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LUTHER ON MUSIC

By WALTER E. BUSZIN

SINCE the day of Martin Luther's death, February 18, 1546, many conflicting opinions have been voiced concerning the Reformer's knowledge, understanding, and ability as a musician. Statements have been made on both sides, during these four hundred years, that are so extreme that they must be discredited entirely. After all, a man of Luther's stature does not need the support of blind enthusiasts to establish his greatness, nor do the hatred and calumny of his foes hurt him markedly. He is neither "the Palestrina of Lutheranism and Protestantism", as has been asserted by some, nor was he merely "a clever dilettante who indeed supplied his adherents with liturgical music which conformed to their teachings, but who cannot be regarded as a composer and as an originator of tunes and who exerted no influence on the further development of musical art".¹

The fact that we possess a great body of German Protestant church music is mainly attributable to Luther's understanding and love of music. Calvin's indifference, or rather hostility, to music effectively thwarted the rise of a comparable musical literature in the countries that espoused Calvinism. The Reformer was a remarkable judge of music, a discriminating connoisseur whose high standards are well demonstrated by his preference for such composers as Senfl and Josquin.

One may glean much concerning Luther's musical knowledge, understanding, and ability from his statements concerning the art of music. These statements were made throughout the years of his career as Reformer (1517—1546). The very fact that he discoursed on music on many occasions proves that the thoughts and opinions he expressed were well established convictions and were not merely casual or transitory. His state-

¹ Wilhelm Bäumker, *Zur Geschichte der Tonkunst*, Freiburg (Breisgau), 1881, p. 153.

ments likewise show that his musical philosophy was carefully thought out, logical, sincere, enthusiastic, and applicable to situations of life and ecclesiastical activity. Though it is impossible and unnecessary at present to quote all of Luther's recorded statements touching music, an attempt is herewith made to present as rounded a picture of Luther the lover of music as may be painted from his utterances. I shall add to the source material only a few remarks deemed necessary to insure clarity.²

In 1538 was published a collection of part-songs based on the suffering and death of Christ. For this collection Luther wrote a preface³ which portrays his deep-rooted admiration for music. Luther said:

I most heartily desire that music, that divine and most precious gift, be praised and extolled before all people. However, I am so completely overwhelmed by the quantity and greatness of its excellence and virtues, that I can find neither beginning nor end, nor adequate words and expressions to say what I ought; as a result, though I am full of the highest praise, I remain nothing more than a jejune and miserable eulogist.⁴

Here ought one to speak of the use one might make of so great a thing, but even this use is so infinitely manifold that it is beyond the reach of the greatest eloquence of the greatest orators.⁵ We are able to adduce only this one point at present, namely, that experience proves that, next to the Word of God, only music deserves being extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart⁶ (regarding animals nothing must be said now), by which as their masters men and women are ruled and often swept away. A greater praise than this we cannot imagine . . . Even the Holy Spirit honors music as a tool of his work, since He testifies in the Holy Scriptures, that through the medium of music His gifts have been put into the hands of the Prophets [e.g., Elisha]; again, through music the devil has been driven away, that is, he, who incites people to all vices, as was the case with Saul, the King of Israel. For this very reason the Fathers and Prophets desired not in vain that nothing be more intimately linked up with the Word of God than music.

Indeed, upon man, not upon any other creatures, has been bestowed

² The author worked largely with the Erlangen (E) and St. Louis (SL) editions of Luther's works. The variants between these editions as to statements regarding music are inconsequential as far as factual content is concerned. While all translations found in this article were prepared by the author, an expression of gratitude is due his esteemed colleague and friend, Professor E. E. Foelber, who offered many helpful suggestions and checked the translations with the original German and Latin texts of Luther's works.

³ *Praefatio D. M. Lutheri in Harmonias de Passione Christi, E, Opera Latina*, VII, 551-54; SL, XIV, 428-31.

⁴ *ineiunus et inops esse laudator.*

⁵ *superat omnium eloquentissimorum eloquentissimam eloquentiam.*

⁶ *affectuum humanorum.*

not only a voice, but also the gift of speech, in order that man might know that he is to praise God with words and music . . . If you will make comparisons among men themselves, you will note how manifold and in what various ways the Creator has proved Himself glorious through the distribution of the gifts of music; you will note how people differ from each other through voice and word, how one will excel another by far. It is denied by some that two people can be found who have exactly the same voice and speech, although one often notices that some imitate others, or that some are the apes of others.

