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The Proper and Ordinary Properties  
of the German Mass

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Music History

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Martin Luther never had the intention of starting a religious movement that would change the world. He was a meek, gentle man who wished the Catholic papacy would see the error of its ways and reform itself—not that the world would instead reform. It is not possible to discuss in small detail Luther's achievements in creating the German Mass without discussing why he loved music and what he disliked about the Roman Catholic Church. The items covered in this paper will be divided and discussed in four sections: the first section will cover Martin Luther's education and background in music. The second section will give a brief history of Luther's role at the beginning of the Reformation. The third section will cover the Catholic High Mass and the items it contains. The fourth section will discuss Luther's German Mass: How he formed it and why he felt the need to change the Mass as he did.

#### Martin Luther's Education and Background in Music:

Martin Luther's formal education in music is not clear. His innate ability and love for music was evident at an early age. An elderly woman gave him free room and board because she admired his voice. He was also an accomplished flute and lute player<sup>1</sup>.

Music was part of the everyday life for the people in the area where Luther grew up. Luther often recalled the memory of his mother and her fondness for singing. The tradition of song and of music in his culture is probably what prepared him most to become a *Kurrende* singer, which was a group of boys, under the direction of a prefect, who would travel from house to house singing, to the enjoyment of the listeners, for a small earning<sup>2</sup>. His time spent as a *Kurrende* instilled in him the importance of educating young people in music, which was, to him, of the utmost importance<sup>3</sup>. In remembering these days of his childhood he said:

Do not look down on these lads. I was once one of them. They are not the worst, these little fellows, who go around in patched coats and shoes, and have to earn

their bread from door to door. They often become the best, most learned, and famous men. Therefore don't be discouraged, lads, a great good fortune may be in store for you, of which you dream not. Meanwhile do your duty!<sup>4</sup>

Luther's father was fairly well off and made sure that his son received a good education, which included Latin schools in Mansfeld, Magdeburg and St. George's School in Eisenach. Later Luther was sent to the University of Erfurt where he earned a bachelor and master's degree while studying to become a lawyer<sup>5</sup>.

After a sudden spiritual awakening due to a narrow escape from death when lightning struck a tree near him, Luther was determined to enter the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. His musical talent and knowledge of church music would have grown immensely as he celebrated the Mass and offices as a priest in the monastery<sup>6</sup>. Luther always had a high opinion of music. "Music," he said, "is a gift from God, not from Man<sup>7</sup>."

Music always provided Luther with solace in times of sorrow throughout his life. As Luther wrote in his *Encomium Musices*:

Music is a beautiful, gracious gift of God. It has often been the inspiration of my sermons,...Music rouses all the emotions of the human heart; nothing on earth is so well suited to make the sad merry, the merry sad, to give courage to the despairing, to make the proud humble, to lessen envy and hate, as music<sup>8</sup>.

He learned to play the lute and *flauto traverso*, but above all of his talents, he was able to discern good church music and formed his own opinions and standards of music. Luther always believed that knowledge of music was of the utmost importance. In the preface to one of the hymnbooks he published in 1524, he wrote:

These hymns have been arranged for four voices, for the sole reason that I should like young people, who in any case should and must be instructed in music and in other proper arts, to have at their disposal something which will rend their minds of lascivious and sensual songs, and teach them instead something wholesome, and in this way they may become acquainted with goodness in a joyous manner, as befits the young<sup>9</sup>.

## A Brief History of Luther's Role at the Beginning of the Reformation:

Three years after going to the monastery in 1505, he was sent to Rome with the purpose of pleading for the reorganization of the Augustinian order. While in Rome, Luther became very aware and very offended by the worldliness of the Italian clergy. In 1512, Luther studied and received a doctorate in theology and became a professor of sacred scripture at the University of Wittenberg, which became his life-long occupation<sup>10</sup>. Over the next couple of years, the Roman Catholic church disillusioned Luther more and more. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of a Monastery in Wittenberg. Luther had many reasons for disliking the Catholic church, only few of which had to do with the selling of indulgences, which was the breaking point for Luther because it dealt with the one point of doctrine of which he was most sensitive—the forgiveness of sins.

