

## Martin Luther's contribution to the crystallization of the Protestant Choral

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**Abstract:** *For the beginning of the Reformation, the choral was so deeply identified with Lutheranism that it became its symbol by excellence. Martin Luther's contribution to the crystallization of the Protestant choral is both an act of reform and a synthesis of the musical styles already existing at the time. Few of the songs are completely original, most of them coming either from the German translation of Latin songs, or from very popular Latin sacred songs that were used for large religious holidays, so the choral reflects a variety of musical styles, starting from the medieval cantus firmus and the songs of the 16th-century meistersingers, to the lied of the Baroque era accompanied by the continuo. The paternity of the Lutheran chorales has been the subject of many controversial disputes over the time, so in certain periods of history the tendency has been to give to Luther unjustly hymns that did not belong to him, exaggerating in this sense, and as a rebound, the next century had the tendency to deprive the reformer of many of the chorals he really composed.*

Key-words: *protestant choral, lutheran choral, Martin Luther, Reformation, Protestantism*

### 1. Introduction

Until the *Lutheran chorale* - this quintessence of the Protestant manifesto expressed through music - the sound art traveled the branched path of the Byzantine chant and the Gregorian plainchant, later processed in *Ars Antiqua* and brought to its first-class grandeur. Then it steps into the world of *Ars Nova*, with the wide influences of the art of the troubadours, trouveres, meistersingers and minnesingerers, and it has a breakthrough in the Renaissance period with the invention of new instruments, but also with the improvement of those already in

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use. The appearance of the Guttenberg's pattern will facilitate the propagation of the sound art in written and printed form. This evolution also adds the shift from modal to tonal, from long values in the measurement of durations to much improved divisions of the times, which used increasingly shorter values.

The term choral designates the congregational hymn from the liturgical service of the German Protestant Church (Marshall; Leaver). It contains stylistic and form elements suitable for its purpose oriented to the parish crowd: simple language, metric verse with rhyme, strophic form of music and of text and an easily tunable melody.

According to Gérard Denizeau (2007, 405) the Protestant choral lays the foundations of the Lutheran musical tradition. Its history begins with the sixteenth century, but flourishes in the seventeenth century, with the help of composers like Johann Adam Reinken (1623 - 1722), Dietrich Buxtehude (1637 - 1707), Johann Pachelbel (1653 - 1706), Martin Luther (1483 - 1546), Johann Crüger (1598 - 1662), Alexander Agricola (1445 - 1506) and others who use all polyphonic language to integrate it into religious worship. The height of the incorporation of the Protestant choral into the scholarly music is reached by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750) in the first half of the seventeenth century. The process is also continued by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809 - 1847), César Franck (1822 - 1890) and Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897) who introduced the Lutheran songs into oratory, symphony or opera.

In the first decades of the Reformation, Martin Luther and his contemporaries referred to the individual structures in the newly reformed congregational genre of vernacular hymns, using terms such as *geistliche Lieder* (spiritual songs), *Psalmen* (psalms), or *christliche Lieder* (Christian songs). Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the *choral* term, which traditionally referred to the Latin melody of the Gregorian cantus firmus, began to apply to church hymns sung in the national language. This happened, probably on the one hand because the congregational tune during Luther was led by the monophonic *chorus choralis* (different from the polyphonic *chorus musicus*, or *figuralis*), and on the other hand because in the Protestant religious service the congregation and the singing of hymns received the importance and the liturgical symbolism occupied by the choir and the Latin songs (*Gregorianischer Choral*) in the Roman-Catholic religious service (*chorus choralis*) (Marshall; Leaver).

In the modern Germany the term choral refers to the harmony or a simple melodic organization, while *Kirchenlied* (hymn) usually encompasses both the text and the tune of the song. In the usual terminology for us today, the term applies

both to the hymn in its entirety (music and text), but also to the harmonic structure of a song. A common practice for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used the term to refer to the simple harmonization of a German anthem, such as Bach's chorales, or 4-voices chorale.

