

The Reformers on Instrumental Music

Cliff Sabroe

Beginning in the early 1500's was a movement that shaped the scope of religion all over the world until now. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Thesis to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. This would later become the symbol of the beginning of the Reformation movement. The Protestant Reformation was an attempt to reform the Catholic Church in Europe. Many Christians were not pleased with what they saw in the leadership of the Catholic Church. Many were upset by the selling of indulgences and the constant reports of immorality, thus they called for reform. It was during this time that men like, John Calvin, John Wesley, Martin Luther, and Ulrich Zwingli came on to the scene. These men and others lead what would later be called the Reformation Movement.

The great leaders in the Reformation movement agreed on many things. Most of them pointed their followers back to the scriptures under the banner of *sola scriptura*. Even with the great agreement in disdain for the Catholic Church, many of these reformers had differing views on various religious topics. One difference that is not often examined is their views on the music of the church. This paper is concerned more specifically with their view of instrumental music. It is the goal of this writing to examine the lives and teachings of three great reformers (John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Ulrich Zwingli) to better understand how they viewed the topic of instrumental music in the worship of the church.

The first great reformer to be examined is John Calvin. John Calvin was a French Protestant theologian born in 1509. His early training was as a lawyer and his published book was a commentary on the philosopher Seneca. Although not Protestants, both Calvin's father and

his brother Charles were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. Calvin married a widow with two children and after her death in 1549 he raised the children on his own. He is most closely associated with the city of Geneva in which most of his work took place. Calvin never met Martin Luther, however, he still esteemed him very highly. In fact, Calvin wrote to his friend Heinrich Bullinger “even if he (Luther) were to call me a devil I should still regard him an outstanding servant of God”¹

John Calvin’s view on instrumental music is well documented and stands in glaring contrast to the common religious view of our times.

In our time, many Christians have encountered more kinds of music in church than previous generations would normally have encountered in all the spheres of life combined – secular as well as sacred. The contrast with Calvin’s expectations could not be greater, for Calvin rejected virtually every kind of church music other than unison, vernacular, unaccompanied psalm singing by the congregation. Calvin’s practical theology of music is thus likely to appear profoundly unfashionable.²

Instrumental music presented a theological problem for John Calvin. He felt that it was closely intertwined with the sacrificial system of the Temple, a system that was done away with Christ on the cross³. In his commentary on Psalm 92:4 he wrote: “...the Levites who were appointed...singers...employ their instruments of music – not as if this were itself necessary, only it was useful as an elementary aid to the people of God in these ancient times ... now that

¹ *John Calvin: Christian History*, Issue 12, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.)

² Brown, Frank Burch. Ap 2006. Religious music and secular music: a Calvinist perspective, re-formed. *Theology Today*. 63, no. 1: 11-21.

³ Leaver, Robin A. Sum 2006. Luther on music. *Lutheran Quarterly*. no. 2: 125-145.

Christ has appeared . . . it were only to bury the light of the Gospel, should we introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation”.⁴

Calvin was a lover of vocal music. He encouraged the church in Geneva to participate in congregational psalm-singing. Calvin viewed music as a gift of God, and even put music to the psalms himself.⁵ Calvin promoted and encouraged the singing of praises to God in and out of the church and he strongly believed in the power singing possessed in the life of a Christian. In his 1543 edition of the Psalter he makes the observation that even singing in homes and in the fields can be done in such a way to praise God. It was a way to rejoice in God by lifting up our hearts to God even as we are consoled by mediating on God’s virtue, goodness, wisdom and justice. It is interesting to note he even went so far to say that singing could also be a type of a public prayer. Calvin believed that public prayer is of two kinds: with words alone and with song. On the topic of sung prayer—essentially the singing of psalms he says “we know from experience that song has great force and vigor to arouse and inflame people’s hearts to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal”.⁶

Even after spending time praising and exalting music he still issues a word of caution that seems to be inline with his feelings about instrumental music when he states “There must always be concern that the song be neither light nor frivolous, but have gravity and majesty, as Saint Augustine says. And thus there is a great difference between the music which one makes to entertain people at the table and in their homes, and the psalms which are sung in the church in the presence of God and His angels”.⁷

⁴ John Calvin. *Commentary on Psalms*. Translated by James Anderson. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 3:494-5.

⁵ *John Calvin*: Christian History, Issue 12, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.)

⁶ John Calvin, “Foreword to the Psalter,” trans. by Charles Garside, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee. Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2001) 94.

