

Music and the Lutheran Tradition

I teach at the North American Lutheran Seminary, which is partnered with Trinity School for Ministry, an Anglican school in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. One week each semester, my Lutheran advisees are responsible for daily worship in the Trinity Chapel, and on those occasions services are conducted from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Every semester, the one unvarying comment we receive from all and sundry is: “You Lutherans certainly do sing a lot!” Four hundred ninety-nine years after the publication of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, it is encouraging to discover that the Lutheran musical tradition survives sufficiently to be noticed, even though it can’t be said to flourish as gloriously everywhere as it does here at Immanuel.

Of all the great theological voices in the Western Christian tradition, the most enthusiastic lover and promoter of music was undoubtedly Martin Luther. Music was uniquely central to the Wittenberg pattern of “Reformation” as it spread across Germany and Scandinavia, and music continued to have a singular place in subsequent Lutheran church life, piety, and culture. I have been asked to speak from the theological side about the place of music in early Lutheranism, as an introduction to the musical feast set before us this afternoon.

Luther wrote nothing systematic about music; his many comments on music are scattered through his written works and also through the *Table Talk*, the voluminous notes on his conversation at mealtimes recorded by admiring student boarders at his home. I want to focus today on his 1538 “Preface” to the *Symphoniae iucundae* (“Delightful Symphonies”) of the Wittenberg musician and publisher, Georg Rhau.¹

Luther’s most characteristic description of music appears in the very first lines of the “Preface”: “I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the divine and excellent gift which it is and to commend it to everyone. But I am so overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of its power and goodness that I can find neither beginning nor end or method for my discourse” (321-322). Luther regards music first and foremost as a gift of God the Creator, an *abundant* gift, diverse and great, powerful and beneficent.

¹ ET by Ulrich S. Leupold in *Luther’s Works* 53, 321-324. Page references to this version will be given in parentheses in the text, but the translation is often emended according to the Latin text in WA 50, 368-374.

Music is therefore not a human invention; it is given in the very fabric of the universe: “From the beginning of the world, music is placed within and co-created with all things, in each and all together. For nothing is without sound or sounding number, so that even the air, which is invisible and imperceptible to all our senses, and the least musical of all things, mute and unnoticed, nonetheless when it is moved, becomes sonorous and audible, and then perceptible...” (322).

The phrase “sounding number” is a technical term from the mathematical and cosmological music theory which the Middle Ages inherited from the ancient world. The Pythagorean discovery that musical harmonies are governed by mathematical ratios was developed into a musical account of the order of the universe. The whole cosmos was viewed as a vast and complex musical instrument, the ordered interaction of its parts producing a great harmonious music which human ears cannot hear directly, but which nonetheless pleases God. The music which we *can* hear can nevertheless mediate this complex cosmic harmony and draw us into it.

Luther was undoubtedly familiar with these ideas and drew on them, but there is something different about his use of them. In the medieval theory, concretely *heard* music, “physical” music, we might say, was the *least* significant musical phenomenon. What was important were the mathematical proportions which the mind could extract from the physical music and thus approach an understanding of cosmic order. If audible music was “sounding number,” it was the *numbers* and not the *sound* which deserved attention.²

For Luther, also, music is associated with order, but his emphasis is different. He does not speak of rising beyond physical, heard music to contemplate inaudible mathematical harmonies. Instead, he celebrates the richness and power with which God’s order embraces us through the physical music of creation. The sensuousness of heard music, already in the natural world, is a medium in which life-giving order takes hold of human beings. Luther was fascinated by the Biblical story in which David’s harp-playing eased the madness of King Saul (1 Samuel 16:23). Scripture does not say that David sang one of his psalms along with his harp; it was the sheer sensuous power and beauty of the instrumental music

² On ancient and medieval music theory, cf. Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Baker, 2007), 77-95.

through which the Spirit of God brought wholesome order for a time to the chaos of the king's spirit.

As this indicates, Luther shared the universal perception that music is especially powerful in its effect on human emotion. Music is "lady and governess of those affections by which human beings ... are ruled as by masters and more often carried away" (323). Here especially Luther is fascinated by the union of sound and speech in *song*, a unique musical gift given to humankind alone. Words and music reinforce one another: the words direct the power of the music and the music brings the words into the heart.

For Luther, the music made by the human voice is the greatest musical marvel of all, in the endless variation of sound of which it is capable as well as the amazing diversity of individual human voices. But the human musical gift goes further. "But when finally learning is added, and artful music, which corrects, cultivates, and refines natural music, then it is possible to taste (but not to comprehend) the absolute and perfect wisdom of God in his marvelous work of music" (324).

Let me point out a few significant features of Luther's account of music and coordinate them with his broader theological teaching. Notice first that Luther is not at all worried about the *physicality* of music, its sensuality, and its emotional power. All these had been matters of concern in western thinking about music since Plato, but they don't trouble Luther. For Luther in general, the material universe is not a distraction from the spiritual. He doesn't deny the distinction between the material and the spiritual, but for him they belong together.

