

Luther's Gospel of Music

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Of all the comments about music Luther made in his life, one has been quoted more often than any other. Our music history books never tire of repeating it – indeed it is all but obligatory whenever the narrative turns to Josquin Desprez and the point one needs to bring home is that he was universally regarded as the greatest composer of his age. Martin Luther bore witness to that point more famously than anyone else. „Josquin“, he is reported to have said, „is the master of the notes: they have had to do what he wills. The other masters of song must do what the notes will.“

The master of the notes: no contemporary had ever put it like this. There were plenty of writers who had spoken of Josquin's divine gift, who even called the man himself divine, not mortal, a demigod, born under a good sign, favored by the Gods, endowed with preternatural genius.¹ But Luther had no need of such flowery rhetoric: he captured the same point in an image so direct and compelling that it strikes home immediately, even today.

And yet, what is it about Luther's comment that has made it so quotable? The image of *der Noten Meister* may be original, but one could scarcely describe the comment as an especially trenchant one.² Josquin is declared superior simply by assertion, and on such categorical black-or-white terms that it is hard to see the assessment as an expression of considered musical judgement. For what does it actually mean, to call somebody the master of the notes? What could be so difficult about 'mastering' notes, when after all they have sprung from the composer's own invention? And why should Josquin be praised in terms of such technical mastery – as if the key to his greatness did not lie in something

¹ Owens, Jessie Ann, „How Josquin Became Josquin. Reflections on Historiography and Reception“, in: *Music in Renaissance Cities and Courts. Studies in Honor of Lewis Lockwood*, ed. by Jessie Ann Owens and Anthony M. Cummings, Warren, MI 1997, pp. 271-280.

² For an important recent essay addressing this question, see Østrem, Eyolf, „Luther, Josquin and *des fincken gesang*“, in: *The Arts and the Cultural Heritage of Martin Luther*, ed. by Eyolf Østrem et al., Copenhagen 2003, pp. 51-79.

more musically inspired? Would one deem a poet the greatest of his age for no other reason than that he made the words do as he wills? Or a painter the greatest artist because he was master of the pigments? And how credible was it to deny that same mastery to all other composers of his time – indeed to dismiss the lot of them, in a single sweeping gesture, as so apparently inept that they could not keep their own notes in order? Are we not doing Luther a disservice by treating this as if it were somehow the most perceptive thing he said about contemporary music? And, more worryingly, could it be our own habit of invoking the comment to make the same point, over and over again, that has emptied it of all but its surface meaning?

These questions bring us already to the theme of this conference – that of Luther in Context. To take a comment out of context and to repeat it dozens of times does not mean to read it carefully. It does not mean that we gain particular insight into Luther's musical sensibility, or get to understand what, exactly, he liked about Josquin, let alone why he made the comment to begin with. In fact it may well mean the opposite: that we discourage close reading, precisely by treating the comment as if it speaks for itself, as though there were nothing more to it than the surface sense. This is the question that concerns us at this conference: would fresh contextual readings – even of the most familiar texts and self-evident truths – bring out dimensions that could inform our understanding in new ways? In the following pages I would like to make an initial attempt at answering that question, by probing more deeply into that curious comment of *der Noten Meister*. Let us find out where Luther's words may take us if we go beyond mere quotation, and seek in addition to recover as much context as may still be accessible to us.

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Our starting point must be the source for Luther's comment, the well-known *Historien* of Johannes Mathesius, printed in 1570 (Fig. 1). The relevant passage begins as follows:³

³ For this and the following quotations from Mathesius, see Mathesius, Johannes, *Historien Von des Ehrwürdigen in Gott seligen theuren Manns Gottes, Doctoris Martini Luthers anfang, Lere, leben unnd sterben*, Nürnberg 1570, fol. 143^v.

„Über und nach Tische sang auch Doctor bißweilen, wie er auch ein Lutinist war. Ich hab mit ihm gesungen. Zwischen Gesang bracht er gute reden mit ein. 'Josquin', sagt er, 'ist der Noten meister, die habens müssen machen wie er wolt; die andern Sangmeister müssen machen wie es die Noten haben wollen'.“

„At table and afterwards the Doctor would also sing from time to time, just as he was also a lute player. I have sung with him. In between the singing he offered edifying comments. 'Josquin', says he, 'is the master of the notes: they have had to do what he wills. The other masters of song must do what the notes will'.“

The first thing to note is that there is in fact an immediate context for the comment. For we find it embedded in a little story, a recollection of some particular occasion on which Luther must have spoken those memorable words. And we learn right away what sort of occasion that was: it was one of those evenings at Wittenberg when he and his friends would take out the partbooks after dinner, and sing selected motets and songs by the great composers of the age. Mathesius tells us that Luther used to speak edifying words in between the singing, and we may take it that the comment about *der Noten Meister* was thought to be a particularly good example of those *gute Reden*. That brings us back to the question we began with: is the comment about Josquin indeed a *gute Rede*? What did Mathesius consider so especially perceptive, so apt and to the point, about calling a composer *der Noten Meister*? Let us consider the passage more closely.

