

Devotion Through Polyphony: Liturgical Music and Lay Participation in the Lutheran Reformation

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Abstract. This paper argues that Martin Luther's musical reforms constituted one of the most consequential and enduring transformations of the Lutheran Reformation. Instead of treating music as an ornament to exhibit grandeur, Luther considered it a divine gift (*donum Dei*) which is essential to proclaiming the Gospel. Through relocating music's function from supporting clerical performance to integrating congregational participation, sacred music was the audible expression of faith and the common priesthood. Yet this expansion of lay involvement did not result in unorganized democratization. Through strategic liturgical reformation in the *Formula Missae* and *Deutsche Messe*, the adaptation of Catholic and vernacular melodies, collaboration with composers (e.g., Johann Walter), and the institutionalization of music in schools and civic life, Luther effectively embedded participation within comprehensive, theological and educational frameworks. The resulting culture was neither wholly conservative nor purely revolutionary. Many familiar melodies and inherited musical techniques were preserved, but redirected towards catechizes and scriptural internalization. By cultivating diverse voices within ordered institutional structures, Lutheran musical traditions produced what may be termed a "devotional polyphony:" a structured multiplicity in which diverse lay voices were harmonized within a coherent theological vision. In sound, Reformation theology was realized among the community.

Keywords: Lutheran Reformation, Liturgical Music, Congregational Hymnody.

1. Introduction

The Protestant Reformation is frequently understood as a theological rupture, a return to Scripture, or a challenge to clerical authority; Martin Luther's doctrinal writings have long occupied the center of this narrative. Yet one of the Lutheran Reformation's most enduring transformations was not confined to the printed page, but sounded in churches, schools, and streets. Working as a trained musician, hymn writer, and composer, Luther sought to transform the role of liturgical music from an ornament of ecclesiastical grandeur to a theological instrument that proclaimed the Gospel, shaped public morality, and invited the congregation into active participation.

Historians often consider this shift a "democratization" of worship. When examining the role of music, the emergence of congregational singing and vernacularised hymnody are often described as an indication of efforts to increase lay involvement. Such claims, however, risk oversimplifying the

nature of participation, overlooking both Luther's nuanced theological intentions and the diverse mechanisms through which sacred music was diffused. This paper argues that Luther's musical reforms certainly reshaped devotional life through the cultivation of lay participation, but this was founded upon carefully constructed logistical and institutional frameworks. Through liturgical revision, educational reform, civic dissemination, and the formal organization of musical life, Lutheranism produced a disciplined, devotional system of polyphony that embodied Reformation theology in sound.

2. The theological blueprint: *musica as donum dei*

The distinctive devotional traditions of the Lutheran Church were largely shaped by Martin Luther's personal affinity for music [1]; any evaluation of Luther's liturgical reforms must therefore acknowledge his theoretical understanding of music. Luther regarded music as "next to theology" (*theologiae proxima*) [2], and so his liturgical reforms largely revolved around the concept of turning the Word of God into song. His insights into the nature and function of sacred music are most systematically expressed through his Preface to the *Symphoniae Iucundae* in 1538, written for a compilation of fifty-two motets composed by nineteen different musicians, published in Wittenberg to support protestant education and worship [3]. The philosophy that these reforms are founded upon is articulated vividly in the opening lines of the preface:

"I would certainly and sincerely like it if music, that divine and most excellent gift, were praised and made appealing to everyone, but I am so overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of its virtue and excellence, that I would not know where to start or finish..."⁵

Luther clearly delineates that music should be deemed a "gift from God" (*donum dei*) instead of a human creation of aesthetics, presenting it as a way of direct connection with divinity [4,5]. Its value, therefore, is not decorative but theological. This theory allowed Luther to justify the centrality of congregational singing within reformed worship: if music is a gift granted to humanity collectively rather than a specialized clerical art, then its use in worship becomes not merely that to please the ear but essential to exercising faith. Congregational song thus emerged as the audible enactment of the common priesthood—an audible realization of Luther's theology itself.