Luther was a scholar of the scriptures and took them very literally. He became obsessed with the writings of Paul in the New Testament and the literal doctrine of the justice of God. Concerning this justice of God, he came to believe in a vengeful God and that justice is granted on His terms. Luther concluded that salvation is not obtained by works at all, but by faith alone:

For however irreproachable I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most disturbed conscience...I did not love, I rather hated this just God who punishes sinners, and with huge murmuring I was indignant against him—as if it were really not enough for God to oppress miserable sinners with the ten commandments, but he must bring sorrow on sorrow and through the *gospel* reveal his justice and through the *gospel* bring his wrath to bear. Thus I raged with a fierce and agitated conscience and yet I kept on knocking at St. Paul in that place, with a burning thirst to know what he really meant...At last, by the mercy of God, I began to understand the justice of God as that by which God makes us just in his mercy and through faith, as it is written, 'By faith the just man shall live...' and at this I felt as though I had been born again, and had gone in through open gates into paradise itself<sup>11</sup>.

Luther came to believe that when sinful people trusted in the Lord's word, that through believing Christ's message of the atonement and redemption, Christ takes their place at the judgment bar

and the sinner is found clean. Once the sinner has faith, it is the Word of God that leads them to do good works of charity and love, not the means by which they are justified before God<sup>12</sup>. This is in large contrast to the Roman Catholic belief that a person is justified before God partly by works performed in faithfulness and duty.

Luther eventually criticized the whole Catholic papacy, saying that they were in error as well as those of the clergy that were responsible for determining doctrine. Scripture was the only source of doctrine and truth, Luther believed. He was excommunicated in 1520 after publishing three highly controversial manifestos—*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*. In these three works Luther discussed his views on Christianity as well as attacking the papacy and many of the traditions of the Catholic Church. Luther believed that all people are spiritually equal and that certain members do not have any special rights or privileges in God's eyes because they are members of the clergy. This he believed was because everyone has to depend on faith in God for justification and forgiveness.

The Roman Catholic High Mass:

The Catholic High Mass is the ritual of the Eucharist and is divided into three sections: the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which is chanted entirely in Latin by members of the clergy. The Mass is also divided according to whether it is part of the Proper or the Ordinary (see Table I).

The Introductory Rites and the Liturgy of the Word are more associated with the Catechumens and are sometimes called the Fore-Mass while the Liturgy of the Eucharist is more formally the Sacrament part of the Mass.

The text of the Proper changes from one Sunday to the next depending on the

season such as Lent and Advent. It also changes for feast days and for the type of Mass, such as a Requiem Mass. The Introit, Offertory and the Communion are the action chants, which were meant to be sung while accompanying an action or ritual, whereas the lessons and prayers between them are the focus of attention themselves. The Introit filled in the time required for the Pope and clergy to move from the back of the Cathedral to the altar where the Mass was performed. The Offertory was sung while the gifts are being given. The Communion was sung while the Sacrament is being performed. Each was adjustable for time's sake and was ended with a signal from the Pope<sup>13</sup>.

The text of the Ordinary is constant. The five principle chants of the Ordinary are the *Kyrie* text, which means 'Lord have mercy upon us', *Gloria* (Glory be to God on High), *Credo* (I believe in one God), *Sanctus* (Holy, holy, holy), which includes the *Benedictus* (Blessed Is He that cometh) and the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God)<sup>14</sup>.

