

Hildegard of Bingen & Martin Luther: A Musical & Theological Comparison of Two German Composers

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Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) is one of the earliest-known composers of plainsong chants, which were a central feature of Roman Catholic liturgy throughout the Middle Ages. Four centuries later, Martin Luther (1483-1546) would become the first and most prolific composer of Reformation hymns, which served as a prototype for what is now the Protestant liturgical singing tradition. To the modern mind, the music and the theology of these two celebrated Christian composers could not be more different. Hildegard, a devoted mystic and visionary of the Holy Roman church, composed a vast collection of songs admired for their ethereal, melismatic quality. Luther's hymns are known for their metered, congregational style, which played a central role in his efforts to undermine the papal authority and establish Christian independence from Rome by spreading his Reformed theology through catchy, accessible hymnody.

However, a closer analysis and comparison of the lives, writings, songs, and historical contexts of these two German composers reveals a number of similarities in their musical theology, as well as some interesting observations regarding the differing ways in which music was implemented for the expression of the Gospel in their respective communities. Such an analysis offers a challenge to those involved in Christian music today, to understand the deeper foundations for a Christian theology of music and to embrace a broader and more historically contextual appreciation of music's role in shaping our spiritual lives.

Hildegard was the tenth and youngest child of an aristocratic family in southwestern Germany. She was dedicated at birth by her family to the church as a tithe, and was sent to a Benedictine abbey near Bingen at eight years old, where she was educated by the Benedictines in Scripture and devotional books, music, and the practice of humility.¹ Though she was immersed in the Benedictine tradition of daily liturgical singing, Hildegard reports that she “never studied either musical notation or singing.”² Yet, in spite of her lack of formal training in music theory or composition, Hildegard went on to become one of the most prolific composers of the early Middle Ages, writing nearly 80 chants that surpassed the linguistic, musical, and liturgical conventions of Gregorian chant, in addition to composing the first musical morality play in Western history.³

Martin Luther, the eldest son of a middle-class peasant laborer family, joined an Augustinian friary in Erfurt at the age of twenty-two, much to his father’s disappointment. Like Hildegard, Luther did not receive any formal training in music theory or composition, but he was considered an accomplished amateur musician who was proficient in singing and playing the lute.⁴ As a schoolboy he sang in the choir, and later as a monk he sang door to door for alms.⁵ He went on to compose melodies for several of his own hymns as well as a short psalm motet in four parts, and while he was not nearly as prolific a songwriter as Hildegard, he composed over thirty hymns during his lifetime.

1 Barbara Jean Jeskalian, “Hildegard of Bingen: The Creative Dimensions of a Medieval Personality,” (dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 1982).

2 Tim Dowly, *Christian Music: A Global History*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

3 Marianne Richert Pfau, “Vision: The Music of Hildegard von Bingen,” *German Life* 3, 5 (1997), 54.

4 Christopher Boyd Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer,” *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture: 1550-1675*, Robert Kolb, ed., (Boston: Brill, 2008), 207.

5 Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 207.

While Luther is most famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask) for his defiance against the Roman Catholic Church and its abuse of papal authority, Hildegard was also committed to challenging the bishops and popes in her own time. In her sixties, she conducted four preaching tours around Germany, during which she denounced clerical abuses and called for church reform. She also wrote over 300 letters during her lifetime to lay people, clergy, church dignitaries, emperors, popes, and kings (including Henry II of England) that contained everything from instruction, encouragement, and advice, to dire prophecies and warnings. In a letter to the prelates of Mainz, who had placed her community under an interdict that restricted their singing of the divine office, she writes:

What about those in the church who through an interdict impose silence on the singing of God's praise? If on Earth they have committed the wrong of robbing God of the honor of the praise which is God's due, then they can have no fellowship with the praise of the angels in heaven, unless they make the situation right again... I heard a voice that said: Who has created heaven? God. Who opens heaven to the faithful? God. Who is like God? No one. Therefore, not one of you, O faithful, should offer resistance of opposition to God. Otherwise God will fall upon you with great strength and you will have no helper who can protect you through God's judgment.⁶

Her obstinate spirit led at least one of Martin Luther's friends, the Nurnberg preacher Andreas Osiander, to regard Hildegard as a "precursor of the Protestant Reformation."⁷ Both Hildegard and Luther held musical theologies that were unique to their times and communities, yet similar to one another in several ways. Both theologians understood music to be a divine gift from God and a foundational aspect of worship. While most medieval music theorists remained preoccupied with resolving the conflict between Greek and Judeo-Christian claims regarding the origins of music (the former attributing it to Pythagoras and the latter to Jubal, cf. Genesis 4:21), both Hildegard and Luther traced the invention of music all the way

⁶ Matthew Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, (Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 1987), 359.