There are two words that leap out from the text, the first of which is *Meister*. In texts from this period the term *magister* normally means an individual who is licensed to teach, whether at the university or in the context of a recognized craft, a trade guild. When *magister* or *Meister* is used in this sense, it usually stands in an implied opposition to another word – student, or apprentice. Master and student: that is a conventional Medieval opposition. Yet this cannot be the sense in which Luther used the term. Josquin may have been *der Noten Meister*, but surely the notes were not his pupils. The implied opposition must be another one: that between master and servant. And the implied context is neither the university, nor the craft or trade guild, but the domestic household. If Josquin is the master, then the notes are his servants. Their job is to obey the master. They don't always do that willingly, however, and so the master's job is to ensure that they obey, and to force them if he has to. If he is a true master (as

Luther assures us he was), then the composition will end up resembling a well-governed household. But other composers are not masters at all: they are powerless to stop the servants from doing as they please, and their households, as a consequence, are in a state of disorder.

At the root of Luther's comment, then, lies a political analogy. The compositional process is like the governance of a household, and, by extension, like the governance of the state at large. It involves the exercise of power, of sovereign will, and the determination to impose that will on otherwise unwilling servants. This, at any rate, is how Luther appears to see the art. One question that might be worth asking at this point is where that political analogy came from. Could Luther have picked up the idea from some other writer? I am inclined to doubt it: as far as I know there is no author before Luther who described the compositional process in such strikingly antagonistic terms, as a power struggle with only two possible outcomes: govern or be governed. Before the early sixteenth century, in fact, it is hard to find any writer saying much about the compositional process at all. The analogy must be Luther's own invention. As such it testifies to something we will have occasion to see more often in the following pages. It is Luther's ability to come up with arrestingly novel ways of speaking about music. His language is original, and his way of thinking is original. That much we can already tell from a mere catchphrase like *der Noten Meister*.

But there is more. The second word to leap out from the text is *wollen*, the concept of *voluntas*. That concept has of course a rich historical context of its own, one that should surely bear upon our understanding of Luther's comment about Josquin. It raises the fascinating but complex issue of authorial intention, and of the musical work as the expression of that intention – in short, the aesthetics of musical authorship. It is well known that writers about music began to be exercised about these issues in the early sixteenth century. Luther seems to be partaking in this trend, by praising Josquin for his success in asserting his compositional will. But what exactly did he understand by that will? And why would the notes have resisted it?

The analogy with a well-governed household may give us a clue. It is the master's job to rule the household according to well-established principles of governance. It is not his job to seek the opinion of the carpenters, the cooks, or the gardeners, for they know only their own trade and are not competent to run a household. That is why the servants must do

as the master wills, not he as they will. The master's will, then, is the principles of governance. And it is those principles to which Luther appears to liken the art of composition. If that is indeed the analogy he had in mind, then the aim of the art must be to establish and maintain an overall sense of musical order. It is that order that the notes – all of them – must help articulate whether they like it or not.

Still, something seems to have made Luther uneasy about his comment. For when we read on, it turns out that he immediately added a note of qualification. „Of course“, he said, „the composer had his good spirit also, just like Bezaleel.“ In the margin Mathesius identifies this as a reference to the Book of Exodus, Chapter 31. Bezaleel, as we read there, was an artist and craftsman, the principal architect and maker of the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God's divine presence, and a man of uncommon skill in wood-carving, stone masonry, and other arts. Yet the Book of Exodus leaves no doubt that his workmanship, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge were outstanding only because they were impregnated with the spirit of God. Here is the relevant passage (my italics):⁴

„Und der HERR redete mit Mose und sprach: Siehe, ich habe mit Namen berufen Bezaleel, den Sohn Uris, des Sohnes Hurs, vom Stamm Juda, *und habe ihn erfüllt mit dem Geist Gottes*, mit Weisheit und Verstand und Erkenntnis und mit aller Geschicklichkeit, kunstreich zu arbeiten in Gold, Silber, Kupfer, kunstreich Steine zu schneiden und einzusetzen und kunstreich zu schnitzen in Holz, um jede Arbeit zu vollbringen.“

„And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying, See, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: *And I have filled him with the spirit of God*, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, And in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship.“

This is the „good spirit“ with which Josquin, according to Luther, was filled as well. His afterthought does indeed amount to an important qualification. Luther may have called Josquin the master of the notes, yet he regarded him as more than that. The composer owed his exceptional

⁴ Exod. 31.1-5, after Luther, Martin et al., *Biblia das ist die gantze heilige Schrift Deutsch*, Wittenberg 1534, and the Authorized King James Version.

achievements not just to technical mastery, but also, and more importantly, to the spirit he had received as a gift from the Almighty. This is the key to Luther's sense of unease: no human being, not even Josquin, should be exalted for achievements that were not wholly his own doing. His creative gifts were literally gifts, faculties he had received, not earned. For that reason it would have been inappropriate for any composer to aggrandize himself by taking the sole credit for his music. Praise was due, first and foremost, to the divine Giver. In the words of a later composer (and one who was not coincidentally a Lutheran): SOLI · DEO · GLORIA.