Yet Luther's understanding of music extended beyond divine origin to moral function: it was also understood as a moral and spiritual influence that teaches goodness to the believers. Luther viewed music as a noble "habit" (*habitus*) that could cultivate alignment with divine virtues and directly shape one's character and moral life. The consistent practice of music was believed to incite the heart towards rectitude, create "genuine faith" [2,4], and deter evil by providing a sense of divine protection. Specifically, the structured harmony in music, especially polyphony, was seen to mirror the harmony within the Trinity and the divine order, establishing a moral and aesthetic model for the ideal human conduct [2].

In his letter to Georg Spalatin, Luther expressed his intention to compose psalms in the vernacular language of German, ensuring that God's Word would reach and remain with the people via music [2]; this intent was realized through the scriptural density of the hymns. According to Leaver, Scripture-based Lutheran hymns served both liturgical and instructional roles, communicating key doctrines in a way that educated believers through singing [5]. This reorientation of music from an ornamental art to an integral element of the theology fundamentally redefined the direction of the reformed liturgy.

Music, as a divine "donum", became the primary sensory vehicle for the downward movement of grace central to Lutheran worship. Through congregational practiced music, the theology of the

Reformation ceased to be an abstract set of propositions and became a communal reality, setting the stage for the specific liturgical innovations such as the Deutsche Messe.

3. The great musical synthesis: change and continuity

Luther's musical reforms deliberately balanced retention and innovation, preserving familiar liturgical structures while redefining their theological and pedagogical function. The aim was to encourage congregational participation in song by drawing on musical forms already known to the community, supporting a gradual development rather than a forced one through abrupt transformation [2]. Change and continuity from Roman Catholic traditions lay at the root of Luther's liturgical framework, as he emphasized in the Formula Missae of 1523, in which existing musical forms and practices were preserved wherever they could support the proclamation of the Gospel [6]. This principle is evident in Luther's decision at Wittenberg to introduce a litany in both Latin and German [2]. Unlike other reformers (i.e Calvin and Zwingli) who dismissed music as a part of worship, Luther maintained elements of the Catholic Church's musical legacy and reinforced and expanded its role in liturgy [7], as he viewed music as a means of education and ethical formation.

The reformer's musical conservatism is mainly showcased in his strategic adaptation of pre-existing chant traditions. For example, he adapted the melody of the 4th-century Latin hymn "Veni redemptor gentium" into the German chorale "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland [2,8]." The text was also made more chantable and memorable by repeating the first melodic phrase at the end of the chorale. The enduring success of this specific adaptation is perhaps most evident in the work of Lutheran Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach, who continued to utilize the adapted melody in his chorale prelude of BWV 599 and cantata of BWV 699 over two centuries later. This demonstrates that the defining feature of Lutheran music—the employment of familiar chorale melodies—remained the primary medium through which the Church's ancient heritage and Reformation theology were consistently re-actualized for the congregation. According to Leaver, the music "combined Catholic principle with Protestant substance [9]."

Another major source of inspiration of Luther's Reformation chorales would be secular folk songs. This allows the powerful and vivid presentation of theology without ornate or poetic language alien to the laity [10]; thus, such chorales could be easily sung and internalized by the congregation. One clear example is Luther's use of the familiar secular melody "Ich kumm aus frembden Landen her" in the Christmas Carol "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her [11]." This practice further bridged the gap between the sacred and the secular, once more reinforcing the "unanimity" of the universal priesthood through the most familiar musical language available.

Catholic music, on the other hand, was circumscribed to trained professionals. A number of pieces required instrument support while others were sung in complex polyphonic texture. Most importantly, they were only sung in Latin [2]. Hastings highlights that Lutheran and Catholic music were fundamentally designed to be received by the congregation in different ways: Lutheran music was to be sung and internalised while Catholic music was to be heard and worshiped [2,12]. Luther's hymns were intentionally made simple, monophonic, vernacular, and metrical; singing them required no musical education background. Therefore, these services became easier to understand and the congregation's participatory role increased.

The musical developments of the early Lutheran movement showcase a reform that was neither strictly conservative nor wholly revolutionary. By preserving familiar melodies, structures, and performance traditions while redefining their function within worship, Luther ensured that music became truly intelligible to ordinary believers. In this way, music has become one of the principal

means, through which the proclaimed Word could be firmly grasped by the congregation, preparing the ground for the more systematic liturgical transformations that would follow.