⁷ Ibid

When observing the teachings of John Calvin it is clear that he was a lover and promoter of song but yet at the same time would have been opposed to the use of the instrument in singing praises to God. His view could be summed up in a quote from his commentary on the Psalms when he said:

Musical instrument in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The papists (Roman Catholics), therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to Him.⁸

Another key figure in the Reformation whose views on instrumental music need to be examined is Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli was born to a prominent middle class family in Wildhaus, Switzerland. His father Ulrich was the chief magistrate in town and his uncle Bartolomeus was the vicar. Zwingli's Reformation was supported by the people of Zurich and led to significant changes in civil life, and state matters in Zürich. Zwingli was often very concerned about civil reform. Zwingli was responsible for the Zurich Council's eleemosynary ordinance of January 12, 1525. This ordinance declared that the assets of the monasteries taken over in the Reformation would be used to create a special fund to help the poor.⁹

Zwingli was a dedicated worker in all that he did. He worked especially hard to free the Swiss economy from dependence on mercenary service to agriculture and trade. He pushed the people to be productive in labor with the words: "You are a tool in the hands of God. He

⁸ Kurfees, M.C. *Instrumental Music in the Worship*. (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1969).

⁹ *Zwingli: Father of the Swiss Reformation: Christian History*, Issue 4, (Carol Stream, I: Christianity Today, Inc) 1997.

demands your service not your rest. Yet how fortunate you are that he lets you take part in His work”.¹⁰

Zwingli taught himself Greek and Hebrew to better understand the Scriptures. He copied several passages of the New Testament from Erasmus’s Greek Text and memorized them. Zwingli pushed for conformity with the New Testament in all matters of religion and was criticized by many for his views, including his view of instrumental music in the worship of the church. “As the reform proceeded in Zurich, Zwingli was criticized by conservatives for moving to fast and by radicals for moving too slow. In addition to removing the statues and artifacts from inside his church, he also forbade the use of the organ. The people were to give ear to the word of God alone”.¹¹

Zwingli was not anti instrumental music in the world, but was vehemently opposed to it in the worship of the church. In fact, he was a trained musician who loved, practiced and played music quite frequently. Many of Ulrich Zwingli’s followers banned organs in other places and went so far to smash organs in their local churches. Zwingli permitted vocal music, but continued to reject instrumental music.¹²

Zwingli later would serve as a chaplain with mercenary troops in Italy. He did this to continue his economic reforms. This choice to serve as a chaplain would ultimately cost him his life. History records:

Zwingli died in battle in 1531, a battle between Protestant and Catholic Cantons.

Protestants were disorganized and outnumbered, yet Zwingli preferred outright

war to the slow pressure-by-embargo that his allies preferred. He believed that he

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *Martin Luther—The Later Years and Legacy: Christian History, Issue 39, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.*

was fighting to preserve the freedom to preach the Gospel. He was found badly wounded by enemy troops and was dispatched by a sword's blow from a mercenary captain. His last words were reportedly: "They can kill the body but not the soul."¹³

The most prominent figure in the entire restoration movement is Martin Luther. More volumes have been written about him than all the other reformers combined. Luther was born November 10, 1483 and died on February 18, 1546. He was a student of law, a German monk, a theologian and a church reformer. He is usually credited as being the founder of Protestantism. Luther was not initially planning to be a monk. The story goes that he was heading down the road to Elfurt to study law. There was a thunderstorm, lightning struck near him and he made a promise to become a monk if he was delivered from the storm. He made it through the storm and in 1505 he entered the monastery.

Luther's teachings and beliefs were quite different from the beliefs of the Catholic church of his day. Luther's basic position was that justification was by faith and not by works. This would be in direct conflict with the works based mentality of indulgences and other Catholic teaching. Luther did, however teach that good works show faith in action. He came to this conclusion after realizing as a monk he could never be "good enough" so he committed himself to the study of scripture. His conclusion was quite different than that of the church's which taught (active) righteousness in which one can become just through good works. Luther taught that God justified man by faith and not works (Passive) righteousness.