⁷ Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, (Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 1985), 19.

back to the origins of human history.⁸ In his 1535 Wittenberg lectures on Genesis, Luther declares that music originated with Adam and was a fundamental aspect of the worship of the “true church” prior to the Fall.⁹ Likewise, in Hildegard’s aforementioned letter to the prelates of Mainz, she identifies music’s source as Adam in Paradise, writing that he was “educated by God’s finger, the Holy Spirit,” and that prior to the Fall “his voice carried in itself, in full harmonious sound, the loveliness of every musical art.”¹⁰

Both Luther and Hildegard believed that it was through the deception of the Devil that Adam lost his harmony with the angels, and that the fallen constitution of humanity inevitably led to the invention of musical instruments, which were interpreted within a Platonic framework as mere reflections of the Divine harmony of the spheres.¹¹ However, the evaluation and interpretation of the nature of this development was quite different between the two, based on key theological difference between them, particularly regarding the role of human creativity. Hildegard wrote positively about the human ingenuity of “zealous and wise people” who “developed a variety of musical instruments in order to be able to sing in joyfulness of heart,” and that “through the appropriate movement of their fingers they [bring] melodies to expression.”¹² Luther, however, remained critical of the invention of instruments, which he attributed to the Cainites, claiming that “they had turned to these endeavors and were not satisfied with their simple manner of life, as were the children of Adam because they wanted to be masters and were trying to win high praise and honor as clever men.”¹³

8 Robin A. Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 67.

9 Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 69-70.

10 Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 354.

11 Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 354-355.

12 Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 355.

13 Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 69.

This seemingly subtle difference in attitude regarding the invention of instruments is born out of, and contingent with, Luther's reformed theology of righteousness. Hildegard's strong contention was that the primary purpose of music was to praise God: "Music is the highest form of praise for me, and I intend my songs as an earthly counterpart to the music of the spheres, harmonizing the human, physical and divine worlds into beautiful, ordered sound," she writes.¹⁴ But for Luther, the idea that music offered praise to God could not be separated from the idea that music was a gift from God, because no human being was capable of giving anything to God that did not originate from God. Therefore, music was not thought to be a human invention per se, but more akin to a "creature," in other words a work of God himself.¹⁵ "Music is a gift of God and not of man," Luther writes,¹⁶ and from this contention he insists that "next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise."¹⁷

While Luther adds this important nuance to his theology of music, his writings and the writings of Hildegard on the nature of music still bear much in common. The two figures observe that all of creation participates in Divine praise through music: "from the beginning of the world [music] has been instilled and implanted in all creatures, individually and collectively," writes Luther,¹⁸ just as Hildegard writes that "all creation is a song of praise to God."¹⁹ Music was also understood by both Luther and Hildegard to be a gift from God with profound moral influence. This theological principle of music figures prominently in both of their writings, where praise of God is often conflated with praise for music itself and for the emotional effect it has on humans. Margot Fassler argues that Hildegard's liturgical songs

14 Barbara L. Grant, "An Interview with the Sybil of the Rhine: Hildegard von Bingen," *Heresies*, 3 (1980): 7.

15 Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 89.

16 Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 70.

17 Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns," 213.

18 Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 77.

