

history

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the idea of renewing church music was far from his mind. And yet, that is exactly what he achieved, says **Albert Ehrnrooth**



REFORMATION!

Half a millennium ago music formed an important part of the Catholic liturgy. Plainchant was always set to Latin text and could only be performed by appointed singers. Martin Luther (1483-1546) went to a Latin school in Eisenach (coincidentally the same that Johann Sebastian Bach attended 200 years later!) where music was an important part of the curriculum. He sang Gregorian chant in the school choir, but also went “busking for bread”, performing secular songs with friends. By all accounts he had a clear, but soft tenor voice.

Martin enrolled as a 17-year-old at the university of Erfurt. For his Master of Arts degree he was required to study the seven liberal arts that were indispensable before engaging in more ‘profound’ subjects. Music was taught in a mathematical manner, but Luther acquired a good understanding of the theory of harmonics, proportions between intervals and monochords. Confined to his room with illness he learnt to play the lute and later also the flute. He must have been very accomplished or he wouldn’t have been given the

nickname “the musician”. The significance of music is mentioned on many occasions in *Table Talk* (1566), a posthumous compilation consisting of Luther’s conversations as recorded by his pupils and colleagues.

“I always loved music,” he said. “Whoever has skill in this art, is of a good temperament, fitted for all things. We must teach music in schools; a schoolmaster ought to have skill in music, or I would not regard him; neither should we ordain young men to preachers, unless they have been well exercised in music.”

After gaining his Master’s degree, Luther decided, at his father’s instigation, to pursue a civil law degree. Returning from a visit to family one day, a violent thunderstorm took him by surprise. A terrified Martin vowed to become a monk if his life was spared. It was an admonitory event and two weeks later he joined a strict Augustinian order in Erfurt where he led an austere existence and gained a deep knowledge of the Latin Bible.

He was ordained to the priesthood in 1507, transferred to the monastery in Wittenberg and studied theology at the local university. His studies were interrupted when he was chosen to represent

the German Augustinian monasteries on a mission to Rome. The cynicism and impiety he encountered among the clergy planted the first seeds of doubt, but he was bowled over by the architecture and art in Italy.

It was on this journey he discovered the magical compositions of Josquin des Prez. The Franco-Flemish composer’s motets were particularly innovative and his natural word setting made a big impression. Luther came to admire Josquin’s polyphony: “The other song masters are forced to do as the notes determine, but Josquin is the master of notes and they must do as he wills.” Luther took a leaf out of des Prez’s book when he wrote that “both text and notes, accent, melody and manner of rendering ought to grow out of the true mother tongue and its inflection.”

The wealth and corruption that Luther witnessed in Rome convinced him that the Catholic Church had lost its way when it should be focusing on the undiluted and pure Gospel message. Luther was not in principle opposed to the doctrine of indulgences but he was particularly outraged by sales of plenary indulgences to living persons on behalf of the dead

in Purgatory. On top of that most of the income was intended to finance the building of the Pope’s vanity project, the St Peter’s Basilica. It was Luther’s belief that a sin could only be pardoned on condition of faith in Christ. The sinner is justified by faith alone.

Martin Luther was a respected professor of theology and never intended to split the ‘old’ church, let alone establish a new church when he posted his 95 theses on the All Saints’ church door in Wittenberg the day before All Saints’ Day in 1517. The theses were a list of propositions for an academic debate on the increasing practice of foregoing true repentance by buying an indulgence and the Pope’s approval of this abuse. They were written in Latin, a language most Germans didn’t understand, targeting theologians and academics. Luther’s supporters treated them like a manifesto and translated them. Thanks to the fairly recently invented printing press the tracts were circulated efficiently all over the German speaking territories.

In 1518 Luther was summoned to an Imperial Diet in Augsburg where he refused to recant. Pope Leo X issued a papal bull that declared Luther’s views to be “heretical



Luther as an Augustinian Friar, workshop of Cranach the Elder



Wittenberg at the time of Luther

and offensive to pious ears". His rebellious reaction was to throw this decree on a bonfire lit by his students. This led to Luther appearing before the Diet of Worms where he with trepidation once more declined to repudiate his writings, dramatically stating: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." Luther had to flee and in his absence was declared a political outlaw, but his protector, the Elector of Saxony Frederick III, arranged a safe hiding place for him at Wartburg castle.

If the Bible was the core of Christian teaching, as Luther maintained, everybody should have an opportunity to read it in their mother tongue. But non-Latin speakers in general had limited knowledge of the Scriptures, other than what they had been

told. Therefore Luther set about translating the New Testament from Greek into the German vernacular. In March 1522, after nine months of exile at the castle in Eisenach, he returned to Wittenberg armed with his fresh translation which was published six months later. A few years of frantic activity ensued and Luther continued translating the complete Bible while simultaneously working out the fundamental principles of the new church he was trying to establish.