More can be said about Martin Luther, but as far as this writing is concerned it is necessary to only focus on one facet of his teaching, that being music. Luther was a lover and a

¹³ *Zwingli: Father of the Swiss Reformation: Christian History, Issue 4, (Carol Stream, I: Christianity Today, Inc) 1997.*

promoter of music. His comments can be quite varied at times, but one always stands out and that is that “Music is next to theology.”¹⁴ Luther loved and adored music. In a letter to Ludwig Senfl he made this statement:

I plainly judge, and do hesitate to affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could not be put on the same level with music, since except for the theology (music) alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely a calm and joyful disposition... This is the reason why the prophets did not make use of any art except music; when setting forth their theology they did it as geometry, not as arithmetic, not as astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed truth through Psalms and songs.¹⁵

As has been stated Luther loved music and was also an avid song writer. It has been said that Music in congregational worship is one of Luther’s enduring legacies. “Who doubts”, he said, “that originally all the people sang these which now only the choir sings or responds to while the Bishop is consecrating?”¹⁶

The types of hymns that were authored by Luther varied. His first, more of a ballad, came following the deaths of the first two Lutheran martyrs (in Brussels on July 1, 1553). Luther’s purpose in this hymn was to counter the rumors that the two men had recanted before they died. Luther sings: “though enemies can spread their lies, we thank our God therefore, his Word has reappeared.”¹⁷

¹⁴ *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883) *Tische* No. 968

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *Martin Luther – The Later years and Legacy*: Christian History, Issue 39 (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.) 1997.

¹⁷ *ibid*

Many of Luther's other hymns were intended for church services and for devotions at home. In 1524, Luther wrote six of his seven hymns based upon the Psalms. His last hymn on the Psalms that he wrote was "A Mighty Fortress", which was authored three years later when he was undergoing trials. Luther also wrote hymns for portions of the liturgy for all the different seasons of the church year. To teach the catechism, he wrote two hymns on the Ten Commandments, a hymn for the Apostles' Creed, one for the Lord's Prayer, and others for baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁸ Many of Luther's hymns are still used in church services today.

Luther and music go hand and hand, but could be best described by a letter written by Martin Luther to the composer Ludwig Senfl:

I love music. Its censure by fanatics does not please me. For: 1. (Music) is a gift of God and not of a man. 2. For it creates joyful hearts. 3. For it drives away the devil. 4. For it creates innocent delight, destroying wrath, unchastity, and pride. I place music next to theology. This is well known from the example of David and all the prophets, who all produced poetry and songs. 5. For (music) reigns in times of peace. It will be difficult to keep these delightful skills after use, for they are of peace. The Dukes of Bavaria are to be praised in this, that they honor music.

Among our Saxon (Dukes) weapons and cannons are esteemed.¹⁹

The question must be asked "What were Luther's feelings about instrumental music?" It has been argued that Luther was opposed to instrumental music, but it seems, however, that the evidence is on the contrary. 'As for organ playing: while some scholars as Schweitzer have thought him not over-friendly to organs, he certainly never showed any animosities. In his exegesis of Psalm 150 he spoke in behalf of organs, and elsewhere he mentioned certain

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Buzzen, Walter. *Luther and Music*. Musical Quarterly 32 (1946): 88

contemporary organists with warm approval. No rejected organs in Lutheran areas, as they often were in Zwinglian and Calvinistic areas".²⁰

In many commentaries and articles written by members of the churches of Christ Luther is quoted as being against instrumental music. Most congregations of the church of Christ oppose instrumental music in the worship of the church because they hold the position of the silence of scripture as being prohibitive. With that being said, although Calvin, Zwingli, Wesley and others were opposed to it, it would seem that Luther was not. The quote that is often used to prove that Luther was against instrumental music is when he speaks against the organ calling it a "sign of Baal". It appears, however, that he was not against the organ because he felt that it was sinful, but that he did not find that particular instrument pleasing to the ear. The Carolina Classical Library records:

During Luther's time, congregational chorales or hymns were most commonly sung in the service without instrumental accompaniment. They were sung with the choir in unison, and occasionally the congregation would sing the melody while the choir sang a simple polyphonic harmonization. However, the pipe organ was never used to accompany chorales. The general view of Luther toward the organ was not at all enthusiastic because of its "primitive" nature (mean-tone tuning). The pipe organ was used to preludize and to give the initial pitch to the priest and choir, and it was used with chorales in alternation with the choir, one verse played by the organ and the next sung by the choir and congregation. However, Luther encouraged the use of wind instruments in performances of *chorale motets* in the large Churches which had trained choirs.²¹

²⁰ Stevenson, Robert. Ag 1951. Luther's musical achievement. *Lutheran Quarterly*. 3, no. 3: 255-262.