Finally, however, when the attempt is made to improve one's natural ability, to develop and unfold it completely, we can perceive, astonished, but cannot comprehend the boundless and perfect wisdom of God revealed in His wonderful gift of music. Outstanding in this art is this, that while one voice continues to sing its *cantus firmus*, other voices at the same time cavort about the principal voice in a most wonderful manner with praise and jubilation, adorning the *cantus firmus* with most lovely movements;⁷ they seem to present a kind of divine dance so that even those of our day who have only a most limited amount of sentiment and emotion gain the impression that there exists nothing more wonderful and beautiful. Those who are not moved by this, are, indeed, unmusical and deserve to hear some dunghill poet⁸ or the music of swine.

But this subject is so great that its many advantages cannot be treated adequately in a brief statement of this kind. To you, my dear young man, I commend this noble, wholesome, and joyful creation, through which the feelings of your heart may at times be helped, especially when withstanding shameful lusts and bad company. Therefore accustom yourself to see in this creation your Creator and to praise Him through it. Diligently beware of corrupt hearts, which misuse this most beautiful natural gift and art, as do those lascivious and lewd poets, who use it for their insane amours. Avoid such people and know that they have become unnatural through the wiles of the devil; use the gift of music to praise God and Him alone, since He has given us this gift. These adulterers convert a gift of God into a spoil and with it honor the enemy of God who is also the adversary of nature and the foe of this lovely art. Farewell in the Lord.

One of Luther's most famous statements regarding music was his Foreword to Georg Rhau's *Symphonix iucundæ atque adeo breves quattuor vocum, ab optimis quibusque musicis compositæ*, a collection published in 1538. Two noteworthy German translations of this Foreword were published in the 16th century after Luther's death, one by Johann Walther (1564), the other by Wolfgang Figulus (1575). The following

⁷ *iucundissimis gestibus.*

⁸ *merdipoetam.*

excerpts from this Foreword will suffice to illustrate its character and content:⁹

I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given mankind by God. The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them. . . . In summa, next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in this world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits. . . . Our dear fathers and prophets did not desire without reason that music be always used in the churches. Hence we have so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself of the fact that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God. However, when man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with great surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God in music, which is, after all, His product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace. . . . A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard it [music] as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.

Another famous foreword by Luther was the one prepared for the Valentin Babst *Gesangbuch* (*Geistlich Lieder*) of 1545, where Luther says in part:¹⁰

. . . The worship in the New Testament Church is on a higher plane than that of the Old; the Psalmist refers to this fact when he says: "Sing unto the Lord a new song, sing unto the Lord all the earth." For God has made our hearts and spirits happy through His dear Son, whom He has delivered up that we might be redeemed from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this sincerely and earnestly cannot help but be happy; he must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ. If any would not sing and talk of what Christ has wrought for us, he shows thereby that he does not really believe and that he belongs not into the New Testament, which is an era of joy, but into the Old, which produces not the spirit of joy, but of unhappiness and discontent.

Luther's letter to Ludwig Senfl,¹¹ written at Coburg on Octo-

⁹ Karl Anton, *Luther und die Musik*, Zwickau, 1928, pp. 50-53.

¹⁰ E, LVI, pp. 306-08; SL, X, 1430-33.

¹¹ SL, XXIIa, 1574.

ber 4, 1530, is unquestionably one of the most significant documents we have from the pen of the Reformer. The letter reads as follows:

Grace and peace in Christ! Although my name is so thoroughly hated and despised, dear Ludwig, that I must fear you will receive and read my letter hardly with safety,¹² my love for music, with which I perceive God has adorned and talented you, has conquered all my fears. My love for music leads me also to hope that my letter will not endanger you in any way, for who, even in Turkey, would find fault with anyone who loves music and praises the artist? I, at least, love your Bavarian dukes, even though they certainly dislike me. I honor them above all others because they cultivate and honor music. There are, without doubt, in the human heart many seed-grains of precious virtue which are stirred up by music. All those with whom this is not the case I regard as stupid blockheads and senseless stones. For we know that to the devils music is something altogether hateful and unbearable. I am not ashamed to confess publicly that next to theology there is no art which is the equal of music, for she alone, after theology, can do what otherwise only theology can accomplish, namely, quiet and cheer up the soul of man, which is clear evidence that the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, flees from the voice of music just as he flees from the words of theology. For this very reason the prophets cultivated no art so much as music in that they attached their theology not to geometry, nor to arithmetic, nor to astronomy, but to music, speaking the truth through psalms and hymns. But how poorly am I now praising music, attempting, as I do, to paint, yet perhaps only disfiguring, on so small a leaf as this a matter so great? Still, my heart overflows with fondness for music, which has refreshed me so often and freed me from great burdens. I return to you with the request that, should you possess a copy of the song, "I Lie and Sleep Enwrapped by Peace",¹³ you have it copied out and sent to me. For its melody has refreshed me since the days of my youth and does so now more than ever before, since now I understand the words also. I have not as yet seen a choral arrangement of this song. However, I do not desire to burden you with the task of preparing a setting for choir, but take for granted that you have already procured one from somewhere. I hope that the end of my life is near, for the world hates me and does not care to tolerate me any longer; on the other hand, I have had my fill of this world and despise it. Therefore, may my good and faithful Shepherd take my soul out of this world. For this very reason I am singing this song oftener and should like a many-voiced arrangement of it. Should you not possess it, I shall send you the simple version I have of it, and if it be your desire, you may then prepare a

