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# Luther and Music

Daniel Reuning

Celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth provides the church with a splendid opportunity to review the vast number of his contributions, and hopefully to be refreshed with a renewed understanding of his great work. In the area of worship his legacy also was both profound and large. He edited and composed more than thirty hymn tunes and texts and seven liturgical pieces, a Latin and vernacular litany and a vernacular Gloria in Excelsis, Agnus Dei, Communio (Ps. 111), Te Deum, and Magnificat. Luther provided the model (*Formula Missae*) for the preservation of the Latin Mass, Matins, Vespers and Compline. He also provided a vernacular alternative (*Deutsche Messe*) with hymn paraphrases of the ordinaries, such as his classic Credo ("We All Believe in One True God"), and his stirring Sanctus ("Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old"), and with his vernacular "Explanation of the Lord's Prayer" and "Exhortation to Communicants" (his substitutions for the medieval Eucharistic Prayer). He authored six occasional services — two orders of Baptism and orders of marriage, ordination, private confession, and self-examination. He translated the collects for the Sundays and feast days of the church year. He involved himself with editing and writing prefaces for all the major hymnals of his days, the three most important of which were Walther's *Geistliches Gesangbuechlein* of 1524, Joseph Klug's "Wittenberg Hymnal" of 1529, and Valentin Babst's hymnal of 1545. Luther was responsible for the production of Duke Henry's 1540 Agenda, editions of which were published into the nineteenth century. He edited a major choral collection, George Rhau's *Symphoniae Iucundae* of 1538, which contained fifty-two motets and a repertory of Latin and German propers and ordinaries for the Sundays of the church year, the composers of which represented the finest available, such as Josquin Despres and Orlandus Lassus. In addition to making numerous comments in sermons and letters, Luther summarized his theology of music in a short poem entitled "A Preface for All Good Hymnals." In 1538 Johann Walther, Luther's friend and musical advisor, and Kantor of the Saxon court chapel, expanded the poem to 335 verses, as a way to organize all of Luther's scattered comments. Luther's productivity is truly staggering and demonstrated his intense concern over what happens in public worship, especially the choice of music. It

is most helpful that he left us not only a written theology of worship, but also compositions that demonstrated what he meant. Volume 53 of the "American Edition" of his works includes most of this legacy.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most frequent themes in Luther's writings was that music, independent of any text or other influence, is a unique dynamic that either reinforces or undermines the meaning of the words. Since Luther's time the composers of our Lutheran musical heritage have followed his direction by composing works that reinforce confessional theology, but it has been only recently that Luther's position could be scientifically documented. Through precise methods and measurements, a new academic discipline called "sentic" proves that Luther was correct in his assessment of the effects of music and used the old words "Dionysian" and "Apollonian" to help us understand the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Sentic's major premise is that music is a communicator of independent forces, namely, two kinds of emotions, that illicit from us two very different reactions, Dionysian and Apollonian.

Music that communicates emotions with a Dionysian force is that kind which excites us to enjoy our emotions by being thoroughly involved or engrossed in them with our entire person. Our enjoyment of the emotion then becomes ego-directed, driven by the desire for self-gratification. This direction often shows itself in keen physical involvement; people become emotionally involved through stomping of the feet, swaying of the body, clapping of the hands, and waving of the arms. Music that solicits from us this kind of emotional response allows us to enjoy our emotions from the inside and very experientially. This kind of music is clearly anthropocentric in nature, because it turns man to himself, rather than away from himself, with the result that *he* becomes the appreciating center of his own emotions and experiences. Herein lies the goal of all entertainment and popular music, which must please or gratify the self if it is going to sell. Luther used the word "carnal" to describe this approach and produced his hymnbooks and choirbook, so as to wean people away from it.

His music and that of the Lutheran heritage communicates a message with an Apollonian force, which allows our emotions to be enjoyed, while at the same time retaining control and mental freedom. We are relieved of the urgent requirements of our inner drives. Under Apollonian influence our emotions are viewed

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empathically or contemplatively in a more detached fashion, so that they might always be subject to our discretion and judgment. Since the major point of the Reformation, as of Scripture itself, was to turn man away from everything within himself as the source of hope and assurance of salvation — to the grace of God alone, earned for us by Christ Himself — it was logical for Lutherans to use Apollonian music. Man-directed Dionysian music would only confuse or contradict the message through its anthropocentric emotional forces. Just as hymns and spiritual songs with words full of Dionysian content, doting upon human experience and feelings, are incongruent with the biblical proclamation of the Gospel, so also is music that revels in Dionysian emotionalism. Thus, because music has so much influence on one's understanding of the Gospel, Apollonian reinforcement was the obvious choice. Furthermore, this choice is just as relevant to us today, since the emotional forces in music keep on conveying their unique messages, remaining unaffected by changes in time or environment — a truly universal expression!

