical world; it changed the way music was used in the church, how music was used in the reformers' respective countries, and how it influenced later composers such as Bach.

Different churches throughout Europe in the sixteenth century each had different worship styles. In fact, a church's worship style often reflected the views of the reformer who founded it, and in order to fully understand its impact within the different sects of Protestantism one must first understand the differences between worship styles in each of the different churches. The main reformer who is credited with the start of the Protestant Reformation is Martin Luther. Out of all the reformers, Luther had the most appreciation for music. This appreciation became very apparent in the Lutheran Churches. Not only did Luther like and enjoy music, as he was a rather

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accomplished musician himself, but he deliberately included music as part of the church service as a means for worship.

He believed strongly in the ethical power of music and that through it one could glorify God and grow closer to Him.¹ This is exemplified through Luther's belief about the Psalms. Andreas Loewe, in the article entitled "Why do Lutherans Sing?" uses an example from one of Luther's own letters to the composer Ludwig Senfl, and it wrote: "They [the psalmists] attached their theology not to geometry, nor to arithmetic, nor to astronomy, but to music, speaking the truth through psalms and hymns."² This makes sense being that the Psalms contain so much emotion, whether sadness, anger, joy, elation, or awe of God. Even Christians today experience the power of the Psalms because they transcend all circumstances, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender or social status. Luther recognized how applicable the Psalms were to move human emotion and because of this he had a deep appreciation for them. He believed that music was and is a natural outpouring of our praise to God. To know Christ's salvation should make us joyful, which should in turn cause us to sing about it.³ In his book "Luther and Music," Paul Nettl states that "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 feelings could find expression only in music."⁴

According to Susan Hammond, the main difference between the Catholic mass and the Lutheran Church service was the shift in emphasis from the sacramental part of the service, the communion, to the written word, the sermon. "In keeping with Luther's theology, the sacrifice of

¹ 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): 69-70, accessed September 16, 2014, EBSCOhost.

² Loewe, "Why," 70.

³ Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (New York, Russell and Russell, 1948), 18.

⁴ Nettl, *Luther*, 2.

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the mass was downplayed and simple chorales or vernacular hymns formed the mainstay of the music after the Gradual, before the sermon, and during communion.”⁵ One of the key elements of music in the Lutheran Church is that it did not consist of only sacred music. Luther used many different songs from the secular world, but arranged and set them to new text for use in the church.⁶

John Calvin, in contrast, viewed music differently than Luther. Whereas Luther had a much more liberal view of music and its function in the church, Calvin was stricter. Like Luther he believed that music was powerful but instead sought to limit how much and in what way music was used within the worship service. In 1536, he wrote his most famous work called the “Institution of the Christian Religion,” and in it he discussed music only briefly, but it was enough to give us a clear picture of Calvin’s view. He believed that individual prayer and worship was of extreme importance and that it far superseded that which happened on the outside. His feelings for music naturally fell into place with this belief. He permitted the use of music within the private sphere of prayer as long as those prayers were heartfelt and genuine. The idea that music should not hinder worship was essential for Calvin.⁷ Charles Etherington also discusses this idea in his book entitled “Protestant Worship Music.” The Calvinists’ music was much simpler than the Catholic’s because they believed that too much complexity would distract the listener and that the real purpose of worship would be overshadowed by the elaborate motets and masses.⁸

⁵ Susan Lewis Hammond, “To Sing or Not to Sing,” *International Journal of Religion*, 72.

⁶ Charles L. Etherington, *Protestant Worship Music: Its History and Practice*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1962), 93.

⁷ Charles Garside, “The Origin of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536 to 1543,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 69, no. 4 (1979): 7-9.

⁸ Etherington, *Protestant*, 98.

