

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE PROTESTANT CHORAL¹

CLAUDIA POP²

SUMMARY. Martin Luther, this Holy man, has dedicated his entire life, to the understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ, in a wonderful way. *Not to require wrong doing, not to take vengeance, to offer the other cheek, not to resist evil, to give the cloak along with the coat, to go two miles for one, to give to every one that asks, to lend to him who borrows, to pray for persecutors, to love enemies, to do good to them that hate, etc.*³, as Christ himself teaches. The protestant choral was one of his preferred ways of the manifestations of his sorrows. The strength of his words was transformed into music, as he, himself explained: *I learned this of the poet Virgil, who has the power so artfully to adapt his verses, and his words to the story he is telling; in like manner must Music govern all its notes and melodies by the text.*⁴

Keywords: Martin Luther, the preacher, the composer.

The Honesty and the Sovereignty which are everlasting worldwide, and rely on realities and sincerities, and then Martin Luther, who is a sincere man, a man with the gift of speech, who is able to sing about the divine Importance of Life, to fight and work in a glorious, victorious and lasting manner. Moreover, the priest, as The Men of Letter say, is some kind of a Prophet that governs and directs the veneration of the People towards God, having the responsibility of calling the lost people to repentance. In addition, our duty that make and practice the music, is to involve the community in singing the splendour of God, with this noble purpose, which was confirmed by Luther himself. *“My young friend, I draw this noble, beneficial creation to your attention, which brings pleasure to God. With this help you can escape from any wish that might bring you shame and you can also escape from the wicked friends”* [7] for *“Music is the queen and governor of the feelings. It conducts people, and in the most of the cases it conquers them”* [7].

¹ This Study is a completed and reviewed edition of the study with the same title, published in the: *Bulletin of the Transylvania University of Brașov*, Series B6, 2007.

² Claudia Pop, Ph. Dr., Lecturer professor, The *Transylvania University* from Brașov, str. A. Șaguna, nr. 2, cod 500123. E-mail: pop.claudia@yahoo.it

³ Text from Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, The AGES Digital Library, p.5.

⁴ Rambach, A.J., *Ueber D. Martin Luthers Verdienst um den Kirchengesang, oder Darstellung. Desjenigen was er als Liturg, als Liederdichter und Tonsetzer zur Verbesserung des oeffentlichen Gottesdienstes geleistet hat*, Hamburg, 1813, p. 215.

That is why this sincere man has drawn this to our attention, a Prophet in his country and his time, whose prophetic work in the sixteenth century was the Protestantism. The very often it is said that Protestantism has introduced a new era, through the mutiny against the Pope and of all worldly and spiritual sovereignties. It is the era, in which there was a going back time towards the Truth and the Reality, as opposed to the Lie and the Appearance.

Luther's birthplace was in Eisleben in Saxony, and he was born at 10th of November 1483. His parents, poor workers in a mine, from a village in this region – Mohra, had gone to the winter Flea market in Eisleben and having to give birth, the child got the name of Martin Luther. Being poor, his childhood was joyless, making him with a harsh appearance but with a weak state of health, quick-minded, anxious to learn. His father guided him towards the study of Law, but an unhappy experience, through the death of his best friend struck by the lightning, changed radically his life. He found himself to be little and small in front of the Greatness of God and decided to worship God and to serve only God. At the age of 19, he became a monk, against the advice of his father, in the Monastery of Augustinians in Erfurt. It is said that he had been a devout monk, doing his best to follow his vocation.

The terrible misery and the hard works he made as an apprentice in the monastery, the torture he submitted himself to, produced him terrible suspicions and doubts, instead of bringing peace into his soul. He thought he was going to die and that he was going to suffer something more tremendous than death. He could not accept how a soul of a man could be saved through fasting and midnight masses, through formalities and church services. All these unrests had led him to despair.

But the hand of God descended upon him and through another brother monk, a devout experience himself, too, and through the discovery of an old Latin Bible in the library from Erfurt, Luther discovered something else than fasting and midnight masses. He learned that one could reach the salvation not by singing masses, but the never-ending grace of God. Thus took place his conversion and transformation in a pioneer towards a Reform in Religion.

Through an order of the Augustinians Luther, he was sent to herald this faith, and the Elector of Saxony, Friedrich, named also The Wise, called him to be a professor and preacher at his new University in Wittenberg.