¹² Senfl was employed by the Roman Catholic court of the Duke of Bavaria. Luther's letters were delivered to Senfl through an intermediary.

¹³ *Ich lieg und schlafe ganz im Frieden.*

setting after I have died.¹⁴ The Lord Jesus be with you into eternity. Amen. Pardon my boldness and verbosity. Extend to your entire chorus my respectful greetings.

It is well known that Luther was a great admirer of the works of Ludwig Senfl. This is brought out in the following quotation which, though it proves that Luther realized that he did not possess Senfl's skill as a composer, does not prove, as has been claimed, that Luther had no ability as a composer whatsoever.

I would not be able to compose such a motet, even if I would tear myself to pieces in the attempt, just as he [Senfl] would not be able to preach as I can. Hence the gifts of God are of many kinds and sorts, just as there are many different members in one body. But men are not content with their own gifts; they are not satisfied with what God has given them. All want to be the whole body, not merely members of it.¹⁵

I have always loved music. Those who have mastered this art are made of good stuff, they are fit for any task. It is necessary indeed that music be taught in the schools. A teacher must be able to sing; otherwise I will not as much as look at him. Also, we should not ordain young men into the ministry unless they have become well acquainted with music in the schools.¹⁶

Music is a beautiful and glorious gift of God and close to theology. I would not give up what little I know about music for something else which I might have in greater abundance. We should always make it a point to habituate youth to enjoy the art of music, for it produces fine and skilful people.¹⁷

On December 17, 1538, Luther was host to a number of singers. After they had sung several motets as well as other choral pieces, Luther enthusiastically remarked:

If the Lord God has given us such noble gifts already in this life, which is, after all, an out-house, what will happen in yonder eternal life, where everything is entirely perfect and most lovely? In this world we have everything only in the rough (*materia prima*).¹⁸

After the death of Frederick the Wise,¹⁹ his brother, John the Steadfast, became elector and regent. He soon dissolved

¹⁴ Instead of complying with this request, Senfl wrote for Luther and sent him a composition based on a cheerful and encouraging text, namely a setting of the words of Psalm 118, 17: *Non moriar, sed vivam et narrabo opera Domini* — I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.

¹⁵ E, LXII, p. 309; SL, XXII, 1538.

¹⁶ E, LXII, pp. 308 f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

¹⁸ SL, XXII, 1538.

¹⁹ May 5, 1525.

the choir of the famous Castle Church of Wittenberg and dismissed its members in order to expend the money formerly needed for its support "for better purposes". He likewise decided to disband the *Hofkapelle* of his illustrious brother, thus depriving its members of a good job. Among these was Johann Walther, Luther's able assistant, who has been referred to as "the Father of Lutheran church-music", a title that many prefer to give to Luther. Walther had succeeded Adam Renner as composer of the *Kantorei* (cantorate or choir school) of Frederick the Wise. Melanchthon sent a letter to John the Steadfast, in which he requested the elector not to put a man like Walther out of work, "since," according to Melanchthon, "he has composed songs that are sung a great deal at present. We have need of such people, not only in order that the good music that has been used might not be buried, but also that new and better music be written. I consider retaining the services of such people a good work from which God derives pleasure. Thus far have people in many places maintained music-groups for unnecessary pomp and other unbecoming purposes. Why should the noble art of music not remain active now for God's sake, since it is used for the service and glory of God."²⁰ On the same day²¹ Luther wrote to the elector as follows:

... Finally, my most gracious Lord, I request again that Your Electoral Grace will not permit the *Kantorei* to pass out of existence, especially since those who are at present its members have been trained for such work; in addition, the art [of music] is worthy of being supported and maintained by Princes and Lords, much more so than many other endeavors and enterprises for which there is not nearly so much need... The goods and possessions belonging to the monasteries could well be used to take care of these people. God would derive pleasure from such a transfer.²²

Although the elector refused to change his mind about dissolving the *Kantorei*, insisting that better use could be found for the funds until now allocated to music and that court-musicians are a rather indolent lot who have too little to do, he finally did grant Walther an annual allowance of twenty-five gulden,

²⁰ Quoted by Wilibald Gurlitt, from the *Corpus Reformatorum* (Vol. I, 1834, p. 799, No. 385), in his article *Johannes Walter und die Musik der Reformationszeit*, in *Jahrbuch der Luther-Gesellschaft*, Munich, 1933, pp. 34-35.

