

LUTHER'S UTILIZATION OF MUSIC IN SCHOOL AND TOWN IN THE EARLY REFORMATION

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The name of Martin Luther brings to mind first of all the Reformer, the writer of the 95 theses, his disputes with John Tetzel, his debate with John Eck, the trial before the Council at Worms, his translation of the Bible, and a host of theological treatises. Secondly, perhaps, one thinks of his role as a musician and hymn writer. The particular strategies employed by Luther and his associates to further the cause of the Reformation through music will be the immediate concern of this article.

Behind these strategies would lie a point of view, an attitude toward music as it may relate to a person's spiritual life; and here Luther's convictions were of the utmost importance. Among the *Tischreden* ("Table Talks") of Luther may be found these remarks on music:

It is the best and most glorious gift of God. It serves as a weapon against Satan, for through music many afflictions and bad thoughts can be driven away. . . . It works like a salve to the depressed, renewing the heart. Music serves to control and discipline the people and should be supported by kings, princes, and lords. . . . Music is next to theology in stature. I would not trade my meager musical ability for great material achievements. The youth should be instructed in the art, for it will enable them to become people of worth.¹

¹I have collated and translated these remarks from a number of sources, including the Weimar Ausgabe (*WA*) of Luther's works (see vol. 6 of the *Tischreden*, p. 348 [item no. 7034]. See also *Dr. Martin Luthers Tischreden oder Colloquia*, ed. Friedrich von Schmidt (Leipzig, 1925), pp. 354-356 (*Tischrede von der Musica*).

No exact dates can be set for these remarks of Luther, but they remain entirely consistent one with another and with his views expressed in prefatory remarks to

1. *Luther's Role in Writing and Disseminating Religious Songs*

To these attitudes just noticed Luther brought a considerable skill in music, both as a singer and lutenist. His more significant contribution, however, was as a writer of songs. One category included hymns and chants which were translated into German, so that *Veni Redemptor gentium* became *Nun Komm, der heiden Heiland* ("Now Come, Savior of the Gentiles"). In another category—pieces made up of old tunes, sometimes of secular association but supplied with appropriate texts—we have *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her* ("From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"). To these must be added songs of specific Lutheran origin, such as *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), a treatment of Ps 46. The total identified with Luther in some fashion is at least thirty-six.²

Considerable as these talents may have been, Luther decided he needed the assistance of other even more highly trained musicians to formulate a musical program to support what had come to be a virtual revolution in Germany. Seven years had passed since the posting of his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Now, in 1524, he called together Conrad Ruff,

song collections. We may consider also his collaboration with Johann Walther in issuing a small publication entitled *Lob und Preis der löblichen Kunst Musica*, first printed in Wittenberg by Georg Rhaw in 1538 (facsimile-reproduction ed. by Willibald Gurlitt [Kassel, 1938]). Both the introduction by Luther, subtitled *Fraw Musica*, and the main portion by Walther are in verse form. A key group of lines by Luther are:

Hie kan nicht sein ein böser mut
 Wo da singen gesellen gut.
 Hie bleibt kein Zorn/zanck/hass/noch neid
 Weichen mus alles hertzleid.
 (Here there can be no sour disposition
 Where young men sing well.
 Here remains no anger, strife, hate, nor envy
 All sadness of heart must give way.)

²Various collections of Luther's hymn texts agree on this total of 36. See Karl Gerok, ed., *Die Wittemberger Nachtigall. Martin Luthers Geistliche Lieder* (Stuttgart, 1883). See also Gerhard Hahn, ed., *Martin Luther, Die deutschen geistliche Lieder* (Tübingen, 1967).

Kapellmeister for the Elector of Saxony, and Johann Walther, cantor at the court of Frederick the Wise in Torgau, to form "*die Cantorey im Hause*" (choral association in the home) to work on the new church music.

Once a large collection of sacred songs had been gathered, these were spread to the people in several ways:

1. Wandering singers, who traveled from town to town, would sing the songs before families in their homes until the entire household had learned to sing them from memory. The Salzburger complained that "the beggars and other folk were singing catchy Lutheran songs in the streets and elsewhere in order to lead the people astray."³
2. Luther insisted on the establishment of schools, where the songs were to be learned and then introduced into the homes.
3. The *Kurrende* (or street singers) would sing the Lutheran songs in the streets during the week.
4. The town pipers would play the new melodies several times a day from the town towers.
5. The school cantors would practice part arrangements of the new music in school for performance in church on Sundays.