In Luther's theology of creation, the created world is, in a sense, *sacramental*. The bodily creation is the medium through which God draws near in blessing. He gives and sustains life through the elements of air, earth, fire, and water. He orders human life so that human beings benefit one another; even when we don't love one another, he loves us *through* one another. "For creatures," he writes, "are only the hands, channels, and means whereby God gives all things, as He gives to the mother breasts and milk to offer to her child, and corn and all manner of produce from the earth for nourishment, none of which blessings could be produced by any creature of itself."³ Furthermore, his understanding of God's blessings in creation is not by any means strictly utilitarian. As one scholar has

³ *Large Catechism*, First Commandment, 26. Cited from the online text at bookofconcord.org.

written, God wants to “please and caress us with the goodness and beauty of the created world, revealing what God is like.”⁴

Music fits into this picture. Quite apart from any specifically religious use of music, Luther sees music as a good created power through which God still delights also his fallen human creatures and heals their hearts, even if only inconclusively, as in the case of King Saul.

To be sure, Luther knows that the power of music can be misdirected; he concludes the “Preface” with warnings against those who abuse music to excite lust and other wrongful passions. But there is no hint that the materiality and sensuality of music render it especially apt to such abuse. Rather, he says, such people have been carried away “contrary to nature” by the devil, “the enemy of God and of this most delightful art.” The bodily created world is not a source or inducement to wickedness; evil comes from the corrupted human heart, which twists all God’s good gifts and diverts them to its foolish, futile projects.

Notice that Luther praises human musical art as itself part of the gift of God. He speaks with admiration of the polyphonic music of his day in which other voices “play marvelously” around the tenor voice singing the melody, “exulting and ornamenting it with most pleasing gestures, conducting around it a kind of divine circle dance...” There is no sense that human artifice and even playfulness diminish the significance of music, no preference for the unadorned and “serious.” This lay at the root of a characteristic difference between the later Lutheran and Reformed traditions in church music.

Finally, music comes fully into its own in conjunction with speech, especially in articulate proclamation of the word and praise of God. God’s rescue and restoration of humankind from sin, death, and the devil is consistent with the pattern of his creation blessing. He saves and grants spiritual life through outward things: the crucified and risen human flesh of the incarnate Son of God, the vocally proclaimed gospel, and the water, bread, and wine of the sacraments. The created power of music joins with the words and signs which communicate Christ and impresses them on the heart. Luther does not understand the word of God rationally, as mere information to be processed and acted on by the mind.

⁴ Miikka Anttila, *Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure* (de Gruyter, 2013), 203.

The gospel is a powerful word which grasps and claims mind and heart together, and as such it is inherently a *musical* word. "Thus it was not in vain that the patriarchs and prophets wanted nothing to be so closely joined to the word of God as music. Therefore we have so many canticles and psalms in which speech and voice act together in the soul of the hearer, while in other living beings and bodies, music gesticulates alone without words" (323).

Let me say now a few words about the musical culture which Luther helped to found. He was first of all intent on drawing the congregation into singing in worship, not only hymn-singing, but the singing of the liturgy. The two liturgical orders which Luther prepared as revisions of the medieval Mass both came with music; they were intended to be sung, even the German Mass of 1526, intended for "unlearned" village congregations.

Of course, Luther is best-known for making vernacular hymnody a regular part of the liturgy. He believed that the "spiritual songs" mentioned by St. Paul along with "psalms and hymns" referred to free compositions not simply taken from the Bible. That such free hymnody would arise in the church was only to be expected, precisely because the church is the community of the Spirit. The Psalms and biblical canticles were cherished, but they were not meant to be a law imposed on the church's singing. The words of Scripture were the norm, to be sure, but they were meant to generate new speech, new song, in both proclamation and praise.

It was not until the eighteenth century that Isaac Watts convinced English dissenters that free hymnody was appropriate; it was not settled that it was permissible to insert hymns into the Anglican Book of Common Prayer until 1820. The Lutheran churches by contrast poured out hymnody in a constant stream from the sixteenth century well into the eighteenth.

The great Lutheran chorales seem to have been everywhere in old Lutheran life. In that far more oral culture, it was not uncommon for people to know twelve- or fifteen-verse hymns by heart. The hymns of Luther and others such Johann Heermann and Paul Gerhart were sung not only in church but at home, in the fields, and in private devotion. In a rigidly stratified society, they united princes and peasants in a common piety, and transmitted the faith from one generation to another.

Singing itself was viewed as integral to spiritual life. The seventeenth-century Lutheran devotional writer Heinrich Müller indicates the centrality of singing in Lutheran spirituality in the opening words of his *Geistliche Seelen-Musik (Spiritual Soul Music)* of 1659:

Dear Christian Reader, it is beyond all doubt that song is one of the foremost parts of both private and public worship. A devout soul often finds so much pleasure therein that it doesn't know where it is for joy. Nothing leads the affections so quickly and tenderly into heaven as song.