²¹ June 20, 1526.

²² Gurlitt, *op. cit.*, p. 35; E, LIII, p. 375.

which he was to receive until the end of his life, "since this man Walther is not equipped to do other work".²³

In 1523 Luther wrote to Spalatinus, who was at that time private secretary to Frederick the Wise and of great service to Luther:²⁴

Following the example of the prophets and fathers of the Church, we intend to collect German psalms for the people so that through the medium of song the Word of God may remain among the people.²⁵

In 1524, the year in which Walther's and Luther's *Geistliches Gesangbüchlein* appeared, Luther wrote as follows to Spalatinus:²⁶

I am willing to make German psalms for the people, according to the example set by the prophets and ancient fathers; by this I mean that I am willing to prepare spiritual songs [hymns] in order that the Word of God may be conserved among the people through singing also. We are, therefore, seeking everywhere for poets. Since you are richly endowed with knowledge of idiomatic German and good taste, and have cultivated these gifts through much practice, I implore you to undertake this task with us and transform one of the psalms into a hymn, according to the example I herewith enclose. I desire, however, that you exclude unfamiliar words and courtly expressions in order that the words be simple and familiar to the people, and yet, at the same time, pure and apt and that the meaning be clear and faithful to the psalms. He who has grasped the sense of the words must be free, however, to substitute for the original expression other convenient words. I do not possess the gift in so great a measure that I am able to do what I desire. I desire, therefore, to put you to the test to ascertain whether you are a Heman, an Asaph, or a Judith.

The Preface written by Luther for the *Geistliches Gesangbüchlein* reads as follows:²⁷

Every Christian knows that the practice of singing spiritual songs is wholesome and well-pleasing unto God, for everybody knows that not only the prophets and kings of Israel (who praised God with vocal and instrumental music, with songs and stringed instruments), but also the early Christians, who sang especially psalms, used music already in the

²³ Gurlitt, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁴ Luther wrote, in all, more than 400 letters to Spalatinus, whose German name was Georg Burkhardt.

²⁵ Anton, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁶ Friedrich Spitta, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott." *Die Lieder Luthers in ihrer Bedeutung für das evangelische Kirchenlied*. Göttingen, 1905, p. 9. Cf. also Wilhelm de Wette, *Luthers Briefe*, II, 590.

²⁷ E, LVI, p. 296 f; SL, X, 1422 ff.

early stages of the Church's history. Indeed, St. Paul encouraged the use of music 1. Cor. 14, and in his Epistle to the Colossians he insists that Christians appear before God with psalms and spiritual songs which emanate from the heart, in order that through these the Word of God and Christian doctrine may be preached, taught, and put into practice.

Bearing all this in mind, I, together with several others,²⁸ have collected a number of spiritual songs in order that a beginning might be made to prepare and gather such material and also that others, whose ability is greater than ours, be induced to do such work. This should be done that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which through God's grace is now again being proclaimed, might be set going and spread among men. Thus shall we, as did Moses in his famous Song (Exod. 15), derive satisfaction from the fact that Christ is the theme of our songs of praise, and thus shall we indicate that we desire to sing and to tell that Christ alone is our Saviour, as St. Paul says 1. Cor. 2.

The music is arranged in four parts.²⁹ I desire this particularly in the interest of the young people, who should and must receive an education in music as well as in the other arts if we are to wean them away from carnal and lascivious songs and interest them in what is good and wholesome. Only thus will they learn, as they should, to love and appreciate what is intrinsically good. I am not of the opinion that because of the Gospel all arts should be rejected violently and vanish, as is desired by the heterodox, but I desire that all arts, particularly music, be employed in the service of Him who has given and created them. I pray, therefore, that every pious Christian would approve of what I have said and, if God has endowed him with the necessary talents and ability, help further the cause. Unfortunately the world has become lax towards the real needs of its youth and has forgotten to train and educate its sons and daughters along the proper lines. The welfare of our youth should be our chief concern. God grant us His grace. Amen.