## **2. Martin Luther - a complex personality**

At 500 years after the Reformation, its echoes are still heard with strong vibrations regarding the perspective of an innovative mentality both ideologically and artistically. Famous forerunners like John Wycliffe (1320-1384) - with his descendants known as Lollards; Jan Huss (1369-1415) - with the Hussite movement; the resistance movement of Valencia (1173) in the valleys of Piedmont in northern Italy - with its founder Peter Waldo and later assimilated by the Calvinist Protestant movement, all favored the appearance of Martin Luther in this trajectory of the growth and evolution of Christianity towards a new, more personal vision, more assumed, more liberated from formalism and dogma.

A complex and at the same time controversial personality, Martin Luther is the one whose name is most closely related to the Protestant Reformation. "Those who followed him considered him the prophet of God and the deliverer of Germany. His Catholic enemies called him the son of perdition and the destroyer of Christianity. Agrarian agitators hated him, calling him a sycophant of the principles, while the radical sects compared him to Moses, the one who took the children of Israel out of Egypt and let them perish in the wilderness. However, such judgments belong to an epilogue rather than a prologue. The first effort we have to make is to understand the man." (Bainton 2017, 30)

From the historian Peter Forna's perspective, Martin Luther is "at the same time - after Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230) and before Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) - the second pillar of German culture and civilization." (2003, 11)

Beyond the opinions of historians, theologians and scholars who have researched Luther's prominent figure, an objective eye can only be formed after passing through his writings, in order to understand the breath that inspired them, the back vibration that has set in motion a reformation which wasn't estimated from the outset not even by its author that it would become so large.

Born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, as the son of a prosperous miner, Luther first wanted to study law, but retired to the monastery in Erfurt in 1505, as a

fulfillment of an oath made after a dramatic experience, when he had survived a devastating storm. Licensed as early as 1502 in Language and Philosophy, he became a monk of the Order of St. Augustine, being received within the order in 1507, when he officiated the first liturgy. At the end of the same year he was summoned by Johann von Staupitz to the Wittenberg monastery, where he took over the Philosophy Department of the University. After obtaining his Doctor of Theology degree, Luther took over the chair of Bible Studies Department from Staupitz and in the following years he gave lectures from Psalms, the Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Ephesians, which will formulate and crystallize his theology (Bainton 2017, 15).

In the year 1517, officially considered to be the debut of Protestantism, Luther didn't really want a radical break from Rome, as much as a reformation of the church from within and a purification of all the ballasts accumulated. The discrepancy between the promiscuity and the abuse of some of the prelates in Rome, with whom he had the opportunity to come into contact in 1510, and the Christian simplicity that he discovered in the study of the Scriptures, as a university professor, determines Luther to take an attitude and publish the 95 of theses or reflections on the force of indulgence, against Tetzl - the indulgences preacher, displayed on the door of the Wittenberg Castle church on All Saints' Day, October 31 (Luther 2003, 123).

The pertinent style he uses in all his writings, sometimes persuasive, but at the same time subtle, exposes many of the horrors cultivated by the court in Rome, maintained by the naivety of the parishioners and the superstition spirit became chronic at the time. Luther has the courage to blatantly oppose and challenge aspects of ritualism (such as the sale of indulgences, veneration of saints, or pompous ceremonies), of the procedure of religious services (such as the Eucharist in two and not one), signaling non-Christian influences coming from the Greek philosophy in consecrated patristic writings, such as those of Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. He has the clarity to denounce them both in Augsburg and in front of the Worms Diet, even if the risks are high.

Terms such as *righteousness by faith*, *universal priesthood* of believers, along with the five great pillars on which his whole theology will sit: *Sola gratia* (Only by grace), *Sola fide* (Only by faith), *Sola Scriptura* (Only by Scripture), *Solus Christus* (Only through Christ) and *Soli Deo Gloria* (Only for the glory of God), for the sixteenth century were revolutionary. Luther states that by repentance and not by indulgence, forgiveness of sins is obtained, salvation is obtained only by faith and not by good deeds, and thus the actions are the effect of salvation, not its cause.

Scripture is the only religious authority, and the head of the church is Christ and Christ only, not the pope, to whose infallibility Luther denies. The concept of priesthood of all believers abolishes the church hierarchies, confession before the priest and the monastic covenant. When speaking of the grace of God, Luther emphasizes His initiative in choice and justification, and it is all for His glory and never for the justification of man, which cannot be recommended before Heaven.