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Calvin was very careful in his consideration of how music affected the listener because he thought that the melody could sway a person for good or bad. For this reason it was extremely important that the text draw the listener closer to God to provide a proper balance in worship. The only text that sufficiently fulfilled these requirements were the Psalms. Erin Lambert, in her article entitled “‘In Corde Iubilum’: Music in Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion” summarizes this view:

Calvin argued that the music of the Church should differ fundamentally from that of the wider world. Godly music was to separate the faithful from the world, and the music of the church should not incline listeners to dissolute behavior. Calvin consequently paid careful attention to the ways in which music affected the listener. He identified text and melody as the two elements of music, and argued that melody acted upon the heart more forcefully than the Word alone. Although melody might distract listeners from a text, it might also be used to draw a text’s meaning into the heart of the listener. In this context, he suggested that the Psalms, paired with melodies that would incline singers and listeners to devotion, provided the only suitable music for worship.⁹

What Calvin means is this: music’s immense power to sway human emotion is dangerous because it may distract the listener, thereby inhibiting true worship of God. In order to provide a safeguard against leading people astray in this way, Calvin argues that the subject of the text needs to lead the singers to true devotion to God so as to limit the music’s potentially destructive power. In his mind the only text that fulfills these requirements is the Psalms.

Charles Garside also points out why the Psalms provide the perfect text according to Calvin: “The Psalms will serve as a talisman against the power of music, and melody, with all its capacity for intensification, will now accompany words which are made and spoken by the Holy

⁹ Erin Lambert, “‘In corde iubilum’: Music in Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 3 no. 4 (2012): 271, accessed September 25, 2014, EBSCOhost.

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Spirit, even by God Himself...”¹⁰ Calvin’s view regarding the Psalms in music is extremely important because it provided the foundation for Calvin’s writing of the metrical psalmody, which is a key feature of worship in his church. Although both Luther and Calvin agreed that the Psalms were of essential importance to worship, Calvin differed from Luther because while he encouraged the use of song in public worship, he believed strongly that the only music suitable for the church service was the singing of Psalms, whereas Luther drew his music from many different sources. This was a key difference between the two reformers, and it set them both fundamentally apart from one another.¹¹

In keeping with his theological views, Calvin began translating the Psalms into the vernacular of the people. This was key for him: anything sung should be in the vernacular, whereas Luther would often allow songs both in the vernacular and in Latin. His first Psalter appeared in 1539 and eventually developed into a final, completed work fully published in 1562 known as the Genevan Psalter.¹² Another key characteristic of music in the Calvinist churches was that it was typically a single, unaccompanied melodic line sung in complete unison.¹³ Because of this practice singing in church was much more communal. Try to imagine a church service today in which there were no guitars, keyboards or differing parts. The only music heard in the service would be that of pure, unison voices. There is often a deeper feeling of community when everyone sings in unison because no specific individual stands out. Calvin believed that worship should draw one’s attention only to God, so it makes sense that he would want the music to be as communal as possible so that no one would become distracted.

¹⁰ Garside, “The Origin,” 24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² Lambert, “In Corde,” 271.

¹³ Neil Stipp, “The Music Philosophies of Martin Luther and John Calvin,” *The American Organist*, September 2007, 68.

As can be seen from the discussion above, Calvin did appreciate music and its use in the church, but he wanted it to be used correctly. He was very concerned about music's power to move the human soul, so he sought to limit its power so that men were not led astray. Since music was supposed to lead a person closer to God it must also be simplistic so as not to distract the worshipper. W. David Taylor argues that Calvin believed musical instruments "risked contaminating the true praise of God."¹⁴ Like Luther, he wanted man to glorify God and worship Him alone. Whereas in Lutheran churches instruments were not frowned upon, Calvin believed that instruments should not be used in the church at all. In essence, the only real difference between Luther and Calvin was the method they used to ensure this in their respective churches.