4. Reforming worship: the deutsche messe and beyond

The re-centering of Christian life around the proclaimed Word required a reconfiguration of the worship itself. Through the publication of the Formula Missae and the subsequent Deutsche Messe 1526, Luther sought to realize the doctrine of the common priesthood into a systematic framework of communal worship. In the Formula Missae, Luther signaled this move from theory to practice, declaring:

"And thus will we do: we will no longer rule hearts by word of doctrine only, but we will put our hand to it also, and make that effective in the public administration."

The public administration should be considered a cleansing of the existing "formal cultus of God" rather than an attempt to completely overthrow tradition. He maintained a spirit of liturgical liberty, insisting that his methods should "prejudice no one," nor forbid any from following alternative methods. For Luther, the power of the liturgy lay not in its legalistic execution, but in its ability to serve as a flexible medium for communicating the Gospel. In the Deutsche Messe, he states that a square and plain catechism was to be prioritized in worship, with all its elements aimed at exercising the congregation daily in the Scriptures. The Lutheran order of mass was designed as a pedagogical tool for Germans, especially the young, to create immersion in teaching of God's Word, training them to become knowledgeable of the Scripture. To this end, music, especially the incorporation of vernacular congregational hymnody, emerged as a key element of the German Mass [13]. Through this integration, Luther shaped a musical architecture that functioned as a direct conduit of his theology, allowing the complex doctrines of the Reformation to become aurally accessible to the lay believer. As Leaver states, it was largely through the congregational hymns written in the vernacular language (otherwise termed "didactic chorales") that the essential teachings of the Christian faith were communicated.

While music had long occupied a substantial place within the Catholic Mass, its function differed significantly from that envisioned by Luther. In the pre-reformation liturgy, elaborate Latin polyphony often prioritized the sonic richness and ceremonial effect over clarity of the text and the musical execution remained chiefly the responsibility of trained clerics and choirs. The congregation's role was predominantly passive and devotional rather than participatory. As Henry states, sacred music of Catholic worship, especially the Gregorian chants, must possess the "three great qualities" of holiness, beauty, and universality [2]. The Catholic tradition emphasized the transcendence and majesty of the rite, often expressed through elaborate ceremonial and musical form. By contrast, Lutheran reform redirected music toward vernacular proclamation and collective engagement. The focus shifted towards the grasping of biblical messages and assimilation of theological ideas through structured and guided participation rather than attempting to inspire awe through the observation of a performance.

This musical and pedagogical restructuring of worship was grounded in deeper divergences between late medieval and Lutheran understandings of the Mass. A key divergence between the theological frameworks of Lutheranism and Catholicism, reflected through their ways of worship, is that the late medieval liturgy highlighted the role of sacrifice and works in attaining salvation (*sacrificium*), understood as the Church's offering before God, whereas Luther reinterpreted it primarily as a gift received in faith (*beneficium*). Accordingly, the former placed heavy emphasis on performing the Eucharist, while the latter expressed devotion through proclaiming the Verba Testamenti and direct exposure to text from the Scripture.

In part (iii) "On Sundays for the laity" of the *Deutsche Messe*, Luther delineates the physical and auditory reorientation of the service with clarity [14]. It is stated that the priest should always turn versus populum (towards the people), mirroring Christ's posture at the Last Supper and reinforcing the theological logic of beneficium: the Word received as divine gift. Other aspects of the reorientation are primarily acoustic; almost every section of the Mass includes instructions for singing in German. While the entire service is inherently musical, the specific role assigned to the congregation—as opposed to the priest or the specialized chorus—is a deliberate pedagogical strategy. By explicitly involving the whole congregation in the Creed, the Distribution Hymns, and the post-*Epistle Hymn*, Luther ensured that the laity become active practitioners of the faith. Through this systematic approach, the liturgy functioned as a musical exchange, where theology was embedded in the collective through both active participation and attentive observation.