19 Fox, *Illuminations*, 116.

contained no music specifically *for* Christ because “He *is* the Music, that the members of his body make together.”²⁰ Hildegard goes so far as to identify Divinity with music itself: “O Trinity, you are music, you are life.”²¹

The issue of the Devil’s relationship to music is also an especially interesting topic to compare between the two writers. According to Hildegard, the Devil, upon hearing music, becomes “uncommonly tortured,” and therefore seeks to manifest disharmony.²² She believed that the Devil was behind all efforts to ban music and that he “has no song in him at all.”²³ The oft-quoted remark, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?” widely attributed to Martin Luther, would seem to contradict this idea. An influential 1931 text by Friedrich Blume cited Luther as saying that “the devil does not need to have all lovely tunes solely for himself.”²⁴ Joseph Herl points out that the question was originally posed by the English preacher Roland Hill (1744-1833), and that no references have been found to corroborate Blume’s uncited statement.²⁵ Much to the contrary, it appears that Luther’s thinking on the subject was much more in alignment with Hildegard’s: the Devil must have had a completely antithetical relationship to music. Luther writes: “The sound of music and the word of theology: both repel the devil. Music is next to theology because both accomplish similar results... The Devil, the creator of saddening cares and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music.”²⁶

20 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 149, emphasis mine.

21 Fox, *Illuminations*, 116.

22 Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 356.

23 Margot Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist: Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse,” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Barbara Newman, ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 173.

24 Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism: Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

25 Herl, *Worship Wars*, 21-22.

26 Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 93.

In a number of quotations Luther reveals his conviction that the physical vibrations in the air, the proportions and relationships of different pitches, and the other “raw materials” of music are all gifts of God in creation.²⁷ Hildegard similarly observed that “singing words reveals their true meaning directly to the soul through bodily vibrations.”²⁸ Matthew Fox points out that Hildegard understood the Spirit in terms of wind and breath, and that as a result her compositions were highly physical, at times leading the singer close to hyperventilation.²⁹ Luther also highlights the connection between the breath and the Spirit in music when writes, “Even the air, which is invisible and imperceptible to all our senses... becomes sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when it is set in motion. Wondrous mysteries are here suggested by the Spirit.”³⁰

Hildegard’s theology of music, just as Martin Luther’s, was based on the notion that communal singing was an incarnational act that had a reciprocal spiritual and theological function: it served humanity by acting as a means for the religious and spiritual education and edification of the soul. In 1521 Luther stated that the gospel should be seen first and foremost as “a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth,” and he recognized early on the power of hymns to accomplish this by providing a means for carrying and conveying the meaning of the Gospel among the people.³¹ Hildegard also understood music primarily as a vehicle for text. She writes that music and instruments were invented “so that through the form and character of these instruments, and especially through the meaning of the words, the listeners...might be so excited by these external things and brought into their rhythm that

²⁷ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 69-70.

²⁸ Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 364.

²⁹ Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 364.

³⁰ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 77.

³¹ Eric Lund, ed., *Documents from the History of Lutheranism: 1517-1750* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 82.

inwardly they might delight in their meaning.” Fassler has shown how Hildegard’s songs were written to be used as teaching tools in her monastic community, describing them as “sounding icons for study and meditation on the words and phrases...each [person] being taught and transformed through the process.”³²

And yet, in spite of the parallels between Hildegard and Martin Luther’s musical ideologies, their common effort to use music in the service of God and the Gospel did not result in similar musical styles, compositional techniques, or modes of dissemination. Rather, these were radically distinct, based primarily on two very different social and historical contexts, as well as two very different theoretical approaches to understanding the power of text, the nature of spiritual growth, and the relationship between the two. It is at this point that the differences between these two progressive German composers become increasingly apparent, and through the lens of their musical pursuits we can get a clearer glimpse of their social, theological, and historical contexts.

One of the most important differences between Hildegard and Luther is their interpretation of the role of the words in music. This had an effect on composition in terms of how the text functioned in relationship to the melody. While both composers believed that the music should serve as an effective vehicle for the text in order to provide a form of religious education, their interpretation of *how* music best supported the text’s ability to educate differed radically. This was most likely the result of distinctions between the characteristics, lifestyles, and needs of their respective communities. As Fassler writes, Hildegard’s music “cannot be fully understood apart from the monasticism that inspired her to compose in the first place and then to create the particular kinds of music she produced.”³³ Her music was written for a

³² Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 161.