The foregoing emphasis on the vernacular may be seen also in Luther's decision to produce a German Mass (first published in 1526).⁴ This was in keeping with the general desire to render the text understandable to the congregation as well as to encourage participation in the services. Such participation by the congregation was probably in unison and without organ accompaniment. Unison rendition (melody only) would have applied for the most part, as well, to the first four categories of dissemination listed above. However, the fifth, the practicing of part arrangements, takes us into another category which requires more extended discussion and involves further consequences.

To return to Johann Walther, it was in 1524 at Wittenberg that he published the first edition of the *Geystliche Gesangk-Buchleyn*. Printed originally in part-books, it contains a total of forty-three pieces; five of these are Latin motets, but the remaining

³E. L. Koch, *Geschichte des Kirchenliedes und Kirchengesanges*, 3d ed. (Stuttgart, 1866-76), 1:454.

⁴*Martin Luther. Deutsche Messe, 1526* (facsimile ed., 1934; ed. Johannes Wolf).

and a subsequent imitative entry in the bass. The voices have a much greater independence as compared to *Aus tiefer Not*, both as regards melody and text alignment. Furthermore, the melody shifts to the discant at the bottom of the page, beginning with “besuch” and remains there for the rest of the piece. All in all, we have a higher level of expectation in terms of proficiency of the singers.

3. *Music Instruction and Performance*

To what extent were the schools able to perform these part arrangements of the new music—particularly such as had the degree of complexity noted in *Komm Gott, Schöpfer*? Luther had been faced with a situation of considerable neglect with respect to the state of musical instruction in the schools. To counter this decline of interest and participation of the pupils in the singing in the worship services, Luther issued his famous *Sendschreiben an die Ratsherren aller Städte deutschen Landes, dass die Christliche Schulen aufrichten und halten sollen* (“Circular to the Princes of All German States, That Christian Schools Should Be Established and Maintained”) of 1524.⁷ Thus, as a result of Luther’s insistence that the schools once more assume the responsibility for taking over the musical obligations in the church services, the Protestant schools which were established during the ensuing decades placed a heavy emphasis on musical instruction.

At this point, it is appropriate to distinguish between the various kinds of school or school-related choirs that made their appearance in German towns of this time. First, there was the common school choir, which could sing only in unison chant style (*choraliter*) in the services. From this choir, the *Kurrende* went forth in large numbers, fulfilling a task which increasingly came to

⁷Printed by Lucas Cranach in Wittenberg (modern reprint in *WA*, vol. 15, with analysis on pp. 9-15, and text of the circular on pp. 27-53). Here Luther presents arguments from both the OT and NT concerning the importance of educating the youth. He sets up no guidelines as to curriculum or organization, but rather expresses the urgency for setting up these programs and states the philosophical basis for doing so. That his appeal was successful may be seen in the speedy adoption of reforms in the same and following years in such towns as Magdeburg, Nordhausen, Halberstadt, Gotha, Eisleben, and Nürnberg.

be regarded as befitting the poorer scholars rather than the well-to-do. Second, in the higher or Latin schools we find the *chorus symphonicus*, which directed its efforts to the mastery of contrapuntal singing. Here the male parts below the discant were bolstered by teachers and former students as section leaders or *Vorsänger*. Third, there was often a *chorus musicus* or *Kantorei*, in which the students generally sang only the discant, while the remaining parts were sung by town citizens, drawn largely from the ranks of the *Astanten* or alumni—young men of near-professional caliber. This *chorus musicus*, under the control of the town cantor, had as its obligations the major burdens in the Sunday church services as distinguished from the daily choral responsibilities in the matins and vespers. Finally, in festivals of all kinds in the life of the town (anniversaries, commemorations, holidays, school celebrations), the *chorus musicus* had to function outside of the worship service too.

In order to participate in the work of a *Kantorei*, the musical group rooted in both school and town, the boys in the German town schools and Latin schools of Saxony were required to spend a considerable amount of time in rehearsal. Singing instruction was a regular major class subject and generally held four hours per week, usually from 12 to 1 on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Since no classes were scheduled for Wednesday afternoon, the rehearsals for special occasions might be continued in the home of the cantor on that day. In the four-class Latin school, singing instruction began with the third class (comparable to our second year of high school), taught by the *Baccalaureus*; the second class (third year) was taught by the cantor, and the first class (fourth year) by the schoolmaster.