Before the documentation of sentics, it was quite easy to disagree with Luther's assessment of music on the grounds that his view was merely his pious opinion — well-intended, of course, but incapable of being scientifically validated. It was also easy to quote as truth the old wives' tale that Luther used bar-songs for his hymn tunes. This myth would have Luther adopting Dionysian music for use in the church, thus making him into some sort of existentialist, claiming that music is an indifferent, neutral vehicle of words that will carry whatever load of meaning one chooses to give by means of the words assigned to it. Now, however, we know that Luther used not bar-songs, but the Apollonian resources of Gregorian chant and ancient Latin hymnody. We also have the documentation from sentics that proves untenable the false assumption that we read meaning out of music simply because we first read meaning into it, that beauty is only in the eye of the beholder, that we are all just accidents of our environment, social class, up-bringing, education, and traditional bias — in short, that music has no independent effect whatsoever on the proper understanding of the Gospel. If Luther cannot convince people of this false assessment, perhaps they will listen to sentics, which proves that sociological and environmental factors do not determine the message and emotional forces in music, the power of which is totally independent of background and culture. In and of itself, music has its very own unique

emotional message which is unaltered by words, the passing of time, and the changing of environments. Thus, Luther insisted that, just as the content of a hymn's text matters, so too, if people are going to sing it, does the independent emotional force of the music; both influence the understanding of the Gospel.

Too often the church has judged music solely on the basis of personal taste, esthetic considerations, or crowd appeal without any concern for the emotional effects which influence meaning. So much contemporary music being introduced in some of our churches promotes Dionysian forces intimately related to the superficiality of television religion with its primary interest in an anthropocentric response rather than the mind-expanding, emotionally controlled Apollonian response necessary for growth in the understanding and application of God's Word. Too many still hold the false notion that, if the text is orthodox, Dionysian music is harmless. With so much use being made of music that conveys the emotional atmosphere of Pentecostalism, it is no wonder that the charismatic movement continues to infiltrate numerous parishes. The church must take Luther to heart and believe that music's dynamic can either poison or support the church's theology.

Many Lutherans today, of course, like and want Dionysian popular music even in the church. After all, it is what they hear constantly in the electronic church. This music, however, helps people become thoroughly engrossed in their own feelings and emotions. Many tell us that this music makes them feel more involved and helps them "feel so close to God," that "He is really alive, here and now, right here in my heart." This reaction of total subjectivity surely encourages a false sense of spiritual reality. In fact, it is totally experiential, an emotional high, not spiritual edification in the biblical and confessional sense. We must patiently lead such people in a more Lutheran direction, showing them that Luther's music enables us (while enjoying our emotions) to be sufficiently detached to view our emotions in the context of our relationship with our Lord, who alone remains the center of our proclamation. We must explain that the merits of Jesus Christ much more easily dominate the message of the church when Dionysian competition is absent. Our confidence in the presence of God will be strengthened not by our feelings, but by the grace conveyed by His holy Word and blessed Sacraments, no matter how we feel! When people begin to realize that music is not simply a matter of esthetics, but a form of communication that shares with words the responsibility of preaching — by either

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reinforcing them or sabotaging them — then people will begin to understand Luther and will begin to view Apollonian music as a necessity for edification, evangelism, and mission.

In conclusion, it is important to the true proclamation of God's Word that we convey God's gift of grace, not do our own Dionysian thing. The Gospel, of course, grants us pardon for having done our own thing. Faithful proclamation of the Gospel, however, tells us of God's feelings for us, rather than getting us engrossed in our own feelings. God's Word calls for the surrender of the self with all its feelings at His feet, rather than encouraging us to seek refuge in them. The musical expression that assists these goals in the Apollonian. Thus, for the sake of the Gospel Luther used the Apollonian mode, and for the sake of the same Gospel we pray that his disciples will do so today.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965; *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 53).
2. Manfred Clynes, *Sentics: Biocybernetics of Emotion Communication* (New York: The Academy of Sciences, 1973); *Sentics: The Touch of Emotions* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1977); cf. M.J. Grieger, "Musical Communication of the Churches," *The Christian News*, July 19, 1982, pp. 14ff.