Luther, Bach, and the Early Reformation Chorale

The Kessler Reformation Lecture, 1995

Robert L. Marshall

Luther, Bach, and the Early Reformation Chorale

Luther, Bach, and the Early Reformation Chorale

The Kessler Reformation Lecture, 1995

Robert L. Marshall

PITTS THEOLOGY LIBRARY, ATLANTA, GA

Contents

Editor's Preface — *M. Patrick Graham* 2

I 3

II 7

III 10

Notes 15

Publisher Information 16

Editor's Preface

M. Patrick Graham

This public lecture was presented on the afternoon of October 17, 1995, at Cannon Chapel (Emory University) as part of festivities preceding the eighth annual Kessler Reformation Concert. These events have been sponsored by the Candler School of Theology and the Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection of the Pitts Theology Library and celebrate the musical holdings of the Kessler Reformation Collection. The 1995 concert used two pieces from the so-called *Achtliederbuch* (*Etlich Cristlich lider* [Nuremberg, 1524]): *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*, and *Aus tiefer Notschrei ich zu dir*. In addition to his afternoon lecture, Professor Marshall provided the commentary for the concert.

Professor Robert L. Marshall is the Louis, Frances, and Jeffrey Sachar Professor of Music at Brandeis University. Trained at Columbia and Princeton Universities, Marshall is an authority on the life and music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He is the author of the award-winning studies *The Compositional Process of J. S. Bach* (Princeton, 1972) and *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, the Significance* (Schirmer Books, 1989), the chorale-related articles in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and the highly praised *Mozart Speaks: Views on Music, Musicians, and the World* (Schirmer Books,1991). Marshall's most recent book publication is *Eighteenth-Century Keyboard Music* (Schirmer Books, 1994). Professor Marshall has also served as vice president of the American Musicological Society, as chair of the American Bach Society, and as the first Harold Spivacke consultant to the Music Division of the Library of Congress. Some of the ideas explored in the present study will be developed more fully in his forthcoming *J. S. Bach: His Artistic Development*. It was both an honor and a pleasure to welcome him as the 1995 lecturer for the Kessler Reformation Concert.

Finally, I want to express appreciation to Professor Stephen A. Crist for his editorial assistance with the present essay and to G. Gordon Boice (Emory University Publications) for his work on the design of this pamphlet and the 1995 concert program and poster. It is indeed a privilege to work with such talented colleagues.

M. Patrick Graham
Margaret A. Pitts Associate Professor of Theological Bibliography
Candler School of Theology
Emory University

I

In the year 1708—that is, at the age of twenty-three—young Joh ann Sebastian Bach resigned his highly respected post as organist of the St. Blasius Church in the Imperial Free City of Mühlhausen. He announced, among other things, that he int ended to devote himself to creating what he described as “a well-regulated church music.”[1] Apparently his first systematic effort at fulfilling this self-proclaimed goal was the composition of what he called an *Orgelbüchlein* —a little organ book—actually an extensive series of miniature, but highly sophisticated and expressive, organ chorales whose contents were to include chorale preludes for the principal feasts of the church year, a series of chorales on the articles of the catechism, and finally, a collection of miscellaneous hymns for a large variety of occasions and circumstances.

It is now thought that work on the *Orgelbüchlein* had commenced much earlier than had hitherto been assumed—virtually as soon as Bach had taken up his new duties as court organist at Weimar.[2] But even though Bach continued to work on it over the course of the next five or six years, the ambitious project was left unfinished. Of the 164 chorales originally planned only forty-six were ever completed. But it is worth noting that of these forty-six no fewer than twenty-eight—well over half—are Reformation-era chorales, twelve of them by Martin Luther himself. Had the *Orgelbüchlein* been completed, it would have contained thirty of the thirty-six chorales ascribed to the reformer.