It may be assumed, with some reason, that the level of ability of these school choirs was fairly high. Areas dealt with included scales, clefs, solmisation, transposition, the modes, and vocal production. The cantors themselves were well-trained, the instruction imparted was quite thorough, and the practice times were frequent and long. Certainly the repertoire was of the best: Masses, motets, hymns, and magnificats by Ockeghem, Obrecht, Josquin, Pierre de la Rue, Isaac, Finck, Agricola, Senfl, and Lassus.

Additional music by the best contemporary German masters was also included. In the earlier part of the century, Rhaw's *Neue deutsche geistliche Gesenge* (1544) was one of the most widely used

publications,⁸ while later in the century the various individual collections came into general favor. Rhaw's collection, also issued in Wittenberg, contained compositions by such men as Balthasar Resinarius, Arnold von Bruck, and Thomas Stoltzer, and were issued specifically "for the common schools" (*für die gemeinen Schulen*). As for the town pipers, they were regular employees of professional caliber.

The culmination of the activities of the various choirs and town musicians was the main worship service (*Hauptgottesdienst*). As Arno Werner so vividly describes the situation in Saxony, the actual service was preceded by a solemn procession, the participants being clad in black mantle and hat. The *Astanten* constituted one group. From the Latin school came the cantor and the other instructors with the Latin pupils; from another quarter came the German schoolmaster (*Schulmeister*) and his boys. As these took their place in the choir loft, they joined forces with the town pipers with their cornetts and trombones to sound forth the chorales in a grand expression of praise.⁹

Although participation in the work of the *Kantorei* may have constituted the crowning achievement of the school choir, there remain two other areas of activity of considerable importance which were for the most part the special province of the school choir: street singing, and singing for special festive occasions like weddings and funerals. Of these two, it is the street singing that needs further comment at this point.

The best voices in the school would be selected for both the street-singing (*Kurrende*) group and the choir of the *Kantorei*; and although these were often one and the same, in the larger schools a class division was apparent. Here only the sons of important and well-to-do burghers belonged to the *Kantorei*, and those of lesser standing were assigned to the task of street singing whereby they might gather funds for themselves and the school. The richer boys

⁸See vol. 34, ed. Johannes Wolf (1908), in *Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst*, Erste Folge, 65 vol. (Leipzig, 1892-1931).

⁹Arno Werner, *Geschichte der Kantoreigesellschaft im Gebiete des ehemaligen Kurfürstentums Sachsen*, in *Beihefte der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* (Leipzig, 1901-1914), 9 (1902):28-31.

tended to look down their noses at such a task. Thus, although others—the older or the more well-to-do—might on occasion join in, street singing was a particular responsibility of the poorer pupils.

In Danzig, the street singing was done from Monday through Friday in systematic fashion. One of the boys would carry a basket to receive the bread that would be given them, and two others would carry locked boxes which they would take to the doors of the houses on either side of the street to collect contributions of cash. School regulations indicated that the responses which were sung were to fit the season of the year and be rendered capably without yelling. The boys, furthermore, were not to honor the requests of the townspeople to sing indecent songs. Any money so collected would be placed in another container by the choir regent; later a teacher would unlock the box and divide the contents.¹⁰

Christmas and New Year's saw a great deal of such activity, but presented special problems. According to regulations, places of drinking and dancing were not to be entered. On the other hand, if requested, the group might enter a tavern (*Stube*), but must not stay over a half hour and not drink to excess nor permit the boys to drink at all. Since the various school statutes are full of warning to the students not to waste their funds, but to spend them on paper, music, etc., the inference is that at times the money *was* squandered in gambling and drinking, or that it was simply ill-spent. Nevertheless, Luther thought well of these boys who traveled through the cold streets in rain and snow. "Do not despise one of these young men; I, too, was one of their number."¹¹

¹⁰Hermann Rauschnig, *Geschichte der Musik und Musikpflege in Danzig* (Danzig, 1931), pp. 48-49. Note that the money, however tainted, was not thrown away but put to good use!

¹¹This quotation may be found in such secondary sources as Frierich Adolf Beck, ed., *Dr. Martin Luthers Gedanken über die Musik* (Berlin, 1825), p. 26, and Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia, 1948), pp. 8-9. However, the source for these and related remarks is a sermon by Martin Luther to the officials of Nürnberg in the year 1530: *Ein Sermon oder Predigt, dass man solle Kinder zur Schule halten* (A Sermon That Children Should Be Kept in School), given in the larger context of the duties of parents toward their children.