The following quotation³⁰ is part of a thesis Luther started to write, but never finished. Its title was *Περὶ τῆς μουσικῆς* "Concerning Music":

He who despises music, as do all the fanatics, does not please me. For music is a gift and largess of God, not a gift of men. Music drives away the devil and makes people happy; it induces one to forget all wrath, unchastity, arrogance, and other vices. After theology I accord to music the highest place and the greatest honor. We note that David and all the saints used verse, rhymes, and songs to express their godly thoughts; *quia pacis tempore regnat musica*—for music reigns in days of peace.

²⁸ Luther here includes, undoubtedly, men like Spalatinus, who helped prepare the texts. The collection includes 43 musical settings of 32 German and 5 Latin texts. Among these were 24 hymn-texts prepared by Luther. The (5-part) musical settings were prepared by Johann Walther.

²⁹ Luther apparently ignored the *vagans*, the fifth part, the purpose of which was merely to fill out the harmony and make it richer.

³⁰ E, LXII, p. 311; SL, XXII, 1541.

Although Luther enjoyed good secular music, even when he was a monk he deprecated the carnal and corrupt songs of his day, which he called *alte Lieder* to distinguish them particularly from the wholesome vocal music of sacred character, which he designated *cantica nova*, the new songs referred to in the Book of Psalms. While he did not dance (Melanchthon did), he was very fond of the joyful songs that accompanied dancing. Such dancing and singing he regarded as “an *officium humanitatis* which pleases me well”.³¹ “Why is it that for the secular phases of life [*carnalibus*] we have so many fine poems and such fine songs while for spiritual matters we have such poor and cold stuff?” Luther then recites poetry to illustrate his point.³²

Luther studied the Church’s attitude towards music throughout the ages and significantly singled out St. Augustine for comment. This most influential father of the Church was a man who, while devoted to and enjoying music, had grave doubts about its propriety in Christian life since “music hath charms”. Augustinian thought was always strongly in evidence wherever music showed an arrested development, as in Italy prior to the *ars nova*, and in the Calvinistic provinces of Western Europe. It is noteworthy that Luther actually tried to remove this obstacle from the path of his philosophy of music, as can be seen from the following excerpt:

... Music is a beautiful and lovely gift of God which has often moved and inspired me to preach with joy. St. Augustine was afflicted with scruples of conscience whenever he discovered that he had derived pleasure from music and had been made happy thereby; he was of the opinion that such joy is unrighteous and sinful. He was a fine pious man; however, if he were living today, he would hold with us...³³

Luther did not approve of uninteresting music. When, on one occasion, the composer Lukas Edemberger had brought along some songs written largely in canonic style (*plenas fugarum*), Luther remarked that these were not pleasing and enjoyable because the composer was more interested in writing counterpoint than in writing interesting music. His words were:

³¹ Cf. Hans Preuss, *Martin Luther der Künstler*, Gütersloh, 1931, pp. 94-95.

³² *Ibid.*, 310; SL, XXII, 1539.

³³ E, LXII, p. 111.

Artis sat habet, sed caret suavitate (He has enough of art and skill, but is lacking in warmth).³⁴

Luther's high regard for the music of the Roman Catholic Church was expressed on various occasions. One of his clearest statements was made in a collection of burial hymns which appeared in 1542, where he said:

To set a good example, we have made some selections from the beautiful music and hymns used in the papacy, in vigils, masses for the dead, and at burials, and have published some in this volume . . . However, we have changed the texts and have not retained those used in the papacy . . . The songs and the music are precious; it would be a pity, indeed, should they perish.³⁵

Luther had already set forth his policy in his *Formula Missæ* of 1523,³⁶ where he said: *Nos interim omnia probabimus, quod bonum est tenebimus* (In the meantime we shall try all things, what is good we shall retain).³⁷

While exhorting the clergy at the Diet of Augsburg (1530), Luther enumerated no fewer than 114 items that determine the character of Roman Catholic services of worship, practically all of which he must, however, reject. He then remarks: "The best feature of these services is the fact that the fine seasonal Latin hymns have remained, although, unfortunately, they have been almost covered up by the new spiritual songs and are counted worth hardly anything. Nevertheless, we shall hold on to these and enjoy them most heartily."³⁸ Luther was particularly fond of hymns written for the Christmas season; these he would sing with his friends and his family. His favorite seems to have been *Ein Kindelein so löblich* (A Wondrous Child, the Virgin-Born), the second stanza from the Latin hymn *Dies est Lætitia*. Luther referred to this hymn often and spoke of it as a work of the Holy Ghost. He was also fond of *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, *Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist*, and *Christ ist erstanden*. Concerning *Christ ist erstanden* he remarked: "Whoever wrote this hymn had the right conception of Easter. One ultimately tires of all songs, but *Christ ist erstanden* must be sung every