Indeed, it is hardly possible to overstate the importance of the Lutheran congregational chorale in the music of J. S. Bach. Of the 1,120 numbered compositions in the most recent edition of the official catalogue of Bach’s works, Wolfgang Schmieder’s *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnism*, more than 450 (or more than one in three) are chorale settings, ranging from simple four-part harmonizations to chorale preludes, variations, partitas, and fantasias for the organ to chorale motets and cantatas for voices and instrumental ensemble. Moreover, a disproportionately large number of these compositions are not only based on Lutheran chorales but literally on the chorales of Martin Luther himself and other poets of his generation. The dominant position occupied by the chorales of Martin Luther and his contemporaries—in comparison to those composed later in the sixteenth century, or those from the Baroque and Pietist periods—is dramatically evident in every category of Bach’s oeuvre. Let us return to our review of the composer’s collections of organ chorales.

While the chorale preludes of the *Orgelbüchlein* were to be miniature in scale—each one only a page or two in length—in Bach’s other collections of organ chorales the individual compositions frequently assumed breathtaking dimensions. The seventeen so-called “great” (i.e., large-scale) organ chorales, BWV 651-667, were also begun in Weimar, very likely at about the same time as the *Orgelbüchlein*, but they were revised (though again never quite completed) late in Bach’s life. They may well have been deliberately conceived as providing a contrasting counterpart to the miniature format of the *Orgelbüchlein* chorales, representing, as it were, the epic as opposed to the lyric modes of chorale composition—or perhaps they were regarded as an analog to the smaller and larger catechisms of Martin Luther.

Although the rationale of the design of the collection of seventeen great chorales, taken as a whole, is not altogether clear, it is evident that the chorales of Martin Luther quite literally occupy pride of place. The group is framed by Luther’s *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*, BWV 651, at the beginning and by his *Komm Gott Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist*, BWV 667, at the end. The midpoint is marked by an elaborate setting of yet another of Luther’s invitatory chorales, addressed this time to the second person of the Trinity: *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 659. The first few measures of the opening composition, Komm, Heiliger Geist, evoke at once the sense of monumentality and grandeur that Bach was striving for in this collection.

Monumentality is also the hallmark of Bach’s mammoth collection of keyboard music, the

Klavierübung, the four volumes, or Parts, of which were published over a period of fifteen years during Bach's Leipzig period. The first installment of the first Part, a book of keyboard partitas (i.e., suites), appeared in 1726; the final volume, the *Goldberg Variations*, appeared in 1741. Only the third Part of the *Klavierübung* is devoted to sacred keyboard music. It consists of twenty-one organ chorales: nine chorales constituting the Lutheran *Missa brevis* (Kyrie and Gloria) and twelve settings of catechism chorales. This time the reference to Luther's large and small catechisms is overt: there are two settings, one large and one small, for each of the six catechism chorales. It may be more than mere coincidence that Part Three of the *Klavierübung*, with its collection of liturgical chorales for the organ, was published in 1739, the year of the bicentennial celebration of the adoption of the Augsburg Confession in Leipzig.

Bach's last great contribution to the literature of the organ chorale, the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her* (published in 1747 or 1748), has as its substance what the author of the text, Martin Luther, described as a "children's song for Christmas Eve." Bach's treatment of the venerable and beloved children's song, however, is not child's play. As its title suggests, the *Canonic Variations* are a compositional *tour de force*, a display of the most rigorous techniques of strict canon. It is known that the *Canonic Variations* were composed and published as part of Bach's initiation into the honorary Society of Musical Sciences. Nonetheless, the work could have been conceived as a companion work to the other magnum opus of contrapuntal craft with which the composer was occupied at just this time in the final years of his life: *Die Kunst der Fuge* (the *Art of Fugue*), BWV 1080. The two publications, taken together, reflect not only the two general spheres, sacred or secular, into which, one or the other, all music necessarily belongs: they also represent the two fundamental principles of musical invention as they were inherited and described by musical theorists and commentators from time immemorial. The *Art of Fugue* manifests the principle, or the genre, of "free" composition (in other words, the use of freely invented, "original," thematic material); the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch*, on the other hand, belongs to the age-old tradition of the "bound" composition: the work is based on a pre-existent or "borrowed" melody.