Another key reformer in the Protestant Reformation was Huldrych Zwingli, a Swiss reformer who is similar to Calvin in theology. Although this is indeed true, Zwingli was even stricter in his theology of music. He sought to break completely with the Catholic Church and part of this break included abolishing music completely. According to Neil Stipp, "He and his followers removed art works from the church and destroyed organs and other instruments in order to display their disdain for Catholic Church music and tradition."¹⁵ He wanted no part of music in the church, because he believed that prayer and worship was supposed to be silent.¹⁶ According to Zwingli, scripture called for no music, and "Obedience to scripture was a higher calling. If music had to be discarded for prayer to take place, it was a necessary sacrifice."¹⁷

¹⁴ W. David O Taylor, "John Calvin and Musical Instruments: A Critical Investigation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 48, no 2 (2013): 254, accessed September 16, 2014, *EBSCOhost*.

¹⁵ Stipp, "The Music Philosophies," 68.

¹⁶ Garside, "The Origin," 11.

¹⁷ James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 62.

While the Protestant Reformation was primarily based on issues of faith in Europe, in England its cause was primarily because of political issues.¹⁸ King Henry VIII split with the Catholic Church in a move of power and not because of a doctrinal difference. It was because of his disagreement with the church over the annulment of his marriage with his first wife who was unable to bear him a male heir. This split allowed him full control of the Church of England, and although it was largely because of moral and political reasons, it still had profound effects on the church and the music of the time. Like Luther, Henry also wanted the laity to be able to understand the music more clearly but those reforms were carried out very slowly. By the time Henry died the daily services were still sung in Latin, but steps were being made to change the liturgy to the vernacular.¹⁹ When Edward VI ascended to the throne, several church choirs began singing some songs in English, such as at Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's.²⁰ The use of English in the service officially became codified in 1549 when Parliament ratified the First Act of Uniformity, which stated that the Book of Common Prayer be used in place of all Latin service manuals.²¹ Composers also began writing in a more chordal style because it was argued that the words were easier to hear and understand that way.²²

Although some changes were made under Henry VIII, the development of music in the English Church was rather tumultuous because it was governed by different political rulers who each had a different agenda, rather than one spiritual leader with the same ideas such as was the case with Calvin and Luther. This principle can be clearly seen when Queen Mary took the throne after King Edward's death. In the blink of an eye, the country did an about turn to

¹⁸ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), 694.

¹⁹ Peter Le Huray, *Music and The Reformation in England 1549-166.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² Etherington, *Protestant*, 105.

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Catholicism and many of the changes that were made were reversed. But these changes lasted for only a short time for as soon as Elizabeth I ascended to the throne, many of the reforms made under Henry VIII and Edward were restored.²³ It is important to note that although Elizabeth restored some of the previous decrees during her reign, “the spirit of Geneva was very much at large,”²⁴ meaning that, like the town of Geneva under Calvin’s influence, music was sparse and extremely limited. Likewise, when the Stuarts reigned after Queen Elizabeth, a new, opposing political group formed called the Puritans. During this reign a civil war occurred between the Stuarts and the Puritans, resulting in the overthrow of the Stuarts and victory for the Puritans, who established a commonwealth in 1649.²⁵ The Puritans were comprised primarily of Calvinists and other Separatists, and under their rule during the Commonwealth music became almost completely extant, save for the singing of metrical psalms. Charles Etherington states it well when he says “The liturgy and the Prayer Book were abolished, choirs dispersed, all organs silenced, and many destroyed.”²⁶ Even though England continued to change throughout the Reformation, a distinct English style was still developing.

Out of all the reformers it can be argued that Luther had the most impact on the composers who came after him. One composer that is frequently mentioned as being a strong follower of Luther is Johann Sebastian Bach, who belonged to the Lutheran church. It is said that many “musicologists have turned to Luther when interpreting Bach.”²⁷ One man, Roland Chia, points out that Bach’s library contained two complete works by Luther, his table talks, and also several other works by renowned Lutheran theologians. Although this cannot be counted

²³ Ibid., 107.

²⁴ Huray, *Music*, 35.