To a nowadays Christian it may seem elementary truths practiced without any difficulty, but for the history of Christianity that came out from the "millennium of papacy" at that time, they were crucial (Vuilleumier 1946, 51).

### **3. The paternity of the lutheran chorals**

Since the death of Martin Luther (1546) there has been many debates regarding the reformer's musical skills and knowledge, his ability to master the musical field. Obviously, he is neither "a Palestrina of the Lutheran and Protestant movement", nor "a clever dilettante who has offered his followers the liturgical musical support that corresponds to the promoted teachings, but who cannot be regarded as a composer, or creator of hymns, and who did not exert any influence in the evolution of the musical art" (Bäumker 1881, 153).

Unlike Calvin, who has adopted an indifference position, even of hostility towards music, an attitude that was strongly spread in the Calvinist countries and thus blocking the emergence of a musical literature similar to Lutheranism, Martin Luther is most often credited as having the merit of facilitating the development of the German church music by understanding and treasuring the musical art. The reformer had a very refined sense in the analysis of the phenomenon, as demonstrated by the prefaces he made to composers such as Ludwig Senfl (1486 - 1543) and Josquin des Prés (1440 - 1521) (Buszin 1946, 81).

The fact that Luther was not the author of all the hymns with which he is officially associated does not diminish his crucial role in the musical field in general and in the perimeter of church music in particular, just as Pope Gregory the Great is not dishonored by the fact that, probably, he was never able to write a Gregorian song or such music (Buszin 1946, 95).

It is true that, over time, too many songs were credited as belonging to Luther, which led some to challenge the paternity of all his hymns. In the seventeenth century writers had a generous tendency to attribute to Luther no less

than one hundred hymns created, while the eighteenth century came with a backlash, in the tendency to challenge him as a music composer, but all the evidences show that the reformer created few original hymns in melody and only one short motet. The rest are translations of Latin hymns, or adaptations and rearrangements of other well-known songs that were circulating at the time and which, put on German text, provided for the needs of a simple and extremely familiar music to the congregation (Brauer 2016, 4).

It is not surprising to find even in the nineteenth century some researchers who sought to discredit Luther's musical capabilities. Thus, in 1880, the German theologian Wilhelm Bäumker tried to show that the hymn *Ein feist Burg ist unser Gott* was a mere compilation of musical phrases taken from Gregorian songs (Bäumker 1880, 155), although this way of borrowing the melody from the Gregorian cantus firmus can only attest to Luther's respect for the Latin heritage. This kind of attacks led in the twentieth century to deepen the subject through specialized studies undertaken by the German musician Hans Joachim Moser, but also by others, such as the German historian Hermann Abert or the German theologian Hans Preuß, who regulated the paternity of Lutheran hymns, among which some indeed belonged to the reformer both as a text and as a melody (Moser 1953, 38 - 55).

#### 4. Conclusions

It is difficult to know exactly which of the chorales is certainly the product of the reformer's composing effort, the more so as the *copyright* was not a familiar notion for the beginning of the sixteenth century, but only over two hundred years later. During the 1500s the poet and the composer were usually the same person, being quite common for someone who writes lyrics to put them on music. Luther's contemporaries, therefore, did not consider it necessary to emphasize who is the author of the song in the case of the texts he wrote for different chorales, this double task being typical for those who were gifted in this respect. That's why most of the chorals are attributed to him, but it is clear that in some cases he has rearranged a music already known on a text he wrote (Brauer 2016, 6).

It is important to note that two-thirds of Luther's hymns were created almost explosively in Wittenberg, after more than a year of being isolated in Wartburg for his own safety, following the confrontations in front of the Worms Diet in 1521. At the beginning of 1523, he left Wartburg Castle and returned home, concerned

about the radical movements that could have led the worship music into an unhappy direction. As a result, he decided to take an attitude in this direction and starts the congregational singing in the vernacular language as one of the first steps in the musical reform. At the same time, Luther seeks to maintain the traditional direction of worship that does not contravene with his biblical teachings, and the two Masses - *Formula missae* (1523) in Latin and *Deutsche Messe* (1526) in German stand as evidence. During the same period most of the Lutheran chorals were created due to his need to provide the parishioners with a model for worship (Brauer 2016, 5).

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