Yet there is still more context, and by drawing it in, our understanding of Luther's comment may take on further dimensions. Let us return once more to Mathesius, and read the conclusion of Luther's *gute Rede*. „Of course“, he noted,

„hat der Componist auch sein guten Geist gehabt, wie Bezaleel, sonderlich da er das *Haec dicit Dominus*, unnd das *Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis*, wercklich und lieblich in einander richtet.“

„the composer has had his good spirit also, just like Bezaleel, especially in the way he adapts *Haec dicit Dominus* and *Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis* so artfully and delightfully to each other.“

It transpires from this last remark that Luther did not, or at least not in the first instance, mean to offer a general assessment of Josquin's music. Rather, his comment was prompted by one particular work, a motet that he and his friends undoubtedly had just finished singing. That motet is *Haec dicit Dominus*, a six-part setting which had been printed in the previous year, 1537, in Johannes Ott's motet collection *Novum et insigne opus musicum* (Fig. 2).⁵ There must have been something about this piece that Luther truly admired, and that inspired the image of Josquin as the master of the notes. But what was it?

Luther himself gives part of the answer. It was (or so Mathesius reports him to have said) the way in which Josquin had adapted *Haec dicit Dominus* and *Circumdederunt* to each other – as if they were two pre-existing plainchants that Josquin had contrapuntally combined. Of course we know that this is not the case: there is only one plainchant in the motet, the

⁵ *Novum et insigne opus musicum, sex, quinque, et quatuor vocum*, Nürnberg 1537.

Invitatory Psalm *Circumdederunt me*.⁶ To the extent, therefore, that Luther could have taken Josquin to have adapted any two pre-existing things, it could only have been the texts. Yet it is doubtful that this is in fact what he meant to say. After all, the combination of two texts could scarcely have earned Josquin the distinction of *der Noten Meister*. Surely Mathesius must have misremembered or misinterpreted the original remark. Fortunately there is another report to shed light on the matter. It comes from the *Tischreden* for 26 December 1538, and it is likely to go back to the same evening recalled by Mathesius. Here is what Luther said:⁷

„Cantilena: *Haec dicit Dominus*. 26. Decembris canebant: *Haec dicit Dominus*, sex vocom, a Conrado Rupff compositum, qui cupiit in agone mortis hoc sibi decantari. Estque egregia muteta legem et euangelium, mortem et vitam comprehendens. Duae voces querulae lamentantur: *Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis* etc., deinde quatuor voces vberschreien dise: *Haec dicit Dominus, de manu mortis liberabo populum meum* etc. Es ist sehr wol vnd trostlich componirt.“

„Song: *Haec dicit Dominus*. On 26 December [1538] they sang *Haec dicit Dominus* for six voices, composed by Conrad Rupsch, who wished that it be sung for him in the hour of death. ‘It is an extraordinary motet, comprehending Law and Gospel, death and life. Two plaintive voices are lamenting *Circumdederunt me gemitus mortis* etc., then four voices exclaim upon these *Haec dicit Dominus, de manu mortis liberabo populum meum* etc. It has been very well and consolingly composed’.“

With this additional report things are beginning to fall into place. We now learn that Luther construed Josquin's motet in terms of an opposition, that

⁶ Besides, *Haec dicit Dominus* was not the original text. As it appears in Ott's print, Josquin's motet is actually a contrafact of *Nymphes, nappés*, having been retexted apparently by Conrad Rupsch (to whom the motet is attributed in this print). More on this in Milsom, John, „*Circumdederunt*. A Favourite Cantus Firmus of Josquin's?“, in: *Soundings* 9 (1981), pp. 2-10; Just, Martin, „Josquin's Chanson 'Nymphes, nappés' als Bearbeitung des Invitatoriums 'Circumdederunt me' und als Grundlage für Kontrafaktur, Zitat und Nachahmung“, in: *Die Musikforschung* 43 (1990), pp. 305-335; Macey, Patrick, „An Expressive Detail in Josquin's 'Nymphes, nappés'“, in: *Early Music* 31 (2003), pp. 400-411.

⁷ Cited after *Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1883-2009 (hereafter abbreviated WA), *Tischreden* 4, p. 215.

between Law and Gospel. Naturally this opposition is of pervasive importance to his theological thought, and I cannot hope to do justice to it in the context of this paper. Yet the important point here – in a specifically musical context – is that Luther associated Law with the pre-existing plainchant. This plainchant sings of death, intoning the words of Psalm 17: „the groans of death compassed me about.“ And Luther associates Gospel with the remaining four voices, whose text holds out the promise of eternal life, after the prophet Hosea: „I shall deliver my people from the hand of death.“ This textual juxtaposition of death and life, of Law and Gospel, within one and the same musical setting, must have deeply moved Luther, who by his own confession drew consolation from it.

