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Liturgy and Hymns

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Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*

1538

Translated by Ulrich S. Leupold

In its infancy Lutheran church music was fortunate to have a publisher as forward looking, imaginative, and energetic as the Wittenberg printer Georg Rhau (1488-1548). A musician and composer, he was an early predecessor of J. S. Bach at St. Thomas in Leipzig and had contributed a mass for twelve voices for the opening of the disputation between Luther and Eck in 1519.¹ At this time or soon after he became an adherent of Luther. He moved to Wittenberg in 1523 and opened a printing firm that produced volume after volume of liturgical music for the Lutheran church service. Between 1538 and 1545 he published twelve carefully-edited collections in which he offered a complete repertory of masses, vespers, antiphons, responsories, and hymns, in both Latin and German and by the best composers of his day. The initial two volumes of this ambitious series were the *Symphoniae iucundae* (*Delightful Symphonies*)² and the *Selectae Harmoniae quatuor vocum de passione Domini* (*Selected Harmonies of the Passion of Our Lord for Four Voices*). The first one contained fifty-two motets for the Sundays of the church year, the second motets and other choral works for Lent. The prefaces for these two collections were written by Luther and Melanchthon respectively. The following translation of Luther's *Preface to Georg Rhau's Symphoniae iucundae* is based on the Latin text, *Martinus Luther Musicae Studiosis*, given in WA 50, 368-374.

Martin Luther to the Devotees of Music

Greetings in Christ! I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone. But I am so overwhelmed by the diversity

¹ Cf. LW 31, 309-325.

² The word "symphony" had none of its present meaning. It signified any piece of music for several parts, whether instrumental, vocal, or both.

and magnitude of its virtue and benefits that I can find neither beginning nor end or method for my discourse. As much as I want to commend it, my praise is bound to be wanting and inadequate. For who can comprehend it all? And even if you wanted to encompass all of it, you would appear to have grasped nothing at all. First then, looking at music itself, you will find that from the beginning of the world it has been instilled and implanted in all creatures, individually and collectively. For nothing is without sound or harmony.¹ Even the air, which of itself is invisible and imperceptible to all our senses, and which, since it lacks both voice and speech, is the least musical of all things, becomes sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when it is set in motion. Wondrous mysteries are here suggested by the Spirit, but this is not the place to dwell on them.² Music is still more wonderful in living things, especially birds, so that David, the most musical of all the kings and minstrel of God, in deepest wonder and spiritual exultation praised the astounding art and ease of the song of birds when he said in Psalm 104 [:12], "By them the birds of the heaven have their habitation; they sing among the branches."

And yet, compared to the human voice, all this hardly deserves the name of music, so abundant and incomprehensible is here the munificence and wisdom of our most gracious Creator. Philosophers have labored to explain the marvelous instrument of the human voice: how can the air projected by a light movement of the tongue and an even lighter movement of the throat produce such an infinite variety and articulation of the voice and of words? And how can the voice, at the direction of the will, sound forth so powerfully and vehemently that it cannot only be heard by everyone over a wide area, but also be understood? Philosophers for all their labor cannot find the explanation; and baffled they end in perplexity; for none of them has yet been able to define or demonstrate the original components of the human voice, its sibilation and (as it were) its alphabet, e.g., in the case of laughter—to say nothing of weeping. They marvel, but they do not understand. But such speculations on the infinite wisdom of God, shown in this

¹ Literally, "sounding number."

² Luther probably thought of the influence of the Holy Spirit on the spirit of man.

single part of his creation, we shall leave to better men with more time on their hands. We have hardly touched on them.

Here it must suffice to discuss the benefit³ of this great art.⁴ But even that transcends the greatest eloquence of the most eloquent, because of the infinite variety of its forms and benefits. We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions⁵—to pass over the animals—which as masters govern men or more often overwhelm them. No greater commendation than this can be found—at least not by us. For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good?—what more effective means than music could you find? The Holy Ghost himself honors her as an instrument for his proper work when in his Holy Scriptures he asserts that through her his gifts were instilled in the prophets, namely, the inclination to all virtues, as can be seen in Elisha [II Kings 3:15]. On the other hand, she serves to cast out Satan, the instigator of all sins, as is shown in Saul, the king of Israel [I Sam. 16:23].

Thus it was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music⁶ join to move the listener's soul, while in other living beings⁷ and [sounding] bodies⁸ music remains a language without words.⁹ After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music¹⁰ and by providing

³ *Usus.*

⁴ Literally, "thing."

⁵ *Affectuum.*

⁶ *Sermo et vox.*

⁷ Luther thinks, e.g., of birds.

⁸ I.e., for example, instrumental music.

⁹ *Sine sermone gesticulatur.*

¹⁰ *Sonora praedicatione.*

sweet melodies with words. For even a comparison between different men will show how rich and manifold our glorious Creator proves himself in distributing the gifts of music, how much men differ from each other in voice and manner of speaking so that one amazingly excels the other. No two men can be found with exactly the same voice and manner of speaking, although they often seem to imitate each other, the one as it were being the ape of the other.

But when [musical] learning is added to all this and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God's absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music. Here it is most remarkable that one single voice continues to sing the tenor,¹¹ while at the same time many other voices play around it, exulting and adorning it in exuberant strains and, as it were, leading it forth in a divine roundelay, so that those who are the least bit moved know nothing more amazing in this world. But any who remain unaffected are unmusical indeed and deserve to hear a certain filth poet¹² or the music of the pigs.

But the subject is much too great for me briefly to describe all its benefits. And you, my young friend, let this noble, wholesome, and cheerful creation of God be commended to you. By it you may escape shameful desires and bad company. At the same time you may by this creation accustom yourself to recognize and praise the Creator. Take special care to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings; and be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature which would and should praise God its Maker with this gift, so that these bastards purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God, the enemy of nature and of this lovely art. Farewell in the Lord.

¹¹ Luther refers to the polyphonic style of his time which gave the melody to the tenor in long notes while the other voices provided a tracery of counterpoints in livelier rhythms.

¹² Luther uses the strong term *merdipoeta* to refer to Simon Lemnius, a humanist and poet who in the same year had drawn the ire of Luther with a collection of poems slandering prominent persons in Wittenberg and eulogizing the cultured, but profligate Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz; cf. WA 50, 350-351.