In turning to Bach's vocal music, we once again encounter the dominating presence of the great reformer. First of all, two of Martin Luther's most revered chorale texts serve as a frame, this time for Bach's life's work as a church cantata composer. Bach's earliest chorale-based cantata is the Easter composition *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, BWV 4, presumably composed during Bach's year at Mühlhausen , 1707-8. At the other end of the composer's life the cantata on *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, BWV 80, was put into its final form (after numerous revisions) sometime between 1744 and 1747 and was very possibly Bach's last German church cantata altogether.

But the period of Bach's most concentrated involvement with the chorale in the context of cantata composition falls almost exactly in the middle of his career. The beginning of that involvement, in fact, can be dated precisely to the First Sunday after Trinity, June 11, 1724, when the composer began his second full year as *Thomaskantor* and Director of Church Music for the city of Leipzig. On that day Bach launched a series of weekly cantatas, all of which were to be based on a congregational chorale appropriate for the particular Sunday or feast of the church year. It is tempting to think that the decision to inaugurate such an ambitious cycle of chorale cantatas specifically during the year 1724-25 was informed by a desire to commemorate the bicentennial of the first Lutheran hymnbook publications: the so-called *Achtliederbuch* (the very first Lutheran hymnbook), the two Erfurt *Enchiridia*, and the *Geistliche Gesangk Buchleyn*, all of which appeared in 1524.

The format of most of the compositions of the chorale cantata cycle of 1724 is essentially the same. Each cantata begins with an elaborate, artful setting of the first stanza of the chorale and ends even more predictably (and far more modestly) with a simple harmonization of the chorale melody, sung to the words of the final stanza (perhaps with the participation of the congregation). As a rule, the interior movements are settings of paraphrases of the texts of the internal stanzas of the chorale, transmuted into the idioms of the modern recitative and aria, unabashedly borrowed from the world of contemporary opera.

Over the course of the next nine months, Bach composed or performed at least forty-four such chorale or chorale-paraphrase cantatas, concluding the series on Easter Sunday, 1725, with a performance of a revised version of his early masterpiece *Christ lag in Todesbanden*. Virtually all of the cantatas,

however, were newly composed—and composed at the astonishing rate of at least one per week. Not surprisingly, in this repertoire, too, the hymns of the first generation of reformers occupy the same preeminent position as they do in Bach's organ works. Over a third of the cantatas of the 1724-25 cycle are set to texts of Luther and his contemporaries.

And, once again, Martin Luther's own hymns stand out not only numerically but also by virtue of their placement in the cantata cycle. Almost all the auspicious and high feasts of Bach's chorale cantata cycle were celebrated with compositions based on the hymns of Martin Luther: for the First Sunday of Advent, the official beginning of the church year, Bach composed a new cantata on Luther's *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 62, traditionally the principal hymn for th at day. (Bach had already composed a cantata on *Nun komm*, BWV 61, ten years earlier during his Weimar period.) Luther's chorales were also chosen for the first two days of Christmas.

Bach also turned to Luther for the cantata intended for performance on the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity. In 1724, that Sunday fell on October 29, thus making it the last Sunday before Reformation Day. The chorale Bach chose to set on this occasion was *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*. That hymn had long been associated with the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, perhaps because the reassuring response to this ernest plea for comfort—Luther's poetic rendering of Psalm 130—was about to be offered a few days hence, namely, on Reformation Day. For Reformation Day itself Bach evidently performed a setting of *Ein feste Burg*, but in an early version that no longer survives. Before the chorale cantata cycle was completed, Bach would compose three further Luther chorale cantatas and would add yet another to the repertoire in later years.

II

The reasons for Johann Sebastian Bach's attraction to the chorales of Martin Luther are many. Luther was not only the founder and guiding spirit of the Protestant Reformation, he was a poet of genius and, as a composer (or at least a melodist), remarkably imaginative, versatile, and effective. Apart from all liturgical and theological considerations, Bach, as a musician, was particularly fascinated by two types of melody writing that had been cultivated and indeed mastered by Luther. The first category consisted of melodies in the major mode. These tunes proceed to clear tonal goals, creating a sense of tonal direction and, more generally, conveying an almost palpable sense of purpose. In conjunction with their texts, they project an aura of sublimity or majesty. Bach was understandably attracted to the solid, sturdy, sharply profiled—"honest"—tunes of such melodies as those of *Ein feste Burg* and *Vom Himmel hoch*. He was able to capture what I like to think of as the "healthy," affirmative attributes of these tunes in simple harmonizations. But they also inspired him to displays of contrapuntal artifice that clothe the folk-like tunes in something like the musical equivalent of the mantle of royalty, while they also represent a devoted and devout musician's labor of homage. Perhaps, too, such grandiose designs were conceived as a reflection or symbol of the miraculous intricacy and order of God's universe.