With the gradual transition from monophony to polyphony, the chants sung during the Mass became more and more elaborate. Often, the chants required trained singers, soloists and

TABLE I: The Roman Catholic Mass			
<i>Proper</i>	<i>Chants</i>		<i>Prayers and Lessons</i>
Introit		Kyrie Gloria	Collect (opening prayer) Epistle
Gradual Alleluia/tract Sequence		Credo	Gospel Homily (general intercessions)
Offertory		Sanctus	Preface Te igitur etc, continuing the Canon Pater noster
Communion		Agnus Dei Ite Missa Est	Post-Communion prayer

1—Introductory Rites; 2—Liturgy of the Word; 3—Liturgy of the Eucharist

choirs. This allowed for more than just the clergy's participation in the music of the Mass, but the congregation was still excluded.

Luther's German Mass: How he Formed it and Why He Felt the Need to Change the Mass:

Luther's fundamental beliefs differed from those of the Catholic church so greatly that the need for a new Mass became evident. He did not desire to eliminate the Mass but rather to do away with certain passages that did not conform to certain aspects of the Gospel<sup>15</sup>. Another of his concerns was that he wished for the congregation to join in the music of the services, yet he did not want to do away with the Latin text entirely.

This I will not abandon or have altered; but as we have kept it with us heretofore, so must we still be free to use the same where and when it pleases us or occasion requires. I will by no means permit the Latin speech to be dropped out of divine worship, since it is important for the youth. And if I were able, and the Greek and Hebrew languages were as common with us as the Latin, and had as much music and song as the Latin has, we should hold Masses, sing and read every Sunday in all four languages, German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew<sup>16</sup>.

He understood the educational importance of the Latin text and its variety of uses. The first liturgy he wrote, the *Formula Missae* (1523) was in Latin and was meant more for use in cathedrals and for collegiate congregations<sup>17</sup>.

Luther's *Deutsche Messe* (German Mass) was written in 1526 and was meant for smaller congregations and unlearned clergy. The German Mass was not meant for the participation of the clergy only, but invited all those present to join in the services<sup>18</sup>. Luther wanted to give to the congregation the opportunity to praise God through song, to give them the chance to give thanks and reaffirm their faith that they would follow the Lord's commandments. It was thus imperative to find simple hymns that could be taught to the congregation<sup>19</sup>. As Luther said:

I would that we had plenty of German songs which the people could sing during Mass, in the place of, or as well as, the Gradual, or together with the *Sanctus* and

the *Agnus Dei*. But we lack German poets, or else we do not yet know of them, who could make for us devout and spiritual songs, as Paul calls them<sup>20</sup>.

As Luther set forth to write these German songs which emerged as chorales—strophic hymns meant to be sung in unison, unaccompanied—others took notice and attempted to accomplish Luther’s desire for congregational singing in the Mass. Andreas Karlstadt of Wittenberg, Thomas Münzer and others attempted writing German hymns for the congregation to sing, but kept most of the service in Latin, with very poor results. Luther immediately took it upon himself to write the Mass in German. In 1524 in a work he published, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* he wrote<sup>21</sup>:

I would very much like now to have a Mass in German, and I am setting about it. But I want it to have a truly German character. I have allowed the Latin text to be translated and the Latin melodies preserved, but it sounds neither agreeable nor right. Both text and music, accentuation, melody and gait, must come from true mother tongue and voice. Else it is all an imitation, such as monkeys do<sup>22</sup>.

In 1525, Luther discussed melodies and ecclesiastical modes with Wittenberg Kapellmeister Conrad Rupsch and Johann Walther. Walther wrote an account of the meetings and commented that they had worked together three weeks “Luther trying always to arrange the notes as the rhythm of the words demanded<sup>23</sup>.” During Luther’s time, it was customary to use secular song melodies and set religious text to them. This was one way for the congregation to be familiar with the hymns without formal training in them. The idea of setting religious text to secular melodies were rejected by some but mostly accepted with the understanding that people are more likely to accept truth when presented to them in a song they are familiar with. It did not matter who had written the song, what mattered was the intent<sup>24</sup>.