In itself this does not bring us closer to an answer, for Luther is still speaking only of texts, not notes. Yet the opposition between Law and Gospel may give us an important clue. As we will see shortly, Luther viewed that opposition as one, not just between death and life, but also between compulsion and free will. Law is what you must do, conceivably against your will, but Gospel is what you choose to do, freely and willingly. From this perspective it seems significant that Luther should have perceived an analogy between Law and the plainchant cantus firmus. For in a sense it is not just the words of the chant that could be seen to support the analogy, but the notes as well. If a composer deals with a pre-existing tune, then of course he may experience difficulty in making the notes do as he wills, because they are fixed and cannot be altered. This difficulty must have been especially acute in Josquin's motet *Haec dicit Dominus* (or rather, *Nymphes, nappés*), for it presents the cantus firmus *Circumdederunt* in a canon at the fifth. In other words, the plainchant is made to sing counterpoint with itself, something it was not originally designed to do, and something which the notes accordingly did not have a particular will to do. It takes a true master to make the notes of the chant bend to his will, and to impose the Law upon them.

If we read it like this, then the opposition between Law and Gospel turns out to be meaningful in a double sense. The tenor not only expresses the ordeal of someone oppressed by death, that is, the mortality imposed upon all of us by the laws of nature, but the notes in that voice are also quite literally yoked under Josquin's compositional design, the laws of the art. Josquin, as *der Noten Meister*, is a man who enforces Law – a notion perfectly consistent with the political nature of the analogy. Yet in doing this, no matter how successfully, Josquin is not neces-

sarily a man who preaches the Gospel. Perhaps it was not even a compliment to call him the master of the notes – for that makes it sound as if he were like the Pharisees and Scribes clinging always to the letter of the Law. *Der Noten Meister* is indeed a strikingly authoritarian image, and it contradicts Luther's own conviction that the truly important things in life are better done voluntarily than under compulsion. This is another reason, I think, why he was careful to qualify his remark by speaking of Josquin's „good spirit“ as the gift of God. Josquin's technical mastery was a matter of Law, but his exceptional talent a matter of Gospel. And ultimately that was the more important thing. And when it comes to this, Luther did recognize that Josquin had practised Gospel after all. He had done so in the other four voices, which are freely composed, and whose text proclaims the good news of eternal life.

Of course I cannot claim that this is necessarily how Luther interpreted the motet in all its details,⁸ but the reading is consistent with what I understand to be his way of thinking. The opposition between Law and Gospel is the key here. It is a theme on which Luther had touched also in another remark about Josquin, in a *Tischrede* from the early 1530s. Once again it is a comment that has often been quoted in the modern literature, though it seems to raise more questions than it supplies answers. Here it is:⁹

„Lex et euangelium. ‘Was lex ist, gett nicht von stad; was euangelium ist, das gett von stadt. Sic Deus praedicavit euangelium etiam per musicam, ut videtur in Josquin, des alles composition frolich, wil lig, milde heraus fleust, ist nitt zwungen vnd gnedigt per —, si cut des fincken gesang’.“

„Law and gospel. ‘That which is Law does not move forth; that which is Gospel does move forth. Thus God preached the Gospel also through music, as can be seen in Josquin, from whom all composition flows joyfully, willingly, gently, [he] is not compelled and forced by —, like the *fincke*'s song’.“

⁸ However, it should be noted that the canon could scarcely be qualified as the kind of contrapuntal feat that might have earned Josquin the distinction of *der Noten Meister*, in contradistinction to all other composers of his time: the two-part counterpoint is exceedingly simple, features prominent use of fourths (often moving in parallels), and unsuccessfully attempts to conceal a set of parallel fifths. On the other hand, there is no other way to explain Josquin's perceived mastery of the notes in terms of the comments Luther makes about *Haec dicit Dominus*.

⁹ WA Tischreden 2, p. 11.

This is the same distinction which we encountered a moment ago: between things that we do against our will because the Law compels us to do them, and things that we do willingly because the Gospel allows us to do them. Luther seems to say that composition ought to be like the gospel, indeed he observes that this is the case with Josquin. For the latter's music comes out flowing joyfully, willingly, and liberally, not under compulsion.