³³ Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 150.

community that followed the rhythms and rituals of a cloistered, contemplative lifestyle, which offered a great deal of time for reflection and pondering the deeper meaning of symbolic elements, alongside a long tradition of instruction to further assist listeners in this practice.

Luther's music also had to serve the needs of his audience, which were far more diverse than that of Hildegard. Luther's community consisted primarily of people who were living and working in increasingly secular contexts. They did not have nearly the time, patience, or instruction for transformation and the construction of meaning through slow, contemplative reflection on symbolic texts. The proclamation of the Word joined to music might take place in a variety of contexts: in the streets and marketplaces, in schools, and most importantly, in the home.³⁴ By Luther's time, the increased availability of printed material had led to increasingly literacy, and contributed to an emphasis on more direct communication through the written word. The conception of hymns as containing and conveying the Word of God was definitive for Luther's understanding and use of hymnody in such contexts: the music was praiseworthy only inasmuch as that it offered a streamlined and mnemonic approach to delivering the words, since words were increasingly considered the most direct and effective means for communicating the Gospel.³⁵

The text for Luther's hymns therefore typically drew on the power of rhyme, meter, and repetition to engage the memory of his congregants and to help spread his theological ideas. Early on, Luther set both the Ten Commandments and the Apostles Creed to metered rhyme and melody so that they could be more easily learned, remembered, and recited communally. The 1529 hymnal contained ten catechism hymns for the explicit purpose of teaching the basic

³⁴ Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns," 219.

³⁵ Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns," 215.

essentials of the Christian faith.³⁶ And though Luther composed several of his own hymn melodies, he also set many of his hymn texts to songs that were already popular in Germany, utilizing familiar melodies to make the new texts and teachings easier to assimilate (an approach that proved incredibly successful, as one embittered Jesuit famously complained: “the hymns of Luther have killed more souls than [his] writing and preaching”).³⁷

Luther’s approach to hymn writing can be seen in the following excerpt from his earliest hymn, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*: “It is in God that we shall hope and not in our own merit. We rest our fears in his good Word and trust his Holy Spirit. His promise keeps us strong and sure, we trust the holy signature...”³⁸ Luther’s most popular hymn, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”), contains the following verse: “This world’s prince may rage, in fierce war engage, he is doomed to fail; God’s judgment must prevail!”³⁹ Both of these early Lutheran hymns were sung in metered rhythm with one note per syllable, in such a way that the lyrics could be delivered clearly and directly. In both cases, we see Luther’s theology of justification by grace stated in the most frank and straightforward manner possible.

This strong sense of rhyme and meter did not necessarily indicate that Luther’s musical style that was overly rigid. On the contrary, Luther writes, “what is Law does not make progress, but what is Gospel does,” citing the gentle, free-flowing, and cheerful songs of Josquin as exemplary musical manifestations of the dynamic and elusive nature of the Gospel, which must never be “forced or cramped by rules.”⁴⁰ The emphasis on Grace in the lyrics also extended to the nature of the musical performance itself: “the ‘law’ of music, as enshrined in

³⁶ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 110.

³⁷ Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 210.

³⁸ Lund, *Documents from the History of Lutheranism*, 96.

³⁹ Lund, *Documents from the History of Lutheranism*, 96.

⁴⁰ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 101.

written notation on the page, must be tempered by ‘grace’ in performance by the singers and players as they make the music live.”⁴¹ The emphasis was not on rigidity or musical perfection but on a strong sense that whatever happens musically should not interfere with the *intelligibility* of the words, nor should it contain melodic complexities that would prevent anyone in the congregation from participating in the sung recitation of the teachings.

In spite of Luther’s popularity among many Germans, and in spite of the later historical significance of his hymns, Luther experienced a great deal of resistance to establishing the songs that he composed in his own time. Domestic piety through hymn-singing was central to establishing lay identity and independence.⁴² Luther’s struggle to implement this shift in religious consciousness through music can be seen in his scathing admonition of his own congregation during a 1526 sermon:

The songs have been composed and are sung for your sake so that you can sing them here and at home, but you sit here like blocks of wood. Therefore I beg you, teach these songs to your children and sing them yourselves...from this you see who is a Christian and what is to be expected of him.⁴³

Two years later, Luther was still disappointed in his congregation’s lack of participation, and complained: “We took care that a large number of the best spiritual songs might be composed for your use and edification. Therefore, work hard that you might learn and cultivate them with greater diligence than you have up until now.”⁴⁴ Apparently the characteristics that Luther considered to be “best” in music were not necessarily shared by the people in his congregation, and them to sing hymns in church was just as much a challenge then than it is for many clergy and worship leaders today. Luther was a former Augustinian monk, and like

⁴¹ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 102.