At the age of 27 he was sent in a mission to Rome where he met the appearance clothed in faith, the idols, those EIDOLONS, seen things, symbols that are not God, but symbols that replace God. Then Luther decided to become an Idol crusher, a Prophet who wanted to bring back people to reality, having the courage to tell the Pope, as it is certified by the documents of the era: *"This thing you name Remission of Sins, is a paper flop with ink. Only God can forgive our sins!"*[7]. He did not stop here: he went on with the preaching of this real way of absolution through grace of God, having more and

more adepts. This thing was not at the will of the Reigning Princes of Germany, of the Papacy and then he was called before them in order to withdraw his words and they forbade him to predict any more. That moment from 17th of April 1521 may be considered, as historians say, directly the moment in which the whole story of the religion and the civilization itself started. With courage, dignity, modesty, with a respectful tone, wise and honest, he appealed to the Power of the world gathered at the Diet at Worms. *“Discourage me with proofs from the Holy Scriptures, or with clear and right arguments, otherwise I can not retract my say. For it is neither sure nor wise to make something against my conscience. I stand here on feet; I can not do anything else: God helps me!”*[7].

The Reform has been started and in its name there were made wars, people died, but it has produced Goethe, Napoleon, German Literature and the French Revolution. Luther remained, considerably, the sovereign of this great revolution that promoted tolerance, temperance and forgiveness, being a real example for Human Bravery, for a Hero.

The protestant coral of Gérard Denizeau [3] is a religious song arisen from Reformation and developed particularly in Germanic countries. It establishes the base of the Lutheran musical tradition. Its history began in the sixteenth century. It is even said that Luther might have composed some forty corals around the year 1520. From these, we will present a famous one: *Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her* (Martin Luther 1483-1546): *Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her/Ich bring euch gute,neue Maer./Der gute Maer bring ich so viel/Davon ich sing' und sagen will:„Euch ist ein Kindlein heut geborn,/Von eine Jungfrau auserkorn,/Ein Kindlein so zart und fein,/Das soll eur Freund und Wonne sein”*.

The golden age of the genre took place in the seventeenth century, with the help of the following composers: Reinken, Buxtehude, Pachelbel, M. Luther, Jah Walter the Elder, Ludwig Scuffl, (collaborators of Luther) J. Crüger, Eccard, Agricola, etc. They all use the polyphonic science in order to integrate it in the religious creed. The crowning of the protestant coral was made by Johann Sebastian Bach, a numbers of chorals being the approximate 200 for organ, in the first half of the seventeenth century. it was continued also by Mendelssohn with the choral *“Herr Gott dich loben wir”* for double choir, orchestra and the organ (1843), Franck, *Trei corale pentru orgă (Three Chorals for the Organ)* (1890) and Brahms, who introduced Lutheran melodies in the oratorio, symphony and opera.

The reformed or protestant coral comes from monodic Gregorian of the masculine coral, which towards the thirteenth - fourteenth centuries extended its number of voices to 2 - 3 in the *Organum* and *Faux Bourdon* or the canon. It became after that a mess and a motet, penetrating into the liturgical music and being sung by women and men who were participating at the religious mass, accompanied at the harmonium (an instrument with keys). The melody

had popular origins, and the words were translated into the language of each nation. The dispute in the religious music between the polyphony with a great number of voices and monody ends up happily in the appearance of a new vocal genre – the protestant coral – which has only four voices, named soprano, alto, tenor and bass. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina has offered the unanimously accepted model for this musical genre. The number four has become the balance number for the number of the voices, of the movements in a cyclical piece (e.g. the suite, the sonata, etc.), of the group of four instruments from the quartet or of the organization of an orchestra. All these movements ended in the epoch of the Renaissance simultaneously with the appearance of the sung theatre, named *Dramma per musica*, and of some new genres: the *missa* and the *requiem*.

Thus, the protestant liturgical music of the sixteenth century has an outlet of psalms and corals, sung by the whole assembly of believers with accompaniment of the organ. The difference between the psalm and the coral is that while psalm uses only minims, the coral also uses connected crotchets and quavers (the so-called melismas). We mention a creator of psalms: Claude Goudimel, who has written music on the text of the metric psalms of Clement Marot, Claude le Jeune, and Bourgeois.

Unlike both the Byzantine music and the Gregorian one that have a passive, contemplative character, discouraging even at any modest initiative from the part of men, these protestant hymns, psalms and corals have an optimistically mobilizing, bright character, full of confidence in the ideal proposed by the literary text. That is why this music and the words full of hope have inspired the reformers and their successors in the fire of the persecution, determining them in some cases to seal their instruction with their own lives.

It is known that Luther has composed and even transformed some popular love or bravery songs, through attachment of religious words, leaving thus some hymns which are sung at the religious messes even in our days for ex. “*A Strong City Is Our God*” or the corals from Mathews’ Passion by Bach: “*Oh head covered with blood and wounds*”.