²¹ <http://www.carolinaclassical.com/articles/luther2.html>

One can observe that not only was Luther not opposed to instrumental music, but in fact he encouraged it. In his commentary on Psalm 4 in 1513-1516 he wrote: “The stringed instruments of the ... Psalms are to help in the singing of this new song; and Wolff Heinz and all pious, Christian musicians should let their singing and playing to the praise of the Father of all grace sound forth with joy from their organs, symphonias, virginals, regals, and whatever other beloved instruments there are (recently invented and given by God)”.²²

For Calvin instrumental music was a theological problem because of its relation to the sacrificial cults of the temple. For Zwingli, it went against what he deemed to be a biblical hermeneutic, but for Luther there was no problem. On Amos 6:5 he wrote “Like David they invent for themselves instruments of music. Certainly if you make use of music as David did, you will not sin”.²³ Luther is also cited on several occasions as stating that music drives away the devil.

It is hard to sum up the various positions that Luther took on the music of the church. Robert Stevenson does an adequate job with the following list. Luther’s philosophy of church music is as follows.

1. He showed admirable discrimination in his own evaluation of contemporary composers, thus setting a standard of correct musical judgment.
2. He defined music as an art which to be properly appreciated must be studied rather than merely listened to.
3. He made music study a mandatory part of the curriculum in all schools organized under his auspices.

²² Leaver, Robin A. Sum 2006. Luther on music. *Lutheran Quarterly*. no. 2: 125-145.

²³ *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans & ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 94.

4. He required the ministers who followed his lead to study singing, and made an understanding of music a prerequisite to ordination.
5. He overrode the scruples of those who, following St. Augustine's example, feared elaborate church music on moral grounds.
6. He spoke often and ardently in behalf of excellence in church music.
7. While exalting the role of the congregation he never minimized the role of the organist nor the choir in church music.
8. He upheld the right of musicians to an adequate and assured income from church sources.²⁴

Mr. Stevenson also compares Luther's view on music with his contemporaries Calvin and Zwingli by stating: "Luther, on the other hand, since he consistently championed not only congregational singing but also the kind of elaborate polyphonic music that only trained choirs can perform, ran counter to the prevailing tendency of the reformers"²⁵.

Luther never went with the norm. Luther stood his ground on his beliefs even with others faltered. On the issue of instrumental music, Luther firmly stood for its incorporation and even felt that it improved the over all tone and majesty of the worship of the church. To Luther musical instruments had a fundamental part to play in the praise of God.

What conclusions can be drawn? Is there one universal opinion on instrumental music that runs through the teaching of the reformers? The answer is no. As the reformers disagreed and divided over the Lord's Supper, they did as well with instrumental music. You had men like Zwingli and his followers who were vehemently opposed to instrumental music and would go so

²⁴ Stevenson, Robert. Ag 1951. Luther's musical achievement. *Lutheran Quarterly*. 3, no. 3: 255-262.

²⁵ *ibid*

far to smash organs in churches. There were men like Calvin who opposed it but were not so radical as to destroy it, and then you had men like Luther who embraced and adored it.

The topic of instrumental music in the worship of the church was not universally agreed upon back then and it is not now. This writer would tend to agree more with the teachings of Zwingli and Calvin on this issue than he would with Luther, but at the same time realize that not much has been written on this topic during the Reformation. Only history knows the true feelings of these great reformers on the topic instrumental music.

If one were to observe the religious world as a whole it would be seen that instrumental music in worship is not an issue that most are concerned with. “If you go to the Baptist church, they use instrumental music. If you go to the Methodist church, they use instrumental music. If you visit the Episcopal church, they use instrumental music. If you go to the Catholic church, they use instrumental music”²⁶. Most of the members of these religious groups have never contemplated wither or not the use of the mechanical instrument in worship is a sin. In fact “They have used it all if their lives, at least all of their religious lives. Therefore when they visit the services of the church of Christ, the first question non-members ordinarily ask about our worship is; “Where is the piano? Where is the organ?”²⁷.

The church of Christ is the not the first religious body to oppose instrumental music and will not be the last. As has been observed in this paper, the reformers debated and disagreed on this topic as many do today. What can be gleaned from the reformers is that even when the religious world opposed them, they still held firmly to the belief of *Sola Scriptura*, and we should do the same. There will always be disagreements in the religious world, but everyman has to answer for himself. All the reformers would agree with this writer with the idea that it is time

²⁶ Highers, Alan E. *Why Churches of Christ Do not Use Instrumental Music in Worship*, “Spiritual Sword” (Vol.35. Num.2 January 2004) 3.

²⁷ Ibid

to not follow men. Even if the men be great reformers, one should only follow the inspired word of God.

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