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The Church Hymn and Its Way into Music

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When the thunderstorm of the Reformation appeared on the heaven of the life of the church, it looked as if it would destroy the harvest of European music. With its protest against the Mass as an *opus operatum*, the Reformation also opposed the artificial music that accompanied the Mass. As formulated in the *Motu Proprio* of Pius X, the music shrouded the Mass in beautiful garments of sanctity and Roman Catholic universality. What substitute did the Reformation offer? Surely not something that one could actually call "art," but rather sacred folksong. Tolerated only as an evil in the Roman Catholic Church, the folksong possessed a very simple musical form which could be sung by anyone.

Nevertheless, there was an entirely different reason why the Jesuits at the time of the Counter-Reformation burned more evangelical hymnbooks than Bibles. Even though these hymnals, at least in their elementary form, possessed little artistic value, the song which accompanied the Reformation to its victory showed many other qualities. Wherever it was heard, it drew the hearts of men like a magnet, and it strengthened the confessional courage of the Reformation-minded people. It created a breach in the once-strong bulwark of the Roman Church. It overpowered dynasties and changed the faith of entire cities. Take, for example, the story of what took place

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in the city of Lübeck.¹ In 1529 a poor blind man in front of the church entrance was singing the hymn "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven." Because of this, he was forced by the papal-minded authorities to leave the city. The following Sunday, the second Sunday in Advent, a few boys took up the singing of this hymn in St. Jacobi Church. The entire congregation joined in singing the hymn to its conclusion, reducing the officiating pastor to silence. From that time forward, if any pastor said anything from the pulpit which the evangelical-minded people did not like, they sang the same hymn, "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven," causing both the church and the city to acquire a Protestant government. Eduard Emil Koch, author of a history of the church hymn and hymn singing, says: "It thus happened that this one simple song effected more than human power and sense could have done."²

Martin Luther made the beginning. The song with which the city of Lübeck was won was his adaptation of Psalm 12. He did not write it to create a revolution. He was merely following the example of the prophets and church fathers, creating psalms and hymns in the mother tongue so that the Word of God would always remain with the people. He did not consider

¹ This incident is recorded in Eduard Emil Koch, *Geschichte des Kirchenlieds und Kirchengesangs der Christlichen, insbesondere der deutschen evangelischen Kirche*, ed. Richard Lauxmann, 3d ed. (Stuttgart: Chr. Belsen, 1876), 8, 523.

² Ibid. Translated by the author from the original: "So geschah es, dass dieses einzige, ein-

himself a poet and was therefore in search of poets. These he encouraged to write hymns based on the Psalms.

At first the poets did not react quickly. For a time Luther had to work alone. In addition to writing hymns based on the Psalms, he also wrote catechismal songs, adaptations of old hymns, etc. However, Paul Speratus, Elisabeth Creuziger, and Justus Jonas soon became his helpers. The *Achtliederbuch* and the *Erfurt Enchiridion* appeared with the first 25 evangelical congregational hymns. In 1524 the first official hymnal was printed at Wittenberg with 32 hymns for use by schools and their choirs. Since then the stream has swollen. The flood grew under the influence of such men as Nicolaus Decius, Nicolaus Herman, Philipp Nicolai, Bartholomäus Ringwaldt, Johann Heermann, Paul Gerhardt, Johann Rist, Joachim Neander, and Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf.³ In Bohemia Peter Herbert and George Vetter followed the example of Michael Weise.⁴ The first Swiss hymnbook, which originally appeared in 1536, was compiled by Johannes Zwick and Sixt Dietrich.⁵ In France, where John Calvin was the leading reformer, Clement Marot began work on a complete psalter which was later finished by Theodore de

fache Lied mehr ausrichtete, als viel menschliche Kraft und Klugheit hätten ausrichten können."

³ See further Philip Schaff, "German Hymnody," *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, ed. John Julian (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1957), I, 412—18.

⁴ See further J. T. Mueller, "Bohemian Brethren's Hymnody," *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, I, 153—60.

⁵ This is the *Konstanzer Gesangbuch*; see further Markus Jenny, *Geschichte des Deutschschweizerischen Evangelischen Gesangbuches im 16. Jahrhundert* (Basel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1962), pp. 77—139, especially pp. 99—112.

Beza.⁶ This work also contained some hymns and the creed. In Holland, Willem van Zuylen van Nyevelde wrote his own psalter on popular melodies; Gerhardus Mes and Philip van Marnix van St. Aldegonde composed a psalter, and Johannes Uitenhoue and Peter Datheen made separate translations of the French psalter for use in Holland.⁷

The pens of the poets and composers were busy, printing presses sprang into action, and the churches were filled with songs and congregational singing. After many centuries the same hymns created by the Reformation are still resounding in churches and homes, in schools and on radio; they are still being sung as the confession of faith and corporate prayer of the congregation. After the Bible, which is more important, the catechism or the hymnbook? The hymnal contains the common faith shared by the New Testament, Bernhard of Clairvaux, Luther, and our time. A theologian of the last century testified that if one would want to know what faith is, he would have to take the catechism in hand, but if he would want to know what is still alive in its contents, he would have to consult the hymnbook. It is really difficult to grasp how deeply the church hymn reaches into the life of the Christian. Who knows whether more Christians die with a hymn verse or a Scripture text on their lips?