This sermon may be found in full in Vol. 10 of the Walch ed. of Luther's works (the relevant remarks appear in items 61-62, cols. 524-525); in *WA* 30:508-588; and in

4. *Tightening of the Regulations*

After the first ardor of the Reformation began to cool, the practice of free-will assistants waned and there was a tendency to replace the loose organization with more rigid control, including the use of written laws (constitutions) so as to encourage faltering members to attend more regularly. The manner in which the membership was classified in such a more tightly-organized arrangement was often as follows:

1. Honorary members
2. Non-singers
3. School pupils and town pipers, who belonged because of their official position
4. Free-will singers, *Astanten* (*Adstanten*, *Adjuwanten*)

The first two categories were absolved of performance responsibility, while the third and fourth were "Cantoristen" or performers.¹²

The regulations of Belger in the year 1595, which have small-town conditions in mind, give us some idea concerning the circumstances and vicissitudes of such musical fellowship:

Any person, who can sing but is uncertain, so that he cannot be entrusted with carrying a part by himself, should be required to sing along on the first three pieces. If he will not sing along, he shall be fined six pence. After these first three pieces he shall remain silent, withdraw, and participate in some other activity. However, no one who so withdraws shall disturb the others who

several English translations. The exact words of Luther, as given in the Walch ed., are as follows: "Man spricht, und ist die Wahrheit, der Pabst ist auch ein Schüler gewesen; darum verachte mir nicht die Gesellen, die vor der Thür *panem propter Deum* sagen, und den Brodreigen singen. . . . Ich bin auch ein solcher Partekenhengst gewest, und habe das Brod von den Häusern genommen, sonderlich zu Eisenach, in meiner lieben Stadt. . . ." ("It is truly said that even the Pope was once a student; therefore do not despise these young men, who say before the doors [of those they serenade] *panem propter Deum* [bread for the Lord], and sing songs for donations of bread. . . . I too was such a *Partekenhengst* [alms-gathering rapsSCALLION] and received bread from the homes, specifically in Eisenach, in my dear home town. . . .")

¹²Werner, pp. 13-21.

are still singing; much less shall he take their copies from them or ridicule them for their singing. Whoever is guilty in these matters shall be fined one *Groschen* [a small silver coin].

He who sings the discant shall always have with him one or two boys who have agreeable voices, so that they may follow the copy with him and gain practice in singing and in time sing a discant part by themselves. However, they shall have nothing to do with the beer drinking; and as soon as the singing is concluded, they shall be sent home, so that their parents will not become unwilling [to send them again] and have reason to raise complaints against us.

Those songs, which are to be sung in the churches, should be practiced more than the others, and should occasionally, when possible, be rehearsed in sol-fa with *Adjuvanten* [*Astanten*], so that they will learn them more readily and become accustomed to mutation [transition from one hexachord to another]. Care should be taken to avoid getting candle drippings or drops of beer on the copies or to ruin or desecrate the copies in any way; whoever does this, must pay the penalty.¹³

Aside from the rather amusing aspects of the foregoing disciplinary regulations, it is highly significant to note the implications of the second paragraph of the quotation. It would appear that in such organizations as these, the upper voice or discant (let alone the alto or other lower parts) was sung regularly by adult males. The purpose of having the boys present was mainly to improve their skill in singing so that in time, perhaps as adolescents, they might be able to carry a part without assistance—rather than that their assistance at this time was an absolute necessity. This would indicate that the art of singing in this high range (by the employment of the falsetto voice, not by virtue of the castrato practice) was normal practice for these men. It would follow, of course, that in the rendering of any drinking songs or songs of fellowship after the boys had left, the discant would be sung entirely by adults.

The overall control of these organizations was essentially in the hands of the clergy, so that a great deal of the possible success of the musical organization depended on the ability and energy of

¹³English trans. of the German quoted in Arno Werner, *Vier Jahrhunderte im Dienste der Kirchenmusik* (Leipzig, 1933), p. 38.

the church fathers. The cantors themselves were not only well-educated generally, but had theological training specifically. They were frequently those who for some reason had had to stop theological preparation short of the ministry, or were, perhaps, looking for temporary employment before becoming pastors. The cantor would judge the musical ability of an *Adjuvant* seeking admission. The level of the test would depend on the size of the town and on the quality of the musical curriculum pursued in the schools.

5. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, it may be seen that the steps for reform undertaken by Luther were of great importance in spreading the new faith in its earliest phases. His insistence on quality and organization led, in turn, to the generally high level of instruction and performance in the church services and other town observances.

Aside from instrumental resources, this meant not only regular choral participation by the pupils but also that of adult alumni, where alto and occasionally soprano parts, as well as tenor and bass, were sung by them. All resources combined to provide a strong musical support to undergird the Reformation in its first flowering in the sixteenth century.