²⁵ Etherington, *Protestant*, 109-110.

²⁶ Ibid., 110.

²⁷ Rebecca Lloyd, “Bach: Luther’s Musical Prophet,” *Current Musicology*, 83 (2007): 5, accessed November 23, 2014, *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost .

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completely as definitive proof of Bach's undying allegiance to Luther, it does suggest that he was influenced by him to a large degree if he had many of his writings in his library.²⁸ Luther believed strongly in the supremacy and importance of the Word of God over the supremacy of the church. This viewpoint was central to his theology and could be seen clearly in his writings and in his music.

Likewise, Bach strongly emphasized the importance of Scripture in his music and this could be clearly seen in his cantatas, which were meant to facilitate the truth of scripture through music rather than music as art for itself. Chia again points out the importance of the Word of God with this quote: "The Word of God for Bach is not comprised of abstract theological propositions that simply invite intellectual assent. Rather it is the Word of life that vitalizes and sustains the soul."²⁹

One can also see the strong influence of Luther's theology on Bach's music in some of his cantatas. For example, Luther believed in justification by faith and that we come to the saving knowledge of God and Jesus not by our works but by the forgiveness of our sins through faith in Him. This view is evident in the words of Bach's 'Salvation Has Come to Us Here,' a chorale cantata composed in the 1730's, which states "Now to us is salvation come, by grace and purest favor. Our works, they help us not at all, they offer no protection. But faith shall Jesus Christ behold, who hath enough done for us all. He is our intercessor."³⁰ According to John Wisley of Liberty University, Bach's music also reflected the change that occurred during the reformation: "Congregational worship sung in the vernacular, theological motifs portrayed in realistic fashion, and a break from established rules of religion and melody all set Bach's music apart from that of

²⁸ Roland Chia, "Re-reading Bach as a Lutheran Theologian," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 3 (2008): 262, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6385.2008.00400.x.

²⁹ Chia, "Re-reading Bach," 264-265.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

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the Catholic Church.”³¹ The Lutheran chorale also strongly influenced Bach’s music, which is evidenced by the fact that Bach himself wrote many simple chorale melodies and also incorporated the chorale melodies into larger genres.³²

The Protestant Reformation led to the implementation of many reforms in the church. The reformers’ calls to change certain worship practices were indeed heard within the church itself, but one can argue that this also had far reaching consequences on the cultures of their communities and countries. The country that felt the most radical change in regards to music is most likely Switzerland, home to both Zwingli who lived in Zurich, and Calvin who lived in Geneva. Zwingli, as stated previously, was highly opposed to the use of music in the church. In fact, he banned it entirely in June of 1523³³ and later in 1527 the organs were completely destroyed.³⁴ Zwingli’s desire for complete purity in worship came from his view that prayer was meant to be completely individual, or “absolutely private.” To Zwingli this was real worship and music in the service was only a hindrance.³⁵ Even though most scholars only really discuss the effect of Zwingli’s theology on music in the church, it is not too far reaching to suggest that his theology greatly affected the music making in the city of Zurich at the time. Zwingli himself was an accomplished musician, and even though his private music making did not stop entirely,³⁶ the destruction of the organs must have had an inhibitory effect on music making since an important musical instrument was now entirely gone. Zurich was “less musical than any other [city] in

³¹ John D. Wilsey, “The Impact of the Reformation on the Fine Arts” *Faculty Presentations and Publications*, no. 175 (2006): 34-39, http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs/175.

³² Erinn Losness, “Johann Sebastian Bach and the Lutheran Chorale,” *Prized Writing* (University of California, 2002-2003), 48.