³⁴ Preuss, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁶ E, *Opera Latina*, VII, pp. 2-20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁸ SL, XVI, 990.

year. The Holy Spirit inspired the person who wrote this song.”³⁹

Reference has already been made to the fact that Luther thought very highly of the motets of Ludwig Senfl. He likewise cherished the highest respect and fondness for the music of Josquin Desprez. His remarks concerning this great master reveal not only enthusiasm, but also profound understanding of the great music of his day and dissatisfaction with other aspects of 15th- and 16th-century music:

Josquin is a master of the notes, which must express what he desires; on the other hand, other choral composers must do what the notes dictate.⁴⁰

God has His Gospel preached also through the medium of music; this may be seen from the compositions of Josquin, all of whose works are cheerful, gentle, mild, and lovely; they flow and move along and are neither forced nor coerced and bound by rigid and stringent rules, but, on the contrary, are like the song of the finch.⁴¹

Luther had the highest regard for the erudition of musicians; he did not share the opinion of those who regard them as intellectual simpletons. This may be gleaned from one of his table-talks, given on New Year's Day, 1537, where, clearly using “ten years” as a round number, he remarked: “Alas, what fine musicians have died within the last ten years: Josquin [d. 1521], Pierre de la Rue [1518], Finck [d. 1527], and many other excellent men. The world is unworthy of her learned men.”⁴²

A much quoted statement by Luther is the following,⁴³ taken from one of his table-talks:

One of the most beautiful and most precious gifts of God is music. Satan is very hostile to it, since it casts out many scruples and evil thoughts. The devil does not remain near it, for music is one of the finest of all arts. Its notes instil life into its texts. Music drives away the spirit of sadness, as may be seen from the life of King Saul. Several members of the nobility and certain bigwigs are of the opinion that they have saved my most gracious Lord the annual sum of 3000 gulden by inducing him to do away with his musical organizations; at the same time, however, they squander 30,000 gulden on unworthy purposes. Kings, princes, and lords

³⁹ Preuss, *op. cit.*, p. 91. S. Kümmerle, *Encyklopaedie der evangelischen Kirchenmusik*, Gütersloh, 1888, I, p. 272.

⁴⁰ M. Johann Mathesius, *Dr. Martin Luthers Leben*, St. Louis, 1883, p. 227 f. Mathesius was a personal friend of Luther.

⁴¹ SL, XXII, p. 427 f.

⁴² Preuss, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁴³ E, LXII, p. 307; SL, XXII, 1536-1538.

must support music; it is indeed fitting and proper that potentates and regents regulate the use and propagation of the fine arts. While some private citizens and common people are willing to finance the cultivation of music and love it, they are not able to shoulder its maintenance and cultivation.

Duke George, the landgrave of Hesse, and Duke Frederick, the elector of Saxony, maintained a choir and a *Kantorei*; at the present time such organizations are being maintained by the Duke of Bavaria, by Emperor Ferdinand and Emperor Charles. One reads in the Bible that pious kings supported, maintained, and gave salaries to singers. For a person beset by grief music is the most effective balm, for through it the heart is made content, is inspired and refreshed, as was said by Vergil: *Tu calamos inflare leves, ego dicere versus*—You sing the notes, then will I sing the text.

Music is a semi-discipline and taskmistress, which makes people milder and more gentle, more civil and more sensible. The wicked gut-scrapers and fiddlers serve the purpose of enabling us to see and hear what a fine and wholesome art music really is; for white is more clearly recognized when it is contrasted with black.

In his interpretation of the last words of David (2. Sam. 23, 1), Luther says:⁴⁴

Since it proclaims and sings of the Messiah, the Book of Psalms is for such hearts a sweet, comforting, and lovely song; this is the case even when one speaks or recites the mere words and does not employ the aid of music. Nevertheless, music and notes, which are wonderful gifts and creations of God, do help gain a better understanding of the text, especially when sung by a congregation and when sung earnestly.

We find a noteworthy statement in his celebrated *Letter to the Aldermen and Cities of Germany to Erect and Maintain Christian Schools*⁴⁵ of 1524:

Since youth must skip about and leap, or at least do something that affords pleasure, and since it would certainly not do to forbid this entirely, ought we not to furnish schools in which we could teach youth such art? By the grace of God everything is so arranged today, that children are able to learn with pleasure, even while they play, not only the languages, but also the arts and history. . . . I say for myself: If I had children⁴⁶ and would be able to carry it out, I would insist that they study not only the languages and history, but also singing, [instrumental] music and all of mathematics. Is this not all child's-play, through which the Greeks in former times trained their children, who developed into men and women of remarkable ability, fit for every eventuality of life?

⁴⁴ SL, III, 1888.

