

14 The impact of the Reformation on music

In the Reformation there was a commitment to hearing the Word of God clearly which meant rethinking the place of music in church worship. Luther utilised the power of music to help congregations worship God and remember biblical truth whereas Calvin limited music to the singing of psalms. In the oratorio, Bach and Handel combined biblical truth with music that moves the soul.



Door to the school in Eisenach commemorating both Luther and Bach's attendance there.

Photo courtesy of J. Horrocks

Pre-Reformation church music had, in some circles, become a bit of an academic and aesthetic battleground for composers. The Reformation, however, helped wrestle the sung truth out of the hands of the professionals, and back into the hands, voices and hearts of every single person. Now, instead of the congregation having to listen to the performance of the religious elite, all people everywhere could sing solid truths together anywhere they chose.

Martin Luther himself was an accomplished musician, starting as a choirboy in Eisenach, followed coincidentally at the same school and church 200 years later by J.S. Bach. As a chorister, the young Bach would have sung hymns and metrical psalms

for which Luther had written both words and music, one of the best known of which is *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A Mighty Fortress is our God), based on Psalm 46. Luther recognised 'that music is the language of the human spirit' and because of that he got everyone singing in Saxony. Four hours of music each week was introduced into the school curriculum and choirs sprang up in every town.



An early print of Luther's hymn *Eine Feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A Mighty Fortress is our God).

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For this purpose Luther sought the co-operation of leading musicians, and with them adapted the tunes of old German religious and secular folk songs, together with some Gregorian melodies, to the new Protestant hymns. A simple and dignified hymn form was thus elaborated, to which the name of Chorale was given, and this came to assume a place in the Lutheran Church similar to that of the Gregorian Chant in the Roman.

At first these chorales were sung in unaccompanied unison by the whole congregation; but soon extra parts were written in the old contrapuntal style, which were rendered by the choir. The organ also acquired greater prominence, and, after 1600, replaced the choir in rendering the additional choral parts, while instrumental interludes were often played between the verses, a form that features prominently in Bach's cantatas. In smaller Protestant churches however, the congregational singing of hymns reinforcing biblical truth took off, paving the way for many other choral traditions – from community choirs to football chants.

In Switzerland, Calvin and Zwingli were more distrustful of the power of music to move the human spirit. Where Luther saw God's truth expressed in song as a way of bringing the truth home to the individual, Calvin saw

it as a distraction and only authorised the singing of psalms in worship, often in metrical form where the scriptural words were adapted so the rhythm would fit the tune. Calvin produced his first psalter in 1539 which was developed into the work known as the Genevan Psalter published in 1562.

The repertory of music that is exclusively 'Lutheran' is relatively small. The leading Lutheran composer of the 17th century, Heinrich Schütz, wrote music that was very much in the same idiom as Monteverdi and other Catholic composers active around 1600. The main difference lies in the use of the vernacular German text, set with a verve and skill that essentially launched German as a language for modern music.



Statue of J.S. Bach, outside St Thomas' Church, Leipzig, designed by Carl Seffner.

Photo courtesy of J. Horrocks



George Frideric Handel by Balthasar Denner. Commons.wikimedia.org

the oratorio tradition which was emulated by many later composers.

In England, composers had to cope with the reversals of religion in their monarchs. Thomas Tallis (1505–1585) was a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal at the court successively of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary then Elizabeth, so adapted his style to both Catholic and Protestant liturgies. The Puritans, true to the principles of Calvinism, abjured all but the most



Opening bars of final chorus of the Messiah 'Worthy is the Lamb', Handel's manuscript. Commons.wikimedia.org

austere unison and unaccompanied metrical psalm singing. Their influence was felt during Elizabeth's reign, but did not achieve its full results till the time of the Commonwealth (1649–1660), when the progress of the art of music was effectually stemmed.

It was not till the 18th century that hymns took on more warmth and colour, and the modern cheerfulness of tone, with noted hymn writers such as Isaac Watts, John Newton and later, Charles Wesley.