Oddly enough in his first liturgy, entitled *Formula Missae* (1523), Luther advocated the continued presence of Latin chant, arguing it would encourage the young to learn Latin. But the congregation was now expected to participate in the singing, which had never previously been a feature of Catholic worship. A hymnody in German would make things easier: "I wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass."

Luther set about translating chants from Latin into German vernacular resulting in nearly 40 new hymns. Many were his own compositions, but in some cases (the Christmas 'carol' *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*) the melody of a popular secular song was retained, while a new religious text was created (a so called *contrafactum*). His paraphrases of psalms are in a league of their own, but his original hymns simply consist of a straightforward tune with plain German words. The enriched and harmonised settings (chorales) were later additions by other composers. Luther's musical advisor Johann Walter (1496-1570) was asked to adapt and embellish 24 of the pastor's *geistliche* (spiritual) Lieder, and at the same time added five of his own motets.

Ein Geystlich Gesangk Buchleyn appeared in Wittenberg in 1524 containing polyphonic settings for

"I WISH THAT WE HAD AS MANY SONGS AS POSSIBLE IN THE VERNACULAR WHICH THE PEOPLE COULD SING DURING MASS"

three to five parts, with the melody placed in the tenor voice. Some of these chorales have tricky rhythmic patterns and harmonies that require a skilled choir. *Gesangk Buchleyn* was reprinted numerous times during the composer's lifetime, each reprint supplemented with additional songs. It became the bedrock of Lutheran music, containing all the 'hits': *Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott*, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* and *Aus Tiefer Not Schrei ich zu dir*.

Many more hymnbooks followed, but because Luther didn't want them to be confined to church services, schools were encouraged to use them as well. The hymnals aimed at domestic use only contained single-line songs, alternated with prayers. Music is "a gift from God and next to theology. Youth should be taught this art; for it makes fine skillful people."

Luther's *Deutsche Messe* (1526) differed considerably from the earlier *Formula Missae*. The *German Mass* was intended for churches managing without a trained choir where the use of simple chorales facilitated congregational singing in unison (without organ accompaniment!). In fact, Luther had mastered the art of making the natural cadences of the German language suit the spiritual message of his music.

In 1525 Martin married the former nun Katherine von Bora, thereby disregarding the Catholic Church's insistence on clerical celibacy. They settled down

THE SONG COMPANY'S ANTHONY PITTS ON LUTHER



Luther's musical legacy is one of seeding an extraordinarily rich polyphonic and harmonic harvest: his chorale tunes are straightforward enough for a congregation to pick up, and usually have a melodic hook that composers down the ages have seized upon.

In my view, human beings are spiritual by default – that's just who we are; how that 'urge' is channeled or cultivated, varies greatly from culture to culture, and age to age, but that doesn't mean that there aren't some universal desires to be fulfilled and some universal questions to be answered. Our 21st-century Australia is just as much in need of consolation and transformation as 16th-century Europe.

Whether it helps to be religious when you sing or conduct Bach is one of those age-old questions. The consensus seems to be that Bach's own faith is irrelevant to our connection with his music. I don't buy that, I'm afraid: of course Bach manages to communicate with us, whether we consider ourselves 'religious' or not, and we can be moved on the level of the story as well as directly by the musical action, but there is a level of meaning in so much of his music (even the apparently non-sacred works) which resonates purely in terms of the Christian faith.

and raised a large family. By this time, as a declared heretic, his ability to travel had become severely limited and so he took on purely an advisory role. In his later years, Luther was too easily drawn into controversies and made some very badly judged pronouncements, particularly on the Jews. The practical business of running the church was left to his Wittenberg colleague Philipp Melancton who was responsible for preparing the Lutheran church's doctrine (known as the *Augsburg Confession*).

In 1534, Luther and his various collaborators finally completed their translation of the entire Bible, which went on to become a source book for many generations of composers. Although he was plagued by poor health for decades, it didn't stop him from refining his monumental Bible translation up until his death in 1546.

Luther still inspires composers today, and the fact that so many music festivals this year are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation demonstrates that Martin Luther still is both a religious and a musical force to be reckoned with.

The Song Company performs *Forward & Bach, Martin Luther's Legacy* in four Australian cities this June. Included are three motets by Bach and new works commissioned from five Australian composers inspired by Lutheran chorales

LUTHER'S MUSICAL LEGACY

Martin Luther made the congregation sing and his psalm paraphrases set a new benchmark for hymn compositions. But it is as a catalyst for musical change that Luther has been truly significant. His chorales were the point of departure for leading German 16th-century composers like Hassler and Praetorius. The 17th century's major German composer Heinrich Schütz wrote a number of Passions and Magnificats with texts drawn from the Lutheran Bible. "Notes make the text come alive", Luther said, and no composer has been a more perfect conduit of the word of God than JS Bach. Lutheran teachings and chorales are infused in Bach's cantatas, masses and Passions. Felix Mendelssohn was a Lutheran and responsible for reviving Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. His *Reformation* Symphony commemorates the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. After Schumann's death, Brahms found consolation in the Lutheran Bible, from which he adapted the text for *A German Requiem*.