Luther amplifies that point by adding that Josquin is not compelled or forced by —, and then, unfortunately, there is a hiatus in the manuscript. The editors of the Weimar edition supposed that the missing word was probably *regulas*, rules, so that we would have to read: „is not compelled or forced by rules“. This emendation was suggested to them by the well-known German translation and paraphrase by Johannes Aurifaber, printed in 1566, which does indeed mention rules at this point:¹⁰

„Was Gesetz ist, das gehet nicht von Stat, noch freiwillig von der Hand, sondern sperret und wehret sich, man thuts ungern und mit Unlust; was aber Euangelium ist, das gehet von Stat mit Lust und allem Willen. Also hat Gott das Euangelium geprediget auch durch die Musicam; wie man ins Josquini Gesang sihet, das alle Compositio fein fröhlich, willig, milde und lieblich heraus fleusst und gehet, ist nicht gezwungen, noch genötiget und an die Regeln stracks und schnurgleich gebunden, wie des Finken Gesang.“

„That which is Law does not move forth, nor is taken on willingly, but refuses and resists: one is uneager and reluctant to do it. But that which is Gospel moves forth with gladness and total willingness. Thus has God preached the Gospel also through music; as one can see in the song of Josquin, [namely] that all composition flows and comes out joyfully, willingly, liberally and delightfully, is not compelled, nor forced and bound tightly and strictly to the rules, like the song of the finch.“

It is this paraphrase that inspired the emendation in the Weimar edition. The emendation has by now become virtually set in stone. In nearly all quotations in the modern literature, the word „rules“ is printed as if it were what Luther had actually said. Yet there are legitimate doubts that might be entertained on that score. In fact I very much doubt that Luther

¹⁰ Paraphrase/translation by Aurifaber, Johannes, *Tischreden oder Colloquia Doct. Mart. Luthers*, Eisleben 1566, fol. 172^v.

himself used the word „rules“, for it distorts the sense of his original *Tischrede*, and it is not actually even supported by Aurifaber's German translation. Since the question matters a great deal to the issues addressed in this paper, I propose to take a few moments to attempt to clarify it.

In the original *Tischrede* the words „frolich, willig, milde“ are adverbs, qualifying the verb „fließen“. That is to say, it is the flowing out of composition that happens joyfully, willingly, liberally and delightfully. However, „zwungen vnd gnedigt“ are not adverbs, but are themselves verbs (or at least past participles). And what they qualify is the subject. That is to say, something or someone is, or is not, being compelled and forced to do something. In Luther's sentence there are two possible subjects: „Josquin“ and „composition“. Most authors prefer the latter, so that the line reads in translation: „in Josquin, from whom all composition flows joyfully, willingly, gently, [since it] is not compelled and forced by —“. Yet one may legitimately wonder if that is indeed the most plausible reading. Strictly speaking one cannot force a composition to do anything, because it has no agency, it neither resists nor obeys. At most one can allow it to flow freely from the composer's musical imagination, or prevent it from doing so. On the other hand, the composer himself may very well be forced to do something against his will: „in Josquin, from whom all composition flows joyfully, willingly, gently, [since he] is not compelled and forced by —“. Yet regardless of whether we choose „Josquin“ or „composition“, in neither case could it be rules that did the compelling and forcing. For rules have no agency either: they cannot act, they can only be observed or broken.

It is true that the Weimar emendation carries at least the textual support of Aurifaber's German translation. Yet that support is not as unambiguous as one might like it to be. Aurifaber never meant the word „rules“ to complete Luther's sentence in the way it does in the Weimar edition. There are two differences that have a critical bearing on how we read the sentence. First of all, Aurifaber removed the word „by“, and thereby effectively eliminated the question who or what was doing the compelling and forcing. Second, he inserted not just the word „rules“, but a much longer phrase of which it was merely a part.

Tischrede: „is not compelled and forced by —“

Aurifaber: „is not compelled, nor forced, ~~by~~ and bound tightly and strictly to the rules“

Weimar ed.: „is not compelled and forced by the rules“

The upshot is that Aurifaber never meant to ascribe agency to the rules. They could not, in and of themselves, compel or force anything – otherwise he would surely not have removed the word „by“. The agency, in his interpolated phrase, resides rather with something else: it is the unnamed subject who (or which) binds composition to rules, and does not bind it tightly and strictly in Josquin's case.

It is important to stress that Aurifaber regarded the rules as inherently neutral, for it is in precisely this respect that the Weimar emendation has had the most unfortunate consequence. Effectively Luther has been taken to say that Josquin's composition was not stifled by contrapuntal rules, in other words, that it was praiseworthy for having resisted or overcome those rules. Yet this would be inherently implausible, even if it had been what Aurifaber intended. No musician at this time would have viewed the rules of counterpoint as an impediment to the composition of music – any more than we would consider the rules of grammar as an impediment to the writing of poetry. On the contrary: they were rules of art – indeed they were the art. As a later writer would put it, counterpoint teachings are the steps on which the student climbs Mount Parnassus – not the rocks that keep him from reaching the top. When Aurifaber said that Josquin's music was not tightly and strictly bound to the rules, the implied comparison may well have been with the counterpoint exercises of an amateur, a beginner who has to keep all his wits about him in order not to make any mistakes. To put it in Luther's terms: those who have not yet learned to keep the Law are not ready to receive the freedom of the Gospel – and without Gospel, the Law must necessarily remain a prison. Yet the freedom of Gospel, when it comes, will not annul the Law, and no amount of freedom in the music of Josquin could annul the rules of counterpoint.