Consider the opening of Bach's last church cantata, the final version of *Ein feste Burg*. Dating from the last decade of his life-the same period during which the composer produced a series of increasingly elaborate explorations of the complexities of canon and counterpoint, the *Goldberg Variations*, the *Musical Offering*, the *Art of Fugue*, the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel Hoch* —the opening chorus of Bach's Reformation cantata is, technically considered, his most complex chorale chorus but also his most exhilarating. Without any instrumental introduction, the voices of the chorus enter at once singing the chorale text to melodic lines obviously derived from Luther's tune in busy fugal imitation until the unembellished chorale melody itself, the cantus firmus, sounds from on high, in long notes, by the instrumental forces (by the oboes, and perhaps a choir of trumpets, as well) and is then thunderously answered, in strict canon, three octaves lower, by the instrumental basses and organ. The sense of heaven and earth opening wide and resounding with the glory of God never has been more vividly evoked.

But Martin Luther also was gifted at creating melodies that occupied the end of the stylistic and expressive spectrum opposite from that represented by *Ein feste Burg* and *Vom Himmel hoch* —and Bach was just as attracted to them. I am referring to melodies such as *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* or *Ach Gott vom Himmel sieh darein*. Quite unlike the readily accessible, modern-sounding, major-mode melodies of the former, those of *Aus tiefer Not* and *Ach Gott vom Himmel* sound archaic, indeed exotic, even alien. They belong to the long-since obsolete church modes (obsolete even in Bach's time), in particular the Phrygian mode, in which the second scale degree is only a half-step above the tonic pitch. When such melodies, like Luther's, are well crafted—with sharply delineated contours and sensitive placement of the characteristic steps and intervals of the mode—they can be both memorable and deeply expressive.

The archaic idiom of hymn melodies of this sort frequently inspired Bach to adopt a self-consciously retrospective compositional style when setting them as cantata movements or even as organ chorales. In order to appreciate their unconventional treatment in his cantatas, let us first consider his more usual technique of chorale elaboration, as found, for example, in the opening chorus of the Advent cantata, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 62, composed for the First Sunday of Advent, 1724. The movement begins, in typical fashion for a chorale cantata of the 1724 cycle, with an orchestral introduction, in this instance with some intimations of the chorale tune in the instruments. After this introduction (or ritornello), the lower voices of the chorus enter in imitation with a version of the first line of the chorale that anticipates the formal entrance of the traditional melody, the cantus firmus, presented by the sopranos. Thereupon, a portion of the orchestral ritornello returns and prepares the

way for the reappearance of the chorus and the soprano cantus firmus with the presentation of the next line of the chorale and so on, until the end. The movement concludes with a repetition of the original orchestral ritornello, as it appeared at the beginning. In sum: with its alternation of orchestral ritornelli and solo episodes—the solo episodes, this time, consisting of the lines of the chorale stanza—the movement follows the formal design of the contemporary, i.e., “modern,” Italian baroque concerto.

The style of the opening chorus of *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, BWV 38, stands in the starkest contrast to this normal procedure. It dispenses almost entirely with the brilliant color palette and lively motivic activity of the independent instrumental ensemble, as well as with the energetic rhythms and clarity of form that are the hallmarks of the Italian concerto—all of which were prominently displayed in *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* —in favor of an uncompromising, austere contrapuntal texture: a steady, almost ponderous, rhythmic tread, and no independent instrumental parts at all (except for the basso continua). The result is a compositional idiom reminiscent of Renaissance polyphony, specifically that associated with the sixteenth-century motet—a style of composition that would have been thoroughly familiar to Martin Luther.

