

## THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN DEVOTIONAL LIFE\*

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### 1 SOME INTRODUCTORY QUOTATIONS

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Dean of St Patrick's, Ireland, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, to Lady Cartaret :

"I know nothing of music, madam. I would not give a farthing for all the music in the Universe. For my own part I would rather say my prayers without it; but as long as it is thought by the skilful to contribute to the dignity of Public Worship, by the blessing of God it shall never be disgraced by me, nor I hope by any of my successors ...."1)

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) to Giuseppe Carpani (Italian poet), who had remarked that all Haydn's church music had such a happy character:

"Ich weiss es nicht anders zu machen. Wie ich's hab, so geb ich's. Wenn ich aber an Gott denke, so ist mein Herz so voll Freude, dass mir die Noten wie von der Spule laufen. Und da mir Gott ein fröhliches Herz gegeben, so wird er mir's schon verzeihen, wenn ich ihm fröhlich diene."2)

St Augustine (354-430), in his *Confessions* (IX,6):

"How much have I wept during Thy songs of praise and hymns, profoundly moved by the voices of the sweet chanting of Thy Church! Those voices entered my ear and (simultaneously) the truth was poured into my heart."3)

Also from St Augustine the often-quoted statement: "*Bis orat, qui cantat*". (Twice (or doubly) prays he who sings.)4)

However, Augustine also said in his *Confessions* (X,33) that when, as sometimes happened, the singing itself moved him more than the words that were sung, he confessed this to be a sin and would then rather hear no singing at all<sup>5)</sup>. This hesitance has, as will be indicated later on, also been the root of the attitude to church music of the reformers Calvin and Zwingli.

Luther and his co-workers had a far more positive opinion about church music, almost to the other extreme. Bugenhagen, for instance, said that

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anyone who was incapable of enjoying music without any scruples, should ask himself whether he deserved to be called a human being<sup>6)</sup>. And Luther himself gave to music the first place next to theology<sup>7)</sup>. And, referring to an old saying: *Clerus, qui non cantat, non est clericus completus*, he almost vehemently postulates musical experience to be a prerequisite for entering the ministry of the Church. Luther wanted every Christian to appreciate, to love music, the divine and most excellent gift of God (*donum divinum et excellentissimum*)<sup>8)</sup>. Music had often inspired him in his preaching, he said, and then he specially reproached St Augustine for his scruples.

Finally, Johann Arndt (1555-1621) in his *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum* called music a "Vorgeschmack des ewigen Lebens" (a foretaste of eternal life), a thought also expressed in an inscription on an old organ: *Musica praeludium vitae aeternae*<sup>9)</sup>.

## 2 SYSTEMATIC SURVEY OF RELIGIOUS MUSIC

It is clear from the above quotations that when talking about music in connection with devotional life, we will have to be more specific. First of all we will have to distinguish between religious or sacred music and secular music. Without going into further detail, one can say that the exact place for this demarcation is rather disputable. We are concerned with the former. But also here we find many ways of looking at it, with a lot of confusion in the terminology applied.

The clearest way of looking at religious music in its widest sense is to see it as concentric circles, the bigger one always including the smaller, but the smaller one excluding what is outside itself<sup>10)</sup>. Here again the exact demarcation is debatable.

2.1 The widest circle is *religious music* in its widest sense: Music with a general religious character; man in pious dialogue with the deity; praising the wonders of nature in general; singing about the good in mankind; all this on the basis of the so-called "natural", human-centered general religious inclination of man.

In our Western civilisation this type of music often has some or other Christian or at least Biblical association. *Examples*: The final movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony (words from Schiller's "Ode to Joy") and many other compositions by Beethoven, Liszt, Bruckner,

Reger and others. Even purely instrumental music can fall in this category, i.e. the "Good Friday Music" from Wagner's "Parsifal".

2.2 The next smaller circle is *pious music*, music confessing to be Christian. This is music - mostly with text, but not necessarily - which is clearly bound to, or at least linked with, Christian faith. It usually has a very individualistic character, expressing personal convictions or even problems, with a generally accepted Christian point of view.

*Examples:* "The Creation" by Joseph Haydn, Beethoven's "Missa solemnis", Brahms' "Vier ernste Gesänge" and his "Ein deutsches Requiem".