This is not the only problem about the word „rules“. If the Weimar editors appear to have misunderstood Aurifaber, Aurifaber in turn appears to have misunderstood Luther. Luther was not talking about the difference between the exercises written by an amateur and the compositions of a professional. What he had in mind, rather, was the difference between two equally proficient composers, of whom one would be forced to write music (as if under the compulsion of Law), and the other composed out of free will (as if under the dispensation of Gospel). Rules per se have nothing to do with that distinction. So the critical issue is the conditions under which music comes into being. Com-

position either „flows out joyfully, willingly, gently“, as in the case of Josquin, or it is produced on demand. For Luther that makes all the difference. The only problem we are left with is the hiatus, that missing word. What word would be consistent with the precise point Luther appears to be making? What was the kind of thing that might compel a composer to write music, even against his will? How could composition, in Luther's eyes, become a matter of Law? These are the questions to which the missing word must provide the answer. Let us read the phrase again: „as can be seen in Josquin, whose every composition comes flowing out joyfully, willingly, liberally; [since he, or it] is not compelled or forced by ——. Here are some possible readings that would make better sense, or at least seem closer to the point Luther is making. Not compelled or forced by obligation – for example, when someone is composing under contract. Not compelled or forced by obedience – for example, when someone is composing for an employer. Not compelled or forced by poverty – for example, when he has no other means of income. Or, not compelled or forced by necessity – for example, when there are repertorial needs that cannot be met otherwise. Whatever word we choose, the point for Luther was that Josquin composed when he wanted to, not when others wanted him to, nor when he needed to, nor when circumstances forced him to. This freedom, the freedom to do as he freely chose, was the Gospel that God preached through music.

I will come back to this point in a moment, but first it might be useful to say a few words about the vexed matter of *des fincken gesang*. There is no consensus among musicologists as to whether Luther referred here to the composer Heinrich Finck or to the songbird, the finch.¹¹ The text itself allows both possibilities. Now since the issue for Luther was whether a composer writes music voluntarily or is forced to do so, one wonders why Heinrich Finck would have represented an especially telling example of the latter. There is nothing about his career or working conditions to suggest that he was under greater compulsion to write than any other composer Luther might have mentioned. So far as we know there were no anecdotes about Finck having to write music on demand

¹¹ Wiora, Walter, „Josquin und ‘des Fincken Gesang’“, in: *Deutsches Jahrbuch der Musikwissenschaft* 13 (1968), pp. 72-79; Hoffmann-Erbrecht, Lothar, *Henricus Finck, musicus excellentissimus (1445-1527)*, Köln 1982; Østrem, Luther, Josquin and *des fincken gesang* (see note 2).

or having to fight for the freedom to compose when he liked. How, then, could his example – and his in particular – have offered a revealing contrast to Josquin?

The poetic image of the finch seems more fitting in this regard. Songbirds can either sing freely in the open air, or they may be constrained to sing when humans put them in a cage – and finches were invoked by poets to illustrate both possibilities. So Josquin, as Luther appears to see it, was free as a bird. Of course there remains the problem why Josquin in particular should be seen as having enjoyed that freedom, why other composers might not have been just as free. In fact, when it comes to composition flowing out freely, why did Luther not cite a composer more famous for his prolificacy, such as Jacob Obrecht or Heinrich Isaac?

The answer is apparent from Luther's own analogy. What matters, in Gospel, is not the number of things one is able to do, nor the ease with which one does them, but the freedom to do them or not to do them. In other words, it is not prolificacy or facility of composition that would testify to Gospel but, again, absence of compulsion. Obviously we do not know if the historical Josquin truly did enjoy greater freedom, and was under less compulsion to write new music, than his contemporaries. But by reputation, at least, he was known to be highly sensitive to the issue. Contemporary anecdotes and recollections about him consistently play on the tension between serving a master and being an artist – with Josquin typically, and satisfyingly, negotiating that tension to his advantage.¹² It is entirely conceivable that some of these stories had reached Luther as well.

Up to this point we have encountered two concepts of great significance to Luther's musical thought: one is the idea of the gift, especially the composer's 'spirit' as a gift received from God, and the other is the opposition between Law and Gospel. I would now like to suggest that these two concepts are really one, or at least are two sides of the same coin.

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¹² Wegman, Rob C., „And Josquin laughed...'. Josquin and the Composer's Anecdote in the Sixteenth Century“, in: *Journal of Musicology* 17 (1999), pp. 319-357.

Let us begin with the concept of the gift. In recent years I have written a number of studies on what might be called the gift economy of fifteenth-century musical culture, the fact that compositions were not bought and sold on the market place, as it were, but circulated freely without money changing hands.¹³ I contrasted this gift economy with the better-known market economy of music, whose emergence we begin to witness in the decades around 1500 – when compositions began to be treated as marketable commodities, when composers like Isaac undertook to write music for a contractually agreed sum, when the idea of musical ownership began to take hold, and when efforts were made to control the circulation of music, or even to impose the equivalent of our modern copyright laws. These latter developments have been well-studied, of course, if only because they are signs of modernity and help us understand why modern musical culture is the way it is today.