III

Bach's stature as the greatest composer of the Lutheran church has long since been beyond debate. Indeed, it is not infrequently suggested that, next to Luther himself, Bach may well be the most important Lutheran in history. Even so, I think it is quite possible that we might, if anything, actually be underestimating the importance of Martin Luther in the life and artistic development of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Some twenty years ago the eminent literary critic Harold Bloom developed a provocative theory of poetic influence, which he published under the title *The Anxiety of Influence*.[3] Bloom's central thesis, enunciated at the outset of his book, is this: "Strong poets make … history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves." He continues, "[S]trong poets … wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves."[4]

Although Bloom speaks only of lyric poets, his thesis clearly applies to great (or in Bloom's preferred term "strong") creative artists of any medium. For example, in the sphere of music, we are all aware of the giant shadow, and the attendant "anxiety of influence," that Beethoven cast on virtually all the composers of the nineteenth century who followed him and the similar, quite suffocating, influence that Richard Wagner exerted on his contemporaries and followers. Beethoven himself admitted to having to struggle with the overwhelming influence of both Mozart and Haydn. As for Mozart, he demonstrably did not reach full artistic maturity until he had seriously studied and absorbed the music of J. S. Bach.

Now, Bloom calls attention to a notable exception to his theory of influence. He writes, "The greatest poet in our language is excluded from the argument … Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness."[5] It seems to me that in an important sense J. S. Bach, like Shakespeare, belonged to "the giant age before the flood" in the history of music. In the same sense that one could assert, admittedly with some hyperbole, that there were "no great poets" before Shakespeare, it is possible to argue that there were "no great composers" before Bach. It is true that Bach has the reputation of being the "culmination of an era." In the famous words of Albert Schweitzer, "Bach is thus a terminal point. Nothing comes from him, everything merely leads up to him."[6] In a far more profound sense, however, Bach was in fact the beginning of an era. He was, upon reflection, the first great composer—at least in modern times, that is, the era that continues still and is in fact ours. In the beginning was Bach, the ultimate source of all modern "anxiety of influence" in the art of music. This means that, unlike all his great and famous successors, Bach had no great musical precursor with whom to wrestle. Whoever was there—Buxtehude, Vivaldi—he merely "swallowed up."

In this connection Harold Bloom cites an example of what he calls "Goethe's … appalling self confidence."[7] The immortal poet once wrote, "Do not all the achievements of a poet's predecessors and contemporaries rightfully belong to him? Why should he shrink from picking flowers where he finds them? Only by making the riches of the others our own do we bring anything great into being."[8] Bach, it seems to me, did not suffer from the "anxiety of influence" any more than did Goethe. He, too, felt free to "pick the flowers where he found them." In the list of composers whom Bach (as reported by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel) had "heard and studied" in his youth, we find the names of Froberger, Kerl, Pachelbel, Fischer, Strunck, "some old and good Frenchmen," Buxtehude, Reincken, Bruhns, and Bohm.[9] A respectable list, but there are clearly no giants among them: no Beethovens, Mozarts, Wagners—or J. S. Bachs—again, because for all intents and purposes, at least in Bach's world, none had existed. (Of course, there were brilliant musicians, even musicians of genius, before Bach: Josquin des Prez, Claudio Monteverdi, to mention only two. But it is doubtful that Bach knew their

music, or perhaps even their names. It is not even certain whether he was aware of the music, or the name, of his greatest German predecessor: Heinrich Schütz.) What is even more striking, however, is that the name of the composer who surely had the greatest influence of all on the formation of Bach's mature style, the one to whom he was clearly most indebted, is missing entirely from his son's list of acknowledgments: Antonio Vivaldi.

As far as his art was concerned, Bach did not so much have formidable individual precursors to confront as prevailing idioms, conventions, and traditions to study, assimilate, and transcend. But any serious artist, especially an artist of genius, must have a worthy model against whom he can measure and challenge himself. Surely the only mortal who could be described as having served, in the deepest sense, as a model and inspiration for Johann Sebastian Bach—someone worthy of his emulation, stimulating his creative imagination, and serving indeed as an inspiration (inspiring both admiration and awe)—was Martin Luther.