The institutionalization of the vernacular song becomes even clearer when one turns from liturgical prescriptions to the musical sources themselves. Luther's dissemination of theology depended upon collaboration with trained musicians. One of the most notable collaborators was Johann Walter, whose *Geistliche Gesangbüchlein* 1524, often referred to as the "Wittenberg Hymnal," provided one of the earliest musical realizations of the reform. The collection contains forty-three polyphonic settings, scored for three to five voices, with the chorale melody typically placed in the tenor as a *Cantus firmus musica practica*. This placement preserved established compositional technique while ensuring structural clarity, allowing vernacular theology to be embedded within disciplined polyphonic form. The chorales are musically simplistic with frequent imitation between the voices and melodies rarely expands over an octave [15]. Apart from five Latin pieces, the collection was written entirely in German and featured a preface by Luther himself. As Highben observes, this preface reaffirmed his position on the role of music in multiple aspects of the Christian life (i.e. worship and education), placing Walter's polyphony as a didactic apparatus intended to acculturate the largely illiterate congregation [16]. Luther writes in his preface:

"That it is good and God-pleasing to sing hymns is, I think, known to every Christian; for everyone is aware not only of the example of the prophets and kings in the Old Testament who praised God with song and sound, with poetry and psaltery, but also of the common and ancient custom of the Christian church to sing psalms.."35

The collection was revised and reprinted into four successive editions between 1524 and 1551 and expanded from forty-three pieces to one hundred and twenty-one pieces (seventy-four German and forty-seven Latin) in its final form. The collection gained immense popularity and was mass produced to be sold widely using the printing press. In many regions, sellers taught the hymns to people with little or no literacy [13]. Hymns such as "Wir glauben all an einen Gott" were directly mentioned in the *Deutsche Messe* to be chanted collectively by the congregation. Others such as "Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist" were to be sung by the specialized choir [17].

It is worth noting that, although Luther's liturgical plan was clearly organized, the adoption of the *Deutsche Messe* was gradual and uneven across the German territories, partly due to the absence of compulsion to adhere uniformly to reformed practices as well as the persistence of earlier liturgical traditions [1]. Luther envisioned that Wittenberg should serve as a primary site of experimentation for the new order of worship rather than as a model imposed uniformly upon all communities [18]. Latin chant continued to coexist with German hymnody and many rural regions adopted the new liturgy only gradually. The Lutheran musical reforms therefore did not produce an immediate transformation of religious life but rather marked the onset of a long-term process through which theological knowledge became increasingly accessible across the principalities. The successful spread of vernacular hymnody, and thus of the *Deutsche Messe*, depended on the accessibility of the

hymns themselves to a great degree. As Loewe observes, Lutheran hymns reached the German population widely regardless of literacy or social status. Musical and liturgical reforms effectively narrowed the distance between learned theology and ordinary religious experience, allowing Luther's ideas to circulate far beyond the clerical elite. In this way, congregational song, which the *Deutsche Messe* was largely built upon, became one of the most effective instruments through which Reformation theology was communicated to the laity.

5. Schooling the song: institutionalizing participation

Finally, the dissemination of Luther's theology through song was not confined to the walls of the church; it became prominent within the educational and civic structures of Reformation Germany. Most notably, music was mandated within Lutheran schools and ingrained into urban life [19]. Sacred music wasn't just left to chance or limited to Sunday service; it was a carefully run system. Institutions took charge of organizing, overseeing, and preserving these songs to make sure they stayed a core part of the culture.

Historically, Luther's reforms contributed to the Lutheran Church becoming known as the "singing Church," a tradition that would later produce some of Germany's most renowned composers [1]. His impact was visible in the emergence of a broad Protestant educational system throughout the German territories that placed sustained emphasis on music instruction. Central to this model was *musica practica*—an approach that prioritized performance, composition, and active musical participation in daily life of the laity.

Music was reintroduced as a key curricular requirement, particularly in the schools of Electoral Saxony—where Luther enjoyed primary political support—and in neighboring principalities [17]. In his *Circular to the Princes of All German States* 1524, Luther firmly asserted that schools should assume responsibility for providing and sustaining the musical life of church services. By anchoring the liturgy in the school system, Luther ensured that the development of the "access" of the laity was supported by an institutional foundation.

In the decades that followed, newly founded Protestant schools placed significant emphasis on music education in response to Luther's advocacy, cultivating a distinctive Lutheran musical culture [20]. Instruction in singing became a standard and significant component of the curriculum, commonly assigned four hours each week. In the four-class Latin school structure, formal music training was introduced in the third class under the supervision of the *Baccalaureus*, continued in the second class led by the cantor, and reached its highest stage in the first class under the direction of the schoolmaster. Instructors were generally well trained and led frequent, extended rehearsal sessions. Students were educated in fundamental musical principles, including scales, clefs, solmisation, transposition, the modal system, and vocal production. Such technical grounding suggests that there existed a continuous effort to frame music as a disciplined intellectual art requiring conceptual understanding and cultivated skill in order to elevate worship. The repertoire further demonstrates the seriousness of this musical formation. Students engaged with a wide range of works—masses, motets, hymns, and magnificent—drawn from both established Catholic polyphonic traditions and emerging Protestant compositions.