Gift economies typically obey a number of unwritten rules, rules that are still familiar to us from our own gift practices today. Those rules are critical to an understanding of Luther's views on music. The most important point is that a gift is not a gift unless it is given freely – unlike an economic commodity whose transfer is subject to conditions and obligations. Nobody can compel me to give a birthday gift: if anyone did, it would no longer be a gift. Freedom is essential to the gesture. For a gift is a token of good will, a gesture of friendship and benevolence, and it can only convey that intention if one also has the freedom not to give. By the same token it matters little whether the recipient has done anything to earn or deserve the gesture. A gift has nothing to do with merit, and it is never a *quid pro quo*.

This, as Luther sees it, is the Gospel that Josquin preached in music. He did not compose under obligation, he did not compose for money, or on command, or as the work he owed an employer. In all of those cases it would have been a job, not the expression of personal inclination. But for Luther, composition was not a labor, not a work, not a product with a

¹³ Wegman, Rob C., „Musical Offerings in the Renaissance“, in: *Early Music* 33 (2005), pp. 425-437; id., „Publication Before Printing. How Did Flemish Polyphony Travel in Manuscript Culture?“, in: *Books in Transition at the Time of Philip the Fair. Manuscripts and Printed Books in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Low Countries*, ed. by Hanno Wijsman et al., Turnhout 2010, pp. 165-180.

price tag. That is why it mattered so much to him that Josquin, when he composed, did it joyfully, willingly, liberally. Who would enjoy a birthday gift knowing that the giver had been forced to make the gesture against his will? Precisely because Josquin's music was free in every sense of the word, it was infinitely more meaningful to Luther. As with any gift, it is the intention behind the gesture that matters, and that intention must be unconstrained by compulsion. In a sense this is the issue of authorial intention all over. Luther was acutely sensitive to that issue. We can tell this, for example, from a comment recorded in the *Tischreden* of 1542:¹⁴

„Lex et gratia. Das lex iram operatur, siht man an dem wol, das Görg Planck – is enim tum aderat – als besser schlecht, was er von sich selbs schlecht, den was er andern zu gefallen schlagen mus, vnd das kumpt ex lege. [...] Wo lex ist, da ist vnlust; wo gratia ist, da ist lust.“

„Law and grace. That ‘the law worketh wrath’ [Rom. 4.15], one can tell alone from the fact that Görg Planck – when he was here – plays everything better than he plays for himself, than what he must play to please others, for that comes from the Law. [...] Where there is Law, there is reluctance; where there is Grace, there is eagerness.“

Here, the intention with which something is played – whether under obligation, or freely, for the sheer pleasure of it – is seen to bear directly on the musical quality of what is heard. For Luther, a musician simply plays better when he is not under constraint to play.

Let us consider another example of the same point. In 1530 Luther sent a letter to the composer Ludwig Senfl asking him if he happened to have a musical setting of Psalm 4, *In pace in id ipsum* and, if yes, if he would be willing to send a copy of it as a personal favor. When reading the letter for the first time it might be tempting to view it as a somewhat unsubtle attempt to get Senfl to compose a new setting. Yet Luther is careful to emphasize that nothing could be further from his mind. His assurance may still ring somewhat hollow to our ears. But it is absolutely clear from Luther's choice of words that he was not interested in something composed upon request. Here is the relevant passage (my italics):¹⁵

¹⁴ WA Tischreden 5, pp. 122-123. See also the excellent discussion in Østrem, Luther, Josquin and *des fincken gesang* (see note 2).

¹⁵ Letter to Ludwig Senfl, 4 October 1530, in: WA Briefwechsel 5, p. 639.

„Ad te redeo et oro, si quod habes exemplar istius cantici *In pace in id ipsum*, mihi transcribi et mitti cures. Tenor enim iste a iuventute me delectavit, et nunc multo magis, postquam et verba intelligo. Non enim vidi eam antiphonam vocibus pluribus compositam. Nolo autem te gravare *componendi labore*, sed praesumo te habere aliunde compositam.“

„I return to you and pray that if you have a copy of that song *In pace in id ipsum*, you would care to have it transcribed and sent to me. For that tenor has delighted me from my youth, and now even more, now that I also understand the words. For I have not seen that antiphon composed with several voices. However, I do not wish to weigh you down *with the labor of composing*, but assume that you already have [a setting] composed by somebody else.“

The keyword here is *labor*. To be burdened by labor is not to do it joyfully, willingly, or liberally. In a purely technical sense labor, throughout the later Middle Ages, is what you do for money, or in fulfilment of an obligation. Labor is that by which you merit pay, earn your recompense. Labor, and the fruits of labor, are commodities that belong in the marketplace. There are many musical activities that may legitimately be treated as labor: someone will have to pay the organist, after all, the trumpeters deserve their salary, and the singers have families to support. All of that is honest hard work. The same is true of scribal activity: Luther had no problem asking for a manuscript copy per se. But the art of composition, for him, was emphatically not labor. Money could only cheapen the art, obligation would debase it, and a direct request on his part was sure to diminish the response.