⁴² Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 237.

⁴³ Herl, *Worship Wars*, 14.

⁴⁴ Herl, *Worship Wars*, 15.

Augustine, he believed that music's power to stir the emotions in order to convey Christian doctrines was what made it praiseworthy. Music was therefore only thought to be in the service of God when it offered a direct theological teaching in vernacular language, set to a tune that would not interfere with the words.

Hildegard of Bingen, however, had a very different understanding of music, words, the relationship between them, and how they best work together to function as a teaching tool in Christian communities. For Hildegard, "songs" were not conceptualized as primarily text *or* as primarily music but as an interconnected whole constructed of both. She likened the relationship between words and music to the relationship between body and spirit.⁴⁵ These two elements of a song are inseparable, and each contains its own independent value and worth. By this understanding, the music itself has its own power to teach. "Musical harmony softens hard hearts," writes Hildegard, "inducing in them the moisture of contrition and summoning the Holy Spirit."⁴⁶ Music has the power to arouse souls from sluggishness to watchfulness, and gives grace not only to those standing and erect but those "sliding and falling out of their very high seats."⁴⁷

This last quote reflects Hildegard's belief that the grace offered through music occurs not just through metered dissemination of doctrine, but through the combined effect of words and music on one's emotional or affectual state. Hildegard had faith in the music to inspire moods and states that deepened the authentic experience of one's full humanity. She understood grace to be at work in musical styles that were both joyous and sorrowful, emphasizing that music is a form of joyous heavenly praise, while also explicitly extolling the virtues of lamentations, for the

45 Fassler, "Composer and Dramatist," 154.

46 Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, eds., *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 83.

47 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, Bruce Hozeski, transl., (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1986), 389-390.

ways in which they offer peace to prodigals and “call people back to those praises and joys.”⁴⁸

In *Scolia* she writes,

For music not only rejoices in the unanimity of exultation of those who bravely persevere along the path of righteousness. It also exults in the concord of reviving those who have fallen away from the path of justice and are lifted up at last to blessedness. For even the good shepherd joyfully led back to the flock the sheep that had been lost.⁴⁹

The method of musical notation used to record the plainchant melodies in Hildegard’s time did not include a standard for documenting rhythm, and in her own music there are few if any indications of metric practice.⁵⁰ While this does not eliminate the possibility that she used meter or rhythmic modes, interpretations of rhythmic patterns in Hildegard’s compositions remain disputed. What we do know, however, is that a different sense of time operates in Hildegard’s songs from that which we experience in modern music: the expectation of forward motion and the sense of an ongoing, driving pulse or beat are absent.⁵¹ Furthermore, while it was common for the Divine Offices composed in her period to rhyme, Hildegard’s compositions characteristically did not use rhyme.⁵² Unlike Luther, it is clear that she did not think meter and rhyme to be particularly necessary or helpful for religious instruction through music.

Also unlike Luther, Hildegard’s songs were musically ornate, long, and difficult to learn and perform.⁵³ In contrast to the narrow tonal range utilized in most plainchant melodies of her time, which conventionally did not use intervals larger than a third, Hildegard employs a wide range and extremes of register, leaping up and down in fourths and fifths, encompassing more than two and a half octaves, and expanding and contracting melodic phrases to create her

48 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 173.

49 Bowie & Davies, eds., *Hildegard of Bingen*, 82-83.

50 John White, “The Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen,” *College Music Symposium* 38 (1998), 12.

51 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 162.

52 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 152.