The element of struggling with faith and having problems as a believer is probably the reason why some of this music can be so stirring and profoundly moving. And, on the other hand, one cannot deny that, in spite of its general and rather rational character with strong individualistic overtones, Haydn's "Creation" contains some of the most beautiful music ever written to the glory of God, the creator of heaven and earth.

2.3 The smallest circle is *church music* in the strict sense. Here we have music which is meant to be used in divine service, to be performed in church during divine service, in connection with an act of worship. In this innermost circle different categories can be specified, or - if you like - some smaller circles be drawn. Firstly *church music in general*, including all vocal and instrumental music that is performed in church during some or other divine service. Included in this is a smaller circle: The vast area of hymns and versified psalms for *congregational singing*. And in the centre stands the *liturgical music* of the churches adhering in some way or other to orders of service of the mass type and other orders like matins or vespers: The so-called altar singing and the liturgical responses of choir and congregation<sup>11)</sup>.

Personal taste, changing times and customs and, especially, changing theological approach will have an influence on the classifying of a piece of music in these categories of church music. For example Bach's Passions in the Good Friday afternoon service with a long sermon between the first and second parts (as was the custom in Bach's time); or spiritual folk songs, revival songs and chorusses that have given rise to a lot of controversy in our time.

### 3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to get a clearer view of the position in the church today, and in particular in the Lutheran church, a brief survey of the historical background is necessary. The introductory quotations clearly indicate that music has always played an important role in the Christian church. Even much further back in the first historical records we have about music history we find music in connection with religion and religious rites. And even the oldest myths about music and the origin of music speak about music being a gift of the gods to man. Many references in the Old Testament also show that music played an important role in the religious life of Old Testament Israel.

The early Christian church can be categorically stated to have been a singing church. This we know from many sources, e g Col 3:16. This early Christian music had three important roots: Jewish temple/synagogue singing (psalmody), the music practice of Greek antiquity (e g the hymns) and the music of the peoples in Mediterranean and other countries (e g the melismatic *alleluia*)<sup>12)</sup>. This music developed abundantly and a great variety of different local and regional traditions of church singing or chanting established themselves. In the Eastern church this great variety is still in existence today. In the Western church from the 6th century onwards uniformity was gradually enforced and the so-called Gregorian Chant (called after pope Gregory the great who ruled from 590 to 604) was established as the only official church singing, with a few exceptions, e g Milan and Toledo.

Quite early in the Middle Ages the performance of the Latin church music in the official services of the church (mass and offices) became more and more the duty and prerogative of specialist clerical singers, whilst the common people were gradually virtually excluded from partaking in it. This is the position which is referred to when it is said that Luther in the Reformation gave the Protestant hymn and hymn book to a congregation that had been silent for centuries.

But it is not correct to deduce from this that by the time of the Reformation the ordinary people did not sing at all. In fact the people have always sung. There were the spiritual folk songs and the different types of popular songs that had developed from the *Kyrie eleison* acclamations in which the congregation had joined in right through the

Middle Ages. The songs were sung during processions and especially on pilgrimages. And it was in these songs that the ordinary people expressed their belief, in which they prayed and sang to the glory of God. The official services of the church were occasions for silent prayer and for being fascinated or even awe-inspired by everything there - the complicated Latin ceremonies and, of course, the Holy Sacrament. And the Gregorian Chant, and later-on also the polyphonic settings of the mass, was the great music of this fascinating and awe-inspiring church service. The devotional life of the ordinary people found its adequate expression in the other songs and hymns mentioned above<sup>13)</sup>. In some dioceses these were occasionally tolerated in the official services, but on the whole the congregation was excluded from the music of this innermost circle and the people expressed their belief in the music of the next circle.

Luther's great achievement was, therefore, not so much that he taught the people to sing again, but that he gave back to the congregation its rightful place in the singing during the official services of the church. For this purpose he wrote hymns and published the first hymn book in 1524. These hymns were in many ways something completely new, although spiritual songs in the vernacular had been in existence in print some years before: The old Moravian Brethren had published a Czech collection in Prague in 1501<sup>14)</sup>. Completely new were the versified psalms. That they were in fact a creation of Luther, is acknowledged nowadays even by eminent Calvinist hymnologists<sup>15)</sup>. It is interesting to note the difference between Luther's (and the later Lutheran) way of versifying the psalms and that of the Calvinists. The Calvinists followed the Biblical prose text rather strictly in their literal versifications (Genève 1562), while the Lutheran way of versification was free, following the general content of a psalm but giving it a definite New Testament interpretation.