⁴⁵ E, XXII, p. 191; SL, X, 478.

⁴⁶ Luther's oldest child, Hans, was born in 1526.

That Luther lived up to this statement may be concluded from the fact that in 1542 he sent his sixteen-year-old Hans to the *Lateinschule* at Torgau in order that he might study music under the guidance of his eminent friend Johann Walther. The following words of Luther,⁴⁷ written to Markus Crodell, superintendent of the Torgau school, in a letter dated August 26, 1542, are significant: "Farewell in the Lord! Wish Johann Walther well for me and ask him to provide my son with instruction in music. I indeed must develop theologians, but I desire that also grammarians and musicians be trained among our people."

One of the keenest disappointments of Luther's life was caused by the fact that the Elector of Saxony could not be persuaded to engage a man of Walther's ability to develop high musical standards in Wittenberg, the seat of the Reformation. The cultural and artistic standards had been high under Frederick the Wise, but never after. As late as 1541, five years before his death, Luther wrote to the Elector:

We have to this day great need for a capable musician [in Wittenberg]. However, since no funds were available, we have disdained to trouble Your Electoral Grace with many petitions. Now that it has been decided to expend the funds supplied by Licentiate Blanken, it seems to me to be a good idea to use some of these to engage a first-rate musician. For there was a time when we, like others, were supplied with such as could sing by the papacy. Now that the day has come in which we must train our own singers, we are not in a position to do so [i. e., because no expert is on hand to do this work].⁴⁸

In 1534 Luther conducted a visitation of the churches in Torgau. After he had noted how the musical standards had risen under Walther's capable leadership and guidance, he rejoiced "because God Almighty has graciously blessed this city of Torgau above many others with an illustrious *Kantorei* and with glorious music".⁴⁹

It is a well known and easily established fact that Luther made much of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. This doctrine, based largely on 1. Peter 2, 9, prompted him not only to have high regard for the common man and for

⁴⁷ De Wette, *op. cit.*, V, p. 492.

⁴⁸ Quoted by Gurlitt, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Enders-Kawerau, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, XIII, No. 2903.

⁴⁹ Quoted by Kümmerle, *op. cit.*, IV, 47.

his well-being, temporal as well as spiritual, but also to consider the worshipper seated in the pews while arranging his services of worship. The laity was to take an active part in the performance of the Church's liturgies, and hymn-singing by the congregation became an integral part of Lutheran liturgies. This was brought out by Luther in his *Formula Missae et Communionis* of 1523, when he said:⁵⁰

I desire also that we have more songs which might be sung in the vernacular of the people, and which the people might sing during the celebration of the Mass after the chanting (in Latin) of the Gradual, the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei. For who doubts that these liturgical parts, which today only the choir sings and with which it responds to the bishop who pronounces the benediction, were at one time sung by all the people? In fact, the singing of these songs may be so arranged by the bishop that they are sung either immediately after the Latin chants have been sung, or interchangeably, in Latin one day (Sunday), in the vernacular the other. Finally the entire Mass will then be sung in the vernacular of the people. But we need poets; as yet we have none who are able to prepare for us pious and spiritual songs (as St. Paul calls them) which deserve being used in the church of God.

Luther was quite liberal in his views. His *Letter to the Aldermen and Cities of Germany to Erect and Maintain Christian Schools* shows plainly that he was definitely of the opinion that, for the sake of the Gospel, the youth of the Church must be taught languages in the schools of Germany and of the Church. For the sake of the young people he did not want Latin services abrogated entirely. In his *Deutsche Messe und Ordnung des Gottesdienstes* of 1526 he said:⁵¹

For I in no wise desire that the Latin language be dropped entirely from our services of worship; I say this in the interest of our youth. If it were possible for me to do so, and if the Greek and Hebrew languages were used as commonly among us as is the Latin language and were also used in as much fine music as is Latin, I would urge that we change off and conduct Mass and sing and read from the Scriptures in all four languages, one Sunday in German, the next in Latin, the third in Greek, the fourth in Hebrew.

While Luther insisted that hymns be sung in the vernacular of the people, he insisted at the same time that the hymns sung in the vernacular be idiomatic and fitting. He stated this clearly

⁵⁰ E, *Opera Latina*, VII, 16 f.

⁵¹ SL, X, 228.

in his writing *Against the Heavenly Prophets* of 1525:⁵²

Although I am willing to permit the translating of Latin texts of choral and vocal music into the vernacular with the retention of the original notes and musical settings, I am nevertheless of the opinion that the result sounds neither proper nor correct; the text, the notes, the accents, the tune, and likewise the entire outward expression must be genuine outgrowths of the original text and its spirit; otherwise, everything is nothing more than an apish imitation.