53 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 161.

characteristic “soaring arches.”⁵⁴ She also used elaborate *melismas*, or expressive vocalizing on one syllable. While this was a common practice in Gregorian chant, Hildegard might use as many as eleven notes to a single syllable in her songs.⁵⁵

Fassler suggests that Hildegard may have even composed her liturgical texts as she sang them.⁵⁶ The use of improvisation to generate text, along with the use of nuance and complexity in the music, could lead one to reason that, for Hildegard, the words were perhaps subordinate to the music. However, this is not the case, based on her own writings: “through the form and character of [musical] instruments, *and especially through the meaning of the words*, the listeners...might be so excited by these external things and brought into their rhythm that inwardly they might delight in their meaning.”⁵⁷ Words are still a key element for Hildegard, just as they are for Luther. The difference lies in the important role that the practice of *rumination* played in the learning style of monastic communities. Rumination was central to liturgical edification for monastics, and the songs composed by Hildegard were meant to sustain a lifetime of contemplation and singing for nuns living in the context of this practice.⁵⁸

In this tradition, the words of a song functioned in such a way that the listener could savor every image. Hildegard’s complex melismas created both structure and sense by stretching important words and outlining elements of form, while her use of relative pitch served to underscore the meaning of certain words through contrasts in the dimension of sound.⁵⁹ Rather than providing a tune to assist listeners in the memorization of a long series of words, the music enveloped listeners into an atmosphere of sound that provided an opportunity to reflect on the

⁵⁴ Dowley, *Christian Music*, 63.

⁵⁵ Jeskalian, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 71.

⁵⁶ Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 154.

⁵⁷ Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 357, emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 162.

⁵⁹ Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 164.

deeper meaning of every word. The effectiveness of these techniques was also based on different linguistic procedures from the vernacular German that Luther employed in his lyric writing. As Fassler explains, “in Latin, the meaning of a sentence is based more on the inflections of individual words than on the ordering of the words themselves.”⁶⁰ Thus, the words played an equally important role in the musical compositions of Luther and Hildegard, but their quantity, meter, and relation to the melody were quite different.

Another important difference between Luther and Hildegard was the way that they regarded and made use of secular melodies. It is a popular misconception of the modern imagination that Luther adapted secular tunes to make his hymns more attractive to people. Thus it may come as somewhat of a surprise to learn that it was actually Hildegard who more freely integrated elements of secular and folk music into her compositions, while Luther approached this matter with much greater trepidation. While Luther often wrote hymns based on pre-existing melodies, most often they were adapted from Gregorian chant or from popular *religious* songs.⁶¹ Only one of Luther’s hymns has been shown to have its origin in secular song, and it was brought into liturgical use only after its secular association had been long overshadowed by its new religious connotations.⁶²

For Luther, music retained its goodness as a gift from God even when it was not being put to explicit religious use. But he continued to criticize congregations from the pulpit for singing “love ballads and carnal songs,” and even in his appreciation of what he considered “honorable” and “morally decent” secular music (songs that did not abuse the three “God-ordained” estates of state, church, and household), he still maintained a stern effort to keep

60 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 162.

61 Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 211.

62 Herl, *Worship Wars*, 22.

secular melodies out of the church. This was primarily because of the distracting associations of secular music, but it was also because church music based on “worldly” melodies was seen by Luther as a distinctly Roman Catholic abuse.⁶³

This supposed “Roman Catholic abuse” is one in which Hildegard of Bingen wholeheartedly participated. Her appreciation for artistic expression remained broad and inclusive: “wisdom resides in all works of art,” she wrote.⁶⁴ She argued that “all the arts serving human desires and needs are derived from the breath that God sent into the human body.”⁶⁵ More than once she spoke in high regard through metaphor of the lyre, which was a definitively non-liturgical and secular musical instrument.⁶⁶ She also lived during one of the richest periods for the art of the aristocratic poet-musicians of northern Europe known as the Minnesingers, and John White suggests that it was highly likely that she heard and was influenced by these composer-singers.⁶⁷ She is cited by several sources as drawing on folk music in her compositions.⁶⁸

Luther’s need to maintain more strict boundaries between secular and religious melodies was due in part to the perception of danger in conflating the values and associations of these two worlds. As already stated, Luther’s congregations included primarily those who lived their day to day lives within secular society. Hildegard’s cloistered community, by contrast, lived in daily communal devotion to God that was set apart from the secular world. Thus, she may have felt more freedom to incorporate secular elements without fear of confusing these two worlds of meaning, since her music never spread throughout the secular world, nor was it “sold” in the

63 Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 213.