These old Lutherans knew that to have a singing culture, it's necessary to work at it. Singing-instruction was viewed as indispensable to education; schoolchildren, both boys and girls, were taught early to sing in four-part harmony, and did so regularly and often throughout their education. Luther had once remarked, "A schoolmaster has to be able to sing: otherwise I shall not look at him,"⁵ and the musically educated seem to have been much in demand in Lutheran schools in the second half of the sixteenth century. Singing was used to help students learn to read, as well as to memorize important texts, such as Luther's *Small Catechism*. Living in a culture in which ordinary people don't often *make* music, but typically buy it on the market as a commodity, we might do well to learn from the old Lutherans.

Despite the strong commitment to congregational singing, the Lutheran churches after Luther also cultivated complex choral church music which likewise proclaimed the word and tuned the heart to worship. The music we will hear this afternoon arose from that tradition. Lutheran cantors and composers developed a tradition of music theory which elaborated and developed various themes in Luther. The cosmic musical tradition was reaffirmed, beyond anything explicitly found in Luther, but with the emphasis that music not only expresses the music of creation but actively attunes the affections of its hearers to that order.

⁵ WA Tr 5: 557, 19-20, no. 6248. Cited in J. Andreas Loewe, "Why do Lutherans sing? Lutherans, Music and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation," accessed online at http://www.academia.edu/1551100/Why_do_Lutherans_sing_Lutherans_Music_and_the_Gospel_in_the_first_Century_of_the_Reformation. Information about musical education in early Lutheranism was gleaned from this article.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Lutheran musicians such as Joachim Burmeister, Cantor at Rostock, began to correlate music theory intentionally with the culturally central humanist discipline of rhetoric. The Renaissance was deeply influenced by the rediscovery of classical Roman writers on rhetoric such as Cicero and Quintilian. In their hands, rhetoric had been developed as a moral art, the art of giving efficacy to truth. Philosophers discovered truth, the rhetoricians complained, but they couldn't give it power. For that, another art was required, the art of eloquence or effective speech, which could engage human emotion on behalf of truth, instructing but also engaging and moving its hearers.

The diverse band of educational and cultural reformers called "humanists" by later historians were essentially out to renew public life in Europe by renewing the arts of speech. Classical rhetoric was studied, great literature was analyzed with a view to discovering its communicative strategies, and schoolchildren practiced diverse means of persuasion identified in classic authors. The Reformers read the Bible as the "rhetoric of the Holy Spirit," a complex work of eloquence aimed at forming heart and mind to fear, love, and trust God in Christ.

Given the importance of the union of music and speech in Lutheranism, and Luther's emphasis on music's power to form the affections, it was perhaps inevitable that Lutheran musicians, trained also in rhetoric, would set out to construe music rhetorically. In good Baroque fashion, elaborate attempts were made to work out musical counterparts to the verbal strategies catalogued in rhetoric textbooks.⁶ The whole business seems rather artificial at this distance, but considerable musical insight was nevertheless encoded in this format.

Great composers do not, of course, use music theory texts like cookbooks, but the theory can provide orientation and teach moves which composers can put to work. I'd like to close, however, by speaking more theologically about the working assumptions of great Lutheran composers like Schütz and Bach.

These musicians believed that the world was the creation of a God of infinite majesty, wisdom, and goodness. As such, the world indeed had an intrinsic order, a good and beautiful order which the human mind could only imperfectly

⁶ Cf. Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Rhetorica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

comprehend. To call this order a cosmic music comes as close as any description can.

Surrounded by such beauty and goodness, however, humankind, deceived and abused by mysterious powers of destruction, has ceased to hear the divine music. We are discordant, out of harmony with God and his creatures, shut out from the true music by the noise and clamor of our own hearts.

It is in Jesus Christ, they all believed, at the cross, that the human discord is rewoven into the divine harmony and reconciled to it. Through his incarnation, in his holy life and work, the song of creation is renewed among human beings. On the cross, he restores human nature to participation in the heavenly music, overcoming through his obedience and love our alienation from its beauty and splendor.

Everything depends for us, therefore, on our union with and assimilation to the crucified and risen Christ, a union established in Baptism, renewed in the Sacrament of the Altar and sustained by the faith of the heart which clings to the word of God. Music, they believed, had its part to play in this great drama of reconciliation. Music could represent the order of creation to the human mind and heart, and it could combine with proclamation and praise to draw human beings deeper into the mystery of reconciliation.

My own memories of this musical tradition go back to my childhood growing up in a quite ordinary congregation in which Bach was nevertheless always present in worship. I recall a deep, though of course not wholly articulate, impression that this music somehow opened up onto a *world*, a world in which there was wholesome order and costly healing for the human heart. I have become neither musically learned nor especially sanctified since then, but the Lutheran musical tradition has remained more to me than a cultural heritage. It is a witness to hope.

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