It would be very difficult to prove from Luther's writings that the Reformer possessed specific ability as a composer. His remark concerning his inability to write music like that of Ludwig Senfl indicates clearly that he was fully aware of his own shortcomings as a composer of music. A very short motet based on the words *Non moriar, sed vivam* (Ps. 118, 17) written by Luther⁵³ has been found and authenticated which indicates that Luther possessed enough theoretical knowledge to write music of this type. It is not great music; Luther would likely have been the first to admit this. It is, however, typical of Luther's nature and spirit, based as it was on a passage that afforded him great comfort. That Luther did not write some of the hymn-tunes formerly ascribed to him does not detract from his importance in the field of music in general and church-music in particular, just as Gregory the Great is not dishonored by the fact that he probably was unable to write Gregorian chant or music of any kind. Some scholars today still credit Luther with having written *Ein feste Burg*, tune as well as text, despite Bäumker's claims to the contrary and despite the fact that some of the phrases of the tune were *loci communes* in Luther's day, just as some of Bach's fugue themes were regarded as common property in the days of the Leipzig Cantor. Walther's words of 1565, recorded in Michael Prætorius' *Syntagma Musicum*,⁵⁴ are often quoted:

When Luther, forty years ago, wanted to prepare his German Mass, he requested of the Elector of Saxony and Duke John . . . that Conrad Rupff and I be summoned to Wittenberg, where he might discuss music and the nature of the eight Gregorian psalm-tones with us. He himself selected finally the eighth tone for the Epistle and the sixth for the

⁵² SL, XX, 197.

⁵³ Published by Peter Limbach, Berlin.

⁵⁴ I, 451. Cf. Johann Rautenstrauch, *Luther und die Pflege der kirchlichen Musik in Sachsen*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 8.

Gospel, saying at the same time that Christ is a friendly and charming Lord, hence we shall take the sixth tone for the Gospel. Since St. Paul is a very serious-minded apostle, we shall use the eighth tone for the Epistle. He [Luther] prepared the music for the Epistles and Gospels, likewise for the Words of Institution of the true body and blood of Christ; he chanted these for me and asked me to express my opinion of his efforts. At that time he kept me in Wittenberg for three weeks; we discussed how the Epistles and Gospels might be set properly. I was in Wittenberg with Luther until the first German Mass had been presented [October 29, 1525]. I had been asked to listen to this first performance and then take a copy with me to Torgau and report, at the command of the Doctor, my impression to His Grace, the Elector. . . . I know and hereby truthfully testify that . . . Luther . . . found great delight in the chorale as well as in figurate music [i. e., solo or unison music as well as part music]. I spent many a pleasant hour singing music with him and often experienced that he seemingly could not weary of singing or even get enough of it; in addition, he was able to discuss music eloquently.⁵⁵

That Luther had at least some knowledge and understanding of musical theory and of the principles of composition may be concluded from the following words he sent to Johann Agricola on June 15, 1530: ⁵⁶ "I am herewith sending you a song . . . Unable to read or write for four days, I found in the out-house a piece of paper, on which had been written this old song arranged for three voices. I cleaned, corrected, and improved it, added a fourth voice, and quickly prepared also a text, which I have added to the music . . ." Luther then instructed Agricola to show this music to his deacon, whose name was Römer and who considered himself an expert and a critic in matters musical; he humorously suggested that Agricola tell Römer this was a song of salutation which had received wide acclaim and he said all this "in order that once and for all this great music-critic be deprived of his self-appointed and egotistic judicature in matters of music."

Many more statements by Luther concerning music could easily be adduced. However, those quoted in this article will suffice to help justify Luther's position in the history of music. Because of his intense interest in music and because of his philosophy concerning its nature, uses, import, and purposes, men like Schütz, Buxtehude, Pachelbel, Bach, and a host of others have been encouraged and impelled to write some of the world's

⁵⁵ *von der Musik so herrlich zu reden wusste.*

⁵⁶ Rautenstrauch, *op. cit.*, p. 6; Anton, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

greatest music. Luther's whole approach to music ultimately helped substantially to produce not only great hymns, notably the chorales of the Lutheran Church, but also great choral as well as great instrumental music. Indeed, Luther's mere statements concerning music justify the conclusion reached by Paul Henry Lang: "In the center of the new musical movement which accompanied the Reformation stands the great figure of Martin Luther. He does not occupy this position because of his generalship of the Protestant movement, and nothing is more unjust than to consider him a sort of enthusiastic and good-natured dilettante."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *Music in Western Civilization*, New York, 1941, p. 207.