64 Fox, *Illuminations*, 115.

65 Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 358.

66 Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works*, 358 and White, “The Musical World of Hildegard,” 14.

67 White, “The Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen,” 14-15.

68 Dowley, *Christian Music*, 62.

secular marketplace. Most of her songs were composed for use in her convent, with only a small number written in response to outside requests for songs, primarily to honor local saints.⁶⁹ In spite of her prolific output of musical works, Hildegard never thought of herself as a “composer,” both on account of her gender and her cloistered condition. She seems to have had neither the opportunity nor the inclination to promote her music.⁷⁰

In drastic contrast to Hildegard’s humble spirit of limited circulation, Luther, along with the merchants who printed and sold his hymns on cheap broadsheets, had a great deal of interest in promoting his compositions and circulating them among as wide a population as possible. The primary context for hymn-singing in Luther’s day was in the home, and so the primary context for the earliest distribution of hymns was extralitururgical.⁷¹ Churches of the sixteenth century did not own hymnals to distribute among their congregations, and hymnals had no official status in the church, nor does there seem to have been any significant effort on the part of Lutheran clergy to establish hymnal use amongst worshippers.⁷² Rather, the early hymnals were pocket editions intended for personal and household use, published by independent printers who competed eagerly to capture a share of the hymnal market. Luther’s contemporaries write of the public controversy caused by “the appearance of peddlers selling, and singing, Luther’s psalm-hymns in the marketplace of German towns.”⁷³ Through the influence of printers and the market, Luther’s hymns became part of the early flood of pamphlet propaganda that circulated in support of the Reformation.⁷⁴

69 Grant, “An Interview with the Sybil of the Rhine,” 7.

70 White, “The Musical World of Hildegard,” 7.

71 Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 209.

72 Herl, *Worship Wars*, 22.

73 Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 209.

74 Brown, “Devotional Life in Hymns,” 210.

In spite of the many similarities between Hildegard of Bingen and Martin Luther, particularly with regard to their commitment to church reform and their overall theological understanding of music, contextual factors such as the development of cheap printing, market influences, gender expectations, and the daily rhythms of the monastic community versus those in secular life led to radically different approaches to musical composition and dissemination among these two famous German Christian songwriters. Arguments made by differing camps in today's so-called "worship wars" to support their views about church music frequently suffer from misinformation regarding these two important figures and junctures in the church's musical history. Ironically, the cloistered Hildegard was much freer to engage with and incorporate a broader sampling of both sacred and secular music, whereas Luther, in his effort to reach a primarily secular community, did not use secular melodies to make his Christian teaching seem more "relevant" (as is commonly assumed today), but drew primarily from Gregorian chant and other existing religious music.

The dissemination of Luther's music during the early Reformation remains hopelessly wedded to processes of consumerism, profit, and the effort to spread ideas quickly among the population, which is at odds with the argument that church music should stand over and against the consumer processes of pop music. The use of words as a kind of propaganda for church doctrine remains a popular approach for the composition of hymn lyrics, while the spiritual and transformational benefits of symbolic rumination have been largely ignored by Protestant congregations. Given that the complaints of today's worship leaders regarding the lack of congregational participation in the singing of hymns goes all the way back to Luther, one cannot help but to wonder whether a better understanding of musical form and the role of emotional affect in worship and in communicating the meaning of words through music might lead to new

insights for this centuries-old problem. Also, communities with strong “praise music” traditions may reconsider developing an appreciation for lamentation and a diversity of ways in which God might be praised.

The historical factors that have contributed to today’s culture of music, both sacred and secular, both liturgical and non-liturgical, deserve a second look from musicians and liturgists who are involved in the conversation about music’s role in shaping the spiritual lives of Christians, so that we can better understand the broad range of available traditions and approaches for conveying the Gospel through music. This comparison offers a challenge to re-think some of the assumptions about the origins of Christian musical history, recognizing that the music which best serves the Gospel is always contingent upon the particular social context and needs of specific communities.

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