But now, what about the relationship between these hymns and the musical art? Did the Reformation, with its hymns and

⁶ See further Schaff, I, 415, and H. Leigh Bennett, "Psalms, French," *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, II, 932—36.

⁷ See further J. Alexander Hewitt, "Dutch Hymnology," *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, II, 1526—30.

other songs, estrange from itself the musical art? Whatever the differences between Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin in their standpoint over against the arts and the use of music in the liturgy, all three of the Reformers were true friends of music. Zwingli probably was the most talented of the three from a musical point of view, although he closed his church to all music, even to congregational singing.

The musical art also took other paths than those within the church. At the time the Reformation closed its church doors to it, as in Reformed Protestantism, or when music had to present other credentials, as in Lutheranism, it was free to separate itself from the heritage of the church. It could choose to identify itself with Rome, which, under the influence of the Reformation, was also at odds with music. But the Reformation was above all a tremendous spiritual event that touched the individual, offering him new freedom and giving him new responsibilities at the same time. In addition, the sacred folksong that it produced was truly a simple yet not a non-musical phenomenon. Following the thunderstorm of the Reformation, there were many chances that a new growth would prosper in the fields of the art of music. Emil Frommel remarks that wonders create songs and songs create wonders. What a wealth of polyphonic music and various musical forms arose on the basis of the Protestant chorale. Basically, it was the nature of the church hymn of the Reformation that it would attract the musical art more so than the Gregorian chant would. The Gregorian chant was the expression of the medieval *musica ecclesiastica* attitude, an existential creation, with an almost otherworldly appearance. It shunned asso-

ciation with other forms lest it lose its character. In contrast, the church hymn of the Reformation was the musical expression of the *musica vulgaris* because it sprouted in the souls of the people.

The church hymn took its first steps in the fields of house and school music. It was the *kirchliche Gebrauchsmusik* (music for church use) that developed when composers like Johann Walther, Thomas Stölzer, and Balthasar Resinarius started to put the songs of the Reformation in the form of choral arrangements and motets. To these were added the polyphonic Psalm settings of Louis Bourgeois and Claude Goudimel in the Geneva Psalter. These arrangements really did not have any liturgical purpose, but they as well as the Psalm Motets of Claudin, Lejeune Paschal de l'Estocart, and Johann Peter (Jan Pieters) Sweeling, supplied inspirational power in the same splendid manner as did the Reformation hymns.

The song of the Reformation penetrated yet more deeply into the musical art because it won greater forms for itself. Here one thinks of Michael Praetorius' *Musae Sioniae*, of the few but impressive *cantus firmus* compositions of Heinrich Schütz, of the organ chorales of Samuel Scheidt and Johann Pachelbel. One is reminded of Dietrich Buxtehude and Johann Sebastian Bach, whose *St. Matthew Passion* never would have become *the* Passion music if it had not consisted of 18 chorale stanzas, if the impressive first chorus had not been bound to the cold wire of the chorale, "Lamb of God, Most Holy," and if the touching plaintive song completing the first part of the Passion had not echoed the beautiful melody of the chorale of

Matthias Greitter, *O Mensch, beweim' dein Sünde gross.*

The Lutheran hymn finally penetrated so extensively and decisively into the musical art that there need be little hesitation about speaking of Lutheran church music. Surely, though, there are many complaints against it. The great strength of the music of the Lutheran Church was that it did not isolate itself from its surroundings as the music of the Roman Catholic Church often did. A part of its nature was its adaptation to musical developments of its time and surroundings.

The polyphonic music of the Lutheran Church received a special character through inclusion of the Lutheran chorale. Truly, it is not a work of magnitude in itself, nor is it *musica sacra*. Although we cannot isolate it from all other music, we can classify it as a special type of music. It has its roots in the hymn of the church. One might even go as far as did Johannes Mehl, who insisted that the angels of Luke 2 sang in a Lutheran manner. But this is not all. The hymn of the Reformation, which once seemed to be so poor, penetrated beyond the boundaries of the chorale. It can be found where one might not look for it. So Luther's "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven," which once reformed the city of Lübeck, appears in the opera of Wolfgang Mozart, *The Magic Flute*. The chorale of Philipp Nicolai, "How Bright Appears the Morning Star," resounds as a musical background in the piano accompaniment of "Three Kings" by Peter Cornelius. The melody of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is used by Max Reger in his 100th Psalm as a crowning counterpoint played by the brass players in the double fugue of the final part. A modern example is the chorale

Es ist genug, Herr, wenn es dir gefällt from Bach's *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, which was chosen by Alban Berg as a theme in the last movement of his violin concerto, although this work cannot really be added to the musical repertoire of Lutheran church music. These examples should be sufficient. The church hymn of the Reformation clearly had an inspiring influence on the art of music.