There can be little doubt that Bach revered Martin Luther, strongly identified with him, recognized him as a supremely towering figure, as a truly "great man," and venerated him almost to the point of obsession. One telling symptom of this reverence is to be found in Bach's personal library. Dominating Bach's library were the writings of Luther, which Bach possessed several times over, including at least two extensive (and expensive) collected editions. Robin A. Leaver reports, "There were twenty-one fat folio volumes devoted to the writings of Martin Luther in Bach's library. If one then adds the quarto volume of Luther's *Hauß Postilla* and the octavo volume of Johannes Muller's *Lutherus Defensus*, which were also in his library, then something of the high regard Bach had for the great German reformer and his writings can be clearly seen."[10]

Particularly intriguing is the seven-volume edition of Luther's *Schriften*, which Bach purchased from a dealer at a book auction in 1742. Bach seems to have paid the considerable price of ten Thalers for this deluxe edition of Luther's works. (Bach's annual income at Leipzig was around seven hundred Thalers, or some sixty Thalers per month.) But Bach actually paid more than ten Thalers. The price on the receipt has been changed, no doubt from something considerably higher: perhaps double or even triple the putative price (see the illustration below).

One can only agree with Leaver's explanation for the alteration of the price of the volumes, namely, that Bach may have been "reluctant to reveal to his wife how much he paid for them."[11] The document reads:

> These German and magnificent Writings of the late D.[octor] M.[artin] Luther (that came from the library of the great Wittenberg theologian D.[octor] Abrah:[am] Calovius, which he probably used to compile his great *Teütsche Bibel*; and also, after his death, passed into the hands of the equally great theologian D.[octor] J.[ohann] F.[riedrich] Mayer) [I] have acquired for 10 thl. anno 1742. mense Septembris.
>
> Joh. Sebast. Bach.[12]

Receipt by J. S. Bach for the purchase of a Luther edition, 1742

Bach's profound veneration of Luther is not difficult to understand. First of all, it obviously built upon the respect and reverence naturally flowing to the founder of the composer's religious confession. But

there were other sources nurturing Bach's personal identification with the reformer: for example, the almost familial bond deriving from their common national-indeed, regional-heritage. Like Luther, Bach was a native Thuringian. Moreover, Bach was born and spent the first ten years of his life in Eisenach, that is, in the shadow of the Wartburg, where Luther, after his defiant stand at the Diet of Worms, had taken refuge and translated the New Testament into German and therewith had determined the precise form in which the Holy Word—itself at the core of the new dispensation—would be proclaimed to the German nation.

There is another element, as well, coloring the nature of Bach's personal relationship with Luther, one having to do, once again, with the extraordinarily gifted creative individual's need for a credible model, a "great man" worthy of and capable of inspiring emulation. In his classic essay, *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud allows himself a lengthy digression in order to speculate on what, exactly, is a "great man."[13] After discounting such attributes as beauty, physical strength, military heroism, and worldly success in general, he adds: "We should certainly not apply the term to a master of chess or to a virtuoso on a musical instrument, and not necessarily to a distinguished artist or a man of science. In such a case we should be content to say he is a great writer, painter, mathematician, or physicist, a pioneeer in this field or that, but we should pause before pronouncing him a great man. When we declare, for instance, Goethe, Leonardo da Vinci, and Beethoven to be great men, then something else must move us to do so beyond the admiration of their grandiose creations."[14] After further such teasing, Freud finally concludes: "It is the longing for the father [emphasis added] that lives in each of us from his childhood days, for the same father whom the hero of legend boasts of having overcome. And now it begins to dawn on us that all the features with which we furnish the great man are traits of the father …. The decisiveness of thought, the strength of will, the forcefulness of his deeds, belong to the picture of the father; above all other things, however, the self-reliance and independence of the great man, his divine [sic] conviction of doing the right thing, which may pass into ruthlessness. He must be admired, he may be trusted, but one cannot help also being afraid of him."[15]