Says Spangenberg, yet in Luther’s lifetime, in his Preface to the *Cithara Lutheri*, 1545: “*One must certainly let this be true, and remain true, that among all Mastersingers from the days of the Apostles until now, Luther is and always will be the best and most accomplished; in whose hymns and songs one does not find a vain or needless word. All flows and falls in the sweetest and neatest manner, full of spirit and doctrine, so that his every word gives outright a sermon of his own, or at least a singular reminiscence. There is nothing forced, nothing foisted in or patched up, nothing fragmentary. The rhymes are easy and good, the words choice and proper, the meaning clear and intelligible, the melodies lovely and hearty, and in summa all is so rare and majestic, so full of pith and power, so cheering and comforting, that, in sooth, you will not find his equal, much less his master.*” [9]

The following words have been quoted from Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *"Luther did as much for the Reformation by his hymns as by his translation of the Bible. In Germany the hymns are known by heart by every peasant; they advise, they argue from the hymns, and every soul in the church praises God like a Christian, with words which are natural and yet sacred to his mind."*

I found a striking passage in an article by Hein in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of March 1834, which was transcribed by Michelet in his *Life of Luther*. This is as follows: *"Not less remarkable, not less significant than his prose works, are Luther's poems, those stirring songs which, as it were, escaped from him in the very midst of his combats and his necessities like a flower making its way from between rough stones, or a moonbeam gleaming amid dark clouds. Luther loved music; indeed, he wrote treatises on the art. Accordingly, his versification is highly harmonious, so that he may be called the Swan of Eisleben. Not that he is by any means gentle or swanlike in the songs that he composed for exciting the courage of the people. In these, he is fervent, fierce. The hymn which he composed on his way to Worms, and which he and his companion chanted as they entered that city, is a regular war song. The old cathedral trembled when it heard these novel sounds. The very rooks flew from their nests in the towers. That hymn, the Marseillaise of the Reformation, has preserved to this day its potent spell over German hearts."*

The appreciations of Thomas Carlyle about the secret of the power of Luther's hymns are memorable [8]. *"The great Reformer's love of music and poetry, it has often been remarked, is one of the most significant features in his character. But indeed if every great man is intrinsically a poet, an idealist, with more or less completeness of utterance, which of all our great men, in these modern ages, had such an endowment in that kind as Luther? He it was, emphatically, who stood based on the spiritual world of man, and only by the footing and power, he had obtained there, could work such changes on the material world. As a participant and dispenser of divine influence, he shows himself among human affairs a true connecting medium and visible messenger between heaven and earth, a man, therefore, not only permitted to enter the sphere of poetry, but to dwell in the purest centre thereof, perhaps the most inspired of all teachers since the Apostles. Unhappily or happily, Luther's poetic feeling did not so much learn to express itself in fit words, that take captive every ear, as in fit actions, wherein, truly under still more impressive manifestations, the spirit of sphere melody resides and still audibly addresses us. In his written poems, we find little save that strength of on 'whose words,' it has been said, 'were half-battles'³— little of that still harmony and blending softness of union which is the last perfection of strength — less of it than even his conduct manifested. With words, he had not learned to make music — it was by deeds of love or heroic valour that he spoke freely. Nevertheless, though in imperfect articulation, the same voice, if we listen well, is to be heard also in*

his writings, in his poems. The one entitled _Ein' Feste Burg_, universally regarded as the best, jars upon our ears; yet there is something in it like the sound of Alpine avalanches, or the first murmur of earthquakes, in the very vastness of which dissonance a higher unison is revealed to us. Luther wrote this song in times of blackest threatening, which, however, could in no sense become a time of despair. In these tones, rugged and broken as they are, do we hear the accents of that summoned man, who answered his friends' warning not to enter Worms, in this wise: – 'Were there as many devils in Worms as these tile roofs, I would on'; of him who, alone in that assemblage before all emperors and principalities and powers, spoke forth these final and forever memorable words, – 'It is neither safe nor prudent to do aught against conscience. Until such time as by proofs from Holy Scripture, or by fair either reason or argument, I have been confuted and convicted, I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand – I cannot do otherwise – God be my help, Amen.' It is evident enough that to this man all popes, cardinals, emperors, devils, all hosts and nations were but weak, weak as the forest with all its strong trees might be to the smallest spark of electric fire."

We are going to finish with a quotation from a direct testimony to his actual work as a composer, which was found in a letter from the composer John Walter, Kapellmeister to the Elector of Saxony, written in his old age for the express purpose of embodying his reminiscences of his illustrious friend as a church musician [10]. *"It is to my certain knowledge," writes Walter, "that that holy man of God, Luther, prophet and apostle to the German nation, took great delight in music, both in choral and in figural composition. With whom I have passed many a delightful hour in singing; and oftentimes have seen the dear man wax as happy and merry in heart over the singing as that it was well nigh impossible to weary or content him therewithal. And his discourse concerning music was most noble."*

(Translated by Senior Lecturer Oana-Andreea Pîrnuță)

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