The church musician, who has as much love for the church as for church music, who is a church musician in heart and soul and looks into the world through the window of the church, will want to make a further remark. This remark is not a closing comment but the beginning of a song of praise, his special song of praise to God. Because he is also a musician and knows the history of music, he does not object to the statement of his esthetically minded colleague who emphasizes that not all church songs inspired the musical art. On the contrary, he wants his pastors and congregations to know that only a small group of church hymns had the power to impress great composers. A small group, with special musical substance, was selected by the musical art because of its striking melodic structure. The secret of this fact is that the power of these hymns is not their obvious beauty but their concealed musical structure. From the composers' handling of these elite melodies we know that they used the technique of analysis (their daily work) and that they thus arrived at the hymns' deepest significance, the seeds from which have sprung their musical masterpieces.

If we study the works of Johann Walther and Michael Praetorius, of Johann Sebastian Bach and Max Reger, and of the

outstanding composers of our day, we see that they were not always the most beloved by the congregation. But the hymns of the master composers were musically best constructed. For instance, the old hymn, *Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland* ("Savior of the Nations, Come") reveals in all its simplicity a remarkable musical construction. The first and last phrases are completely equal, and the second and third are exact melodic reflections. Other melodies which offer great musical discoveries are *Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir* ("Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee"), *Allein Gott in der Höb' sei Ehr* ("All Glory Be to God on High"), and *Jesu, meine Freude* ("Jesus, Priceless Treasure"). An analysis of the two well-known hymns of Philipp Nicolai, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* ("Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying") and *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* ("How Lovely Shines the Morning Star") reveals why they are called the king and queen of the church hymns and were often used by the greatest composers in their greatest works. They are hymns of majestic beauty and superb musical structure. Church hymns with special substance possessed the power to inspire the great composers; they were enabled to take the *gradus ad Parnassum*, the big step, to the top of the mountain of the musical art.

But the church musician must interrupt in order to finish this reasoning. He agrees but also points out that in the hymns of the church is found the congregational proclamation of the creed and of the Word of God. By the use of great and famous melodies the church lifts up its message *ad Parnassum*, from which it can be heard by people who have turned their backs on the

church, thinking that they do not need the church.

The final observation the church musician must make is that Lutheran Christians, who are supposed to support the "singing church" after possessing this rich heritage, are now so musically poor that they hardly realize what great missionary resources are available in their church hymns, particularly in that select group from the Reformation period. In the last century Max Reger, himself a Catholic, proclaimed that "you Protestants do not know what you possess in your chorales." Today in Moscow believers and unbelievers still come in contact with the happy message of the church through Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and its many chorales. Everywhere in the world where people substitute their worship of the arts for religion, they are nevertheless still found by the church through the musical art in which the song of the church lives on and continues its work.

Truly, the church musician who combines church and music in its heart and soul could sing a song of praise at the union of select church hymns and select church music. As the result of this union he sees many other possibilities to serve the church with this music. His song of praise modulates to a song of lamentation when he sees how little the church makes use of these means. The rediscovery of our time, of this post-modern and post-Christian era in which the spoken word has declined so strongly, is that the song of the church, together with all its good qualities, also has a missionary power. He who deals with the church hymn and knows of its radiating power in and through the art of music knows that it can today fulfill a special church function. As a witness of the

church, the hymn can fulfill a mission to the outposts of the church, and through the musical art, which the hymn won for itself, it is already standing as a servant of the church in the midst of the world.

Paul Gabriel, a fine hymnologist, gave due recognition to the church hymn when he said that many melodies water the words, so that the Word of God looks refreshed, is prevented from wilting, and can grow and bear fruit in man's heart. Gabriel "hit the nail on the head" when he mentioned that the church hymn is the lengthened arm of the Bible, an arm that reaches so far that one cannot hide from it. It is always where one least expects it, where one takes for granted that he has no need for it; it is like a mother who always provides for the needs of her child.

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The only thing the church musician still has to say at this time before he can begin the work he should like to do for the church is that the church should listen to him and realize that the church hymn, with its musical power, has at the same time religious power. If we sing the hymn and listen to it, if we fathom it and use it with all its artistic possibilities, we will discover that the select hymn of the church has a special radius. We will see that it can bring the message of the church to those who could not otherwise be reached, that it seeks the lost sons, that it helps strengthen the faith, that it preaches and encourages, and that it does nothing else than what its duty is, namely, to minister to the world. And if it does this artistically, it does it thoroughly, even though this may be hard to believe.