And then, of course, Luther gave music in general an important place in the order of church services, retaining much of the great musical tradition of the old church. In fact he chose the best part of both worlds: The liturgical music and the choral and instrumental music of the old church and the congregational singing of the Reformation.

Calvin, and especially Zwingli, had great problems in this respect. Although musical and, in the case of Zwingli, an able musician himself, they had scruples about the place of music in divine service. Zwingli banned all music, maintaining that the Bible demanded "singing in the heart and not with the mouth"<sup>16)</sup>. Calvin limited congregational singing to the

versified psalms and *cantica* sung to the beautiful Genevan melodies<sup>17)</sup>.

It is interesting to note that in the regions where Calvin and Zwingli had their strongest influence, we find a development similar to that in the Middle Ages: people sang outside the church services, in the schools and especially at home in their devotions<sup>18)</sup>. Calvin in fact worked in this direction, and the beautiful four-part settings of the 1562 **Psalter** by Claude Goudimel (1565) are a great example of the music written for this purpose.

#### 4 THE POSITION IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Some of Luther's statements on music in general have been mentioned above and his contribution with regard to congregational singing has been referred to. We briefly return to Luther again, now specifically with regard to music in the order of divine service. In his sermon at the dedication of the church in the castle of Torgau (1544) he summarized the nature of Christian worship as follows: "God speaks to us through His holy Word and we answer Him in prayer and hymns of praise"<sup>19)</sup>. Singing is, in other words, the spontaneous, natural reaction on the side of the congregation to the action of God. Singing and saying belong together; God's Word wants to be preached and sung<sup>20)</sup>. Luther assumes that the first and foremost function of music is the singing of hymns of praise to the glory of God.

This answer to God's speaking to us, this faithful singing of the new song (Ps 98) is a working of the Holy Spirit. It can be a direct reaction to the situation of man in the presence of God, e g "Lord, have mercy". Or it can be brought about by the realisation of the great deeds of God and then result in hymns of praise and the proclamation to others of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The "spiritual songs" of Col 3:16 are thus not spiritual in the general sense of the word as we usually understand it, but spiritual in the sense that they are workings of the Holy Spirit.

Music, therefore, can also be a vehicle for the proclamation of the gospel. (*Deus praedicavit evangelium per musicam*)<sup>21)</sup>. This is where the Calvinists have difficulties. Most Calvinists do not strictly adhere to Calvin's principles about church music, but the position is usually fairly vague<sup>22)</sup>.

Furthermore music has the power to unite people, to bring them to=

gether. The congregational hymn can forge the separate individuals together into a congregation, a communion of believers. In His "calling, gathering, enlightening and sanctifying"<sup>23)</sup> of the Christian church the Holy Spirit can make use and does make use of music. "The Holy Spirit honours music as a tool of His very office"<sup>24)</sup>. One need only think of the important role Luther's hymns played in the spreading of the Reformation.

To what extent and in which combination instrumental music is to be used in Lutheran worship, is in many ways a matter of opinion and of interpretation of what the reformer meant. But there is no doubt about the fact that instrumental music was meant to be included in everything said above. The danger of sliding off into purely secular instrumental music making is there. But also with regard to this danger we have to try to "distinguish between spirits", according to I Cor 12:10. And fear of the danger of misuse is a very bad reason for completely discarding this beautiful gift of God and tool of the very office of the Holy Spirit.

All this we have said primarily in connection with music for the church and its divine services. However, it also holds true with regard to music in the private life of a Christian, the "devotional life" of our title in a stricter sense. Luther said that by singing a hymn of praise to Christ one could drive away the devil and regain peace of mind. Music can console in a deep and godly way.

It is also interesting to note the important role that music, and especially community singing, has always again played in times of spiritual revival within the church, be the movements as different as the spiritual folk songs of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Pietism of the 17th century, the Moravian Bretheren of Zinzendorf in the 18th century, the 19th century revival movement with its Moodie and Sankey songs, or the Negro spirituals. In all these cases music has brought people together, has been a hymn of praise, has been a vehicle for the proclamation of the gospel and has thus helped to bring consolation and peace with God. Johann Crüger (1598-1662) called his great collection of hymns, including many by Paul Gerhardt, *Praxis pietatis melica* (practice in piety through song).