So far as we know, Senfl did indeed not undertake the labor of composing a new setting of *In pace in idipsum*. Instead he sent a different composition, a setting of the words of Psalm 118, *Non moriar sed vivam*. Given the situation Luther was in at the time – one of profound distress, and the heartfelt wish to be delivered from this life – that was a wonderfully thoughtful and moving gesture, more compassionate, probably, than anything else he could have done. Luther appreciated that gesture in the spirit in which it was intended. For he replied not just by writing a letter of thanks (which would have been sufficient), but by sending along several books as a gift – items that were worth much more, in purely financial terms, than any handwritten copy of a four-part motet

could have been. This illustrates another unwritten rule of the gift exchange. One may send a return gift if one so chooses, but it is not required. For a gift, even in reciprocation, must always be given freely. On the other hand, when we have received a gift, we absolutely must express gratitude at the earliest opportunity. Few things could be worse in any human than ingratitude.

With this we seem to be coming full circle. Josquin may have been *der Noten Meister*, as Luther famously called him, but that was a matter only of labor, of human handiwork. Mastering notes was an exercise in enforcing Law. But for Luther, the key to Josquin's excellence as a composer was the 'good spirit' which he had received as a divine gift. It seems ironic that when we invoke Luther's opinion of Josquin, we quote him only when he praises the less important aspect of his music: the all-important qualification about the composer's 'good spirit' is almost always left out. There could hardly be a better example of the problem that this conference is designed to address – the problem that context is all too easily disregarded, even when it is right before us.

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Taking this in a wider perspective now, we can see that Luther views music as part of a gift exchange, a gift economy between God and humans. If God has bestowed gifts on us, then of course we owe him the same response that we would owe anyone who gives us a gift. We must express thanks, first of all by recognizing the gift as a gift. Luther praised Josquin as *der Noten Meister*, yet he did so out of admiration, not gratitude. Yet he was careful to recognize as well the divine gift that allowed Josquin to be so much more than that. The second way to express thanks is to treat the gift as a gift, not as something we can turn into a commodity. The 'good spirit' that Josquin received as a free gift from God could only be passed on to the world as a free gift in turn. That is why excellence in composition should not be treated as labor. If Josquin had made compositions on demand, or in order to become rich and famous, he would have insulted God by turning a divine gift into a marketable commodity, thereby cheapening and debasing it.

All this brings us to what is probably the most important and most influential statement Luther made about music: *musica donum Dei*, music is the gift of God. This idea pervades his thinking about music: rarely did

he lose an opportunity to reiterate it, as if it were the most self-evident of all truths about music. Yet in historical context it was actually a novel and provocative claim. It is true that fifteenth-century musical culture operated as a gift economy. But no musician from that period ever theorized about the practice – largely, I suspect, because it was self-evident that music should circulate in this way. It is for the same reason that we never theorize about the practice of giving birthday gifts. Yet Martin Luther did theorize about it, and turned it into a veritable theology of music. As far as I know there is no precedent for his having done so. Nor have I been able to determine the origin of the expression *musica donum Dei*. As far as I know there is no Medieval writer on music who ever used the expression, or said something analogous to it. Nor do I know of Patristic or Medieval authorities, or even writers from Classical Antiquity, who viewed music in these terms. True, there were many other things in the Middle Ages that were called gifts of God: the holy spirit, for example, or chastity, science, knowledge, faith, even canon law – but never music.

After Luther, on the other hand, the idea became a virtual commonplace. Even Jean Calvin, perhaps not the greatest friend of music, was able to admit, in the 1540s, that music is God's gift. And in the later sixteenth century the expression *musica donum Dei* regularly occurs as a motto painted on keyboard instruments. Did the idea originate with Luther? It would certainly seem so, though of course it is always possible that some little-known writer turns out to have expressed the idea before him. Still, even if Luther had borrowed the idea from somebody else, one could safely maintain that no-one had done more to promote it than he. It was his guiding principle in all matters musical – when he praised Josquin's good spirit, when he heard Planck playing for his own pleasure on the organ, and when he pointedly refrained from asking Senfl to compose new music. Undoubtedly it was his guiding principle also when he looked at the veritable industry that music-making had become in the Catholic church. Although Luther did not often comment upon Catholic musical practices, it is not hard to guess what his objections would have been. Unlike many other reformers, he never complained that church music was a waste of money – because praise and thanksgiving, as return gifts to God, could never be too expensive. Neither, needless to say, did he repeat the often-heard charge that music was 'nothing more than sound', and that the listener was left empty-handed once the sounds had

died out.¹⁶ Among Luther's own followers, it was only *Schwärmer* like Karlstadt who proposed to do away with church music on such philistine grounds. But Luther would have none of that. To raise any of these objections against music, in his view, was tantamount to being ungrateful, like receiving a precious gift