One need not be a doctrinaire Freudian, I think, to find that this insight rings true. And it is hardly necessary to argue that these attributes of the great man, which Freud, of course, proceeds to apply to Moses, apply just as well to Martin Luther. As far as the present discussion is concerned, it is important to remember that Bach had no father. He was an orphan: his mother died when he was just nine years old and his father nine months thereafter—a month short of Bach's tenth birthday. Bach, then, experienced the catastrophic deprivation of his parents, and this calamity understandably put the boy on his guard, engendering in him, we may be sure, an attitude of "basic distrust" against an unreliable, even treacherous world. Under such circumstances, it is readily apparent why Bach would have been drawn to religion, especially to the Lutheran religion with its message of personal faith and salvation, one moreover, which would have provided him with the ideal image of the admirable, inspiring, awe-inspiring, longed-for father.

There was yet a further, perhaps decisive reason, why Bach would have been drawn to the person and doctrine of Martin Luther, and that is the uniquely important place Luther accorded to music. Luther put it most succinctly in his *Table Talk* (at least one copy of which Bach owned) when he said, "Music is an outstanding gift of God and next to theology. I would not want to give up my slight knowledge of music for a great consideration. And youth should be taught this art; for it makes fine skillful people."[16]

It is important to recognize that Luther's enthusiasm for music embraced both its least pretentious and most sophisticated manifestations—from the simple folk-like tunes to be sung by the congregation to the most elaborate polyphonic settings. Nowhere, perhaps, is Luther's admiration for the highest musical art expressed more eloquently and lyrically than in this passage recorded in the *Table Talk*: "How strange and wonderful it is that one voice sings a simple unpretentious tune … while three, four, or five other voices are also sung; these voices play and sway in joyful exuberance around the tune and with ever-varying art and tuneful sound wondrously adorn and beautify it, and in a celestial roundelay meet in friendly caress and lovely embrace; so that anyone, having a little understanding, must be moved and greatly wonder, and come to the conclusion that there is nothing

rarer in the whole world than a song adorned by so many voices."[17] For all its enthusiasm and poetic exuberance this passage could serve as a technically precise description of a typical polyphonic chorale setting, such as one encounters in a church cantata by J. S. Bach, for example, in the opening chorus of *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, or even, if one adds the instruments, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*.

The implications of such statements for Bach's self understanding—and Bach almost certainly knew them—are abundantly clear: Martin Luther, quite literally, has done nothing less than justified (even glorified) Bach's existence as a musician and indeed defined his earthly mission.

Notes

[1] An English translation of the complete text of Bach's letter of resignation (actually a request for dismissal) is printed in Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader*, 2nd edn. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), p. 60-61.

[2] Christoph Wolff, "Chronology and Style in the Early Works: A Background for the Orgel-Büchlein," in *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 299.

[3] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[4] Ibid., p. 5.

[5] Ibid., p. 11.

[6] Albert Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, trans. Ernest Newman (New York: Macmillan, repr., 1964), 1:3.

[7] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 52.

[8] Ibid., p. 52.

[9] C. P. E. Bach's comment, made in reply to an inquiry from the early Bach biographer Johann Nicol aus Forkel, is printed in David and Mendel, *The Bach Reader*, p. 2 78.

[10] Robin A. Leaver, "Bach and Luther," *Bach: The Quarterly Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 9/3 (July 1978), p. 11-12.

[11] Robin A. Leaver, *Bach's Theological Library: A Critical Bibliography* (Beiträge zur theologischen Bachforschung, 1; Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler-Verlag, 1983), p. 14.

[12] Ibid ., p. 42. Incidentally, this document evidently contains the only surviving written reference to Martin Luther in Bach's hand.

[13] Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 136-40.

[14] Ibid., p. 138.

[15] Ibid., p. 140.

[16] Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis: Concordia House, 1988), p. 34.

[17] Ibid., p. 21.

Publisher Information

ATLANTA
PITTS THEOLOGY LIBRARY
2020

For further information regarding the
Kessler Reformation Collection, contact:

Richard M. Adams, PhD
Pitts Theology Library
Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia 30322

A Pitts Theology Library Digital Publication
Copy Editor: Liz Miller
Managing Editor: Spencer Roberts