Finally a few thoughts from the preface of Luther's *Deutsche Messe* (1526)<sup>25)</sup> in which, i a, he soberly calls "many and elaborate chants ...

unnecessary". In this preface he mentions three types of divine service. The first is the Latin mass with all its liturgical splendour and beautiful music, the second is the German mass "for the sake of the simple laymen". And then the third type which he calls "a truly evangelical church order", for those "who mean to be real Christians and profess the Gospel with hand and mouth". He suggests that these people "meet by themselves in some house in order to pray, read, baptize, receive the Sacrament and do other Christian works". Everything there should be "centered on the Word and on prayer and love" and there the "many and elaborate chants would be unnecessary". But he says that he has "not yet the persons to accomplish" this type of service, and for the time being the first two types of public worship should suffice. I deliberately quote this passage to show that despite his great love for music and his fervent desire to retain the beauty of the age-old divine service of the mass (be it German), Luther was nevertheless able to distinguish between the truly essential (the "good portion" which Mary chose in Luke 10:42) and the abundantly plentiful (the alabaster flask of ointment in Luke 7:37). But he leaves scope for *both*, as the Spirit may choose to work.

## 5 POINTS TO PONDER

In conclusion I would like to touch on a few points of practical application for us today, for Lutherans in particular, but also for Christians of other denominations.

5.1 In dealing with music (and for that matter with all the arts) in connection with church service and devotional life we should always again try to soberly distinguish between the essential and the abundantly plentiful (and try to also retain the latter, if possible, to the glory of God), and also to distinguish between the essential and the superfluous and redundant (and do away with the latter, to our own good and also, if I may say so, to the glory of God).

5.2 We have seen that many times in the history of the church a type of music (especially spiritual songs) regarded by the official opinion as not belonging to that innermost circle of true church music, has in the end been able to become an important factor, a strong force in the life and practice of the church, be it, as usually happened, in a purified or refined form. Which are the things that we do not consider to be suitable or appropriate for inclusion in the church



service- and meanwhile they may be a strong factor in the private devotional life of many people? Without taking back anything about only the best being good enough for divine service, we should nevertheless ask ourselves: Are we aware enough of these things, are we open-minded enough?

5.3 Do we utilize the possibilities of the role of music in devotional life to their full extent? And I mean divine service as well as devotions in family circle and even privately. Maybe we cannot always do what Luther suggests after the morning prayer in his Small Catechism: "Then go joyfully to your work, singing a hymn, like that on the Ten Commandments, or whatever your devotion may suggest". (Neither can we always manage to follow his advice after the evening prayer: "Go to sleep at once and in good cheer" !) But our hymns and hymn book could be given much more scope in our lives, to our own emotional benefit and spiritual welfare. And much more time and energy could be spent in dealing with the music for our divine services. Is the lonely work of our organists and choir masters appreciated *and* supported as should be?

5.4 And then the last point: Do we know our hymn book, this "treasury of faith"? Through many a time when the preaching had become thin and meagre and the Word of God rare, this treasury of faith of the fathers has been the saving grace. Whilst singing their hymns the people of God managed to live through these stretches of desert road. But do we know this treasure? Do the ministers preach it? And do we teach it to our children at home, in Sunday school and, if possible, in day school? If we don't, are we surprised that all sorts of other books and songs find their way into our ranks?

## 6 CONCLUSION

The role of music in devotional life: Much more could be said, in fact voluminous books have been written about this subject. Allow me to end with the observation that nowhere in the New Testament do we find anything said about preaching or teaching in the life hereafter. But it is assumed that there will be singing, lots of singing in the heavenly liturgy. And many hymns describe the beauty of this music and express longing to be there and to join in with the heavenly choir. So in its own way music can be, as someone once expressed it, "a pre-school for heaven", or as we quoted earlier, "a foretaste of eternal life". But - and this is most important - real church music can only grow in a church

which is kept alive by the breath of the Holy Spirit. And so in its final destination, church music in all its facets and functions can always only be re-action to the action of God, or, as Luther expressed it, an answer.

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