The order in which the songs and prayers were given in the German Mass are as follows (see Table II): Introit—a hymn or German psalm by the people; *Kyrie eleison*; Collect; Epistle;



TABLE II: The German Mass		
<i>Proper</i>	<i>Chants</i>	<i>Prayers and Lessons</i>
Introit	Kyrie	Collect (opening prayer)
Hymn	German Creed	Epistle
		Gospel
		Sermon
		Lord's Prayer
		Exhortation preliminary of the Sacrament
		Description of the Sacramental Institution
	Distribution of the Bread	
	German Sanctus	
	Distribution of the Wine	
	Agnus Dei, German hymn, or German Sactus	
		Closing Benediction

1—Introductory Rites; 2—Liturgy of the Word; 3—Liturgy of the Eucharist

Hymn of the congregation; Gospel; the German Creed “Wir glauben all’ an einem Gott” which was sung by the people; Sermon; Lord’s Prayer; Exhortation preliminary of the Sacrament; Description and explanation of the significance of the Sacramental Institution; Distribution of the Bread; German Sanctus “Jesus Christus unser Heiland”; Distribution of the Wine;

Singing of Agnus Dei, a German hymn or the German Sanctus; Collect with thanksgiving and the Closing Benediction<sup>25</sup>.

Since Luther rejected the Catholic idea of transubstantiation, that part of the Mass as well as all the preparations and prayers that accompanied it had to be removed. Also, because of his primary belief that all members of the congregation are equally members of the priesthood and people are justified by faith, he removed the elements of the Mass that identified something done for its own merit as a work pleasing to God. He believed that the divine influence would impart itself to the hearts of the penitent without them having to earn it by special merit or the performing of a ritual for its own sake<sup>26</sup>. It had not occurred to Luther to essentially change or undermine the foundation, and essentially, the form of the Mass. The change in the form of the Mass from the Roman Catholic Mass to the German Mass were insignificant compared to the change in the content of the Mass<sup>27</sup>. However, Luther did not wish to impose his views on any of his followers by the position of assumed authority, rather he gave his two Masses as a form of worship that was, to him, adequate and effective<sup>28</sup>.

Luther's attempts at religious reform had much greater success rate than his contemporaries. Why? Was it because he brought the Mass to the people? Perhaps. Was it because of the Word? Most likely. Or was it because of a man who taught what he believed; a man who fought for what he believed; a man who let the Word speak for itself and desired nothing more than to boast of his God? Luther's success was not because he was the most skilled musician, although his musical abilities spoke for themselves. It was not because he was the most outstanding spokesman. It was because he loved God, he knew he had something to share and he shared it with fervent zeal. He shared a message of faith and peace to the hearts of those who believed. He brought the Mass to a new height by allowing even the lowest commoner to worship God.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin A. Leaver and Ann Bond, "Luther, Martin," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Robin A. Leaver and Ann Bond, "Luther, Martin," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 9

<sup>5</sup> Robin A. Leaver and Ann Bond, "Luther, Martin," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Théodore Gérold, "Protestant Music on the Continent," in *The New Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Théodore Gérold, "Protestant Music on the Continent," in *The New Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Robin A. Leaver and Ann Bond, "Luther, Martin," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.

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- <sup>11</sup> From the Preface to a collected edition of his works, 1945, in *The Reformation Crisis*, ed. Joel Hurstfield (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 22-23.
- <sup>12</sup> *The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1994, s.v. "Luther, Martin."
- <sup>13</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980, s.v. "Mass."
- <sup>14</sup> Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Norton and Norton, 2001), 35-36.
- <sup>15</sup> Théodore Gérold, "Protestant Music on the Continent," in *The New Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 1974.
- <sup>16</sup> Edward Dickinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 247.
- <sup>17</sup> Robin A. Leaver and Ann Bond, "Luther, Martin," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Théodore Gérold, "Protestant Music on the Continent," in *The New Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 1974.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 29.
- <sup>25</sup> Russel N. Squire, *Church Music* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1962), 115.
- <sup>26</sup> Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 52.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> Edward Dickinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 248.

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