³³ Charles Garside, *Zwingli and the Arts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966): 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

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Switzerland.”³⁷ If banishing the organs did not abolish music entirely, Zwingli’s emphasis on true worship at least changed the way his followers approached music. Since music had no place in worship, any music making that occurred would have strictly been done for recreational purposes only, more than likely in the privacy of one’s own home or in strict secular settings. While Zwingli’s effect on the music culture of Zurich, Switzerland is relatively obvious, Calvin’s impact is less so. However, since Calvin’s views were very similar to Zwingli, it follows that Calvin’s theology at least had somewhat of a similar effect.

In contrast to Zwingli’s far reaching negative effect on the musical life in Switzerland, Luther’s views had quite the opposite effect in Germany. Music in Germany was regarded very highly, not only in the common culture but also within education. In the sixteenth century the oral vernacular song, or *Lieder*, was the key form of music. It was heard on the streets or used in the inns for entertainment. This form of music was especially prominent in lower classes³⁸ primarily because of illiteracy. Luther knew and wrote many of his vernacular *lieder*s with that in mind³⁹ and as a result his ideas spread prolifically throughout all of Germany since singing was one of the main forms of communication. Not only did Luther write in the vernacular so as to reach more people, but he typically chose to use a preexisting secular melody which helped the song spread faster and quicker due to its familiarity. This made text memorization easier and as a result Luther’s ideas were now being sung on the streets and in the home.⁴⁰ Although some foreigners most definitely objected to this practice, called *contrafacta*, it was recognized as a valuable tool to spread one’s views to the illiterate in the community and many used this

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁸ Rebecca Wagner Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), 19.

³⁹ Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

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method.⁴¹ This obviously had far reaching effects on the culture. Luther used Germany's strong musical tradition in his favor, and because of it Lutheranism took root and spread.

Not only did Luther recognize the importance of music among the lower classes, but he also recognized its importance in music education. He was thoroughly convinced of music's power to sway the emotions and to affect the soul. Because of its value he believed that it was important for students to learn and understand music. One similarity between Luther and Calvin was that they both recognized music's power and therefore wanted to educate the younger generation in it. Frederick Sternfeld wrote "In nearly all Lutheran and Calvinistic Schools the teaching of music was assigned to the first hour after the mid-day meal."⁴² However, teaching the students music was not only meant to serve as another topic in school; it was also meant to help enrich the community.⁴³ One reason it did this was because the student choir would often lead the congregation in singing. Therefore, education provided students with both a broader knowledge of music and a practical application: leading others in worship through the music they learned in school. The student's exposure to music was not limited to the classroom; it also assisted them in their understanding of the word of God and broadened their experience of worship while helping others to do the same.⁴⁴ He was adamant about music's benefits to learning and as a result it became a key part of the curriculum in Germany. If not for Luther's influence in education, music would not have as prominent a role in the education of our children today, especially in Christian circles.

⁴¹ Nettl, *Luther*, 29.

⁴² Frederick W. Sternfeld, "Music in the Schools of the Reformation," *Musica Disciplina* 2 (1948):100, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20531762>.

⁴³ Joe E. Tarry, "Music in the Educational Philosophy of Martin Luther," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 21, no. 4 (1973): 362, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.cedarville.edu/stable/3344909>.

⁴⁴ Robin A. Leaver, "Luther and Bach, the 'Deutsche Messe' and the Music of Worship," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2001): 320-321, accessed November 24, 2014, *EBSCOhost*.

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The issue of music was at the forefront of the conversation during the Protestant Reformation, whether or not it was viewed as bad or good. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the English monarchs all agreed about music's importance, but their primary differences in theology and politics had nothing to do with music's importance: it was the question of *how* music was important that led each to differing views. Each reformer established different rules for their church and because of this worship looked different in each sect. In addition to affecting their respective worship services, they also affected their respective countries. The Lutheran Reformation also had a profound impact upon Bach's life and his compositions, as a result influencing musicians for many years to come. The Protestant Reformation therefore played a key role in music, whether it changed the way music was used in the church, how music was viewed in different countries, or how future composers who came after the sixteenth century looked at music and its power to affect the soul.

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