Luther's insistence on musical education was explicit and uncompromising. He argued that music should remain a part of the school curriculum and that schoolmasters must possess singing ability [1]. Music was therefore treated as essential to the educational enterprise itself, embedded within the qualifications of those entrusted with instruction. The ability to sing marked participation in a shared devotional life that schooling was meant to cultivate. Lutheran cantors, including Walter, worked simultaneously as church musicians and school teachers affiliated with the churches in which they

served, positioning the cantor at the intersection of pedagogy and liturgy [21]. What students practiced in the classroom found expression in the service, and the theological content of the service returned to shape daily instruction.

Another significant means by which liturgical music was disseminated was its integration into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. Itinerant singers moved between towns, disseminating sacred music among the wider population. By performing in private homes and repeating the melodies until entire households had memorized them, they transformed domestic space into an extension of the church's musical life. Music likewise permeated the public environment. Town pipers—professional civic musicians—performed the new tunes multiple times each day from church steeples and civic towers, rendering Reformation hymnody a constant presence in the urban sphere. Through these practices, sacred song moved beyond the confines of formal worship and became ingrained in both private and civic life, reinforcing theological ideas through repetition and familiarity.

From the 1520s onward, the emergence of the *Kantoreien*—small choral ensembles rooted in both school and town—further reshaped the system of Lutheran sacred music, fundamentally altering the role of polyphony within Protestant worship [15].

Typically, their treble voices were drawn from Latin and German schools, while adult members came largely from the mercantile and professional classes of the community. Johann Walter's choir in Torgau, formed after he left his court appointment, became an influential model for such urban ensembles. The formation of the *Kantoreien* marked a significant shift in authority: in the late medieval Catholic context, sacred polyphony had been largely controlled by clerical institutions and cathedral foundations; under Lutheran structures, responsibility increasingly passed into the hands of educated laymen. This development aligned with Luther's theology of the universal priesthood: musical leadership, like spiritual vocation, was no longer confined exclusively to ordained clergy.

At the same time, participation remained restricted to an extent. Participation in the *Kantoreien* remained largely reserved to relatively affluent strata. Latin schools primarily served the sons of prosperous burghers, and adult members were men of sufficient means to devote time to rehearsal and performance. While these ensembles enabled polyphonic singing of the laity within the church—introducing a civic body into the liturgical sphere—their social reach remained limited. Many smaller churches lacked the resources or inclination to maintain such choirs, tempering the scope of this reform [18].

Taken together, these developments reveal that the expansion of sacred song in Lutheran territories was both transformative and structured. Participation widened beyond clerical control, but it remained mediated through schools, civic offices, and social hierarchies. Multiple voices were cultivated, disciplined, and harmonized within institutional frameworks.

6. Conclusion

The musical reforms of Martin Luther represented far more than a simple aesthetic shift in worship; they were the systematic, audible manifestation of Reformation theology. By redefining music as a divine gift from God, Luther shifted its purpose from a ceremonial clerical art to an essential theological necessity. This foundation allowed for the transformation of the liturgy, where the *Deutsche Messe* and other reformed practices replaced passive observation with active congregational participation, through which the Scripture was internationalized by the believer. Through the strategic adaptation of familiar Latin chants and secular folk tunes, Luther ensured that the reception of the Gospel (*beneficium*) became personally accessible to the laity, regardless of their literacy or social standing.

Yet this expansion of participation did not entirely dissolve structure. By embedding music within schools, civic offices, and the Kantoreien, Lutheran reform cultivated trained voices within ordered institutions. Sacred polyphony passed increasingly into the hands of educated laymen, enacting the "priesthood of all believers" while remaining shaped by discipline and hierarchy. The resulting culture was not chaotic democratization, but structured multiplicity—a devotional polyphony in which diverse voices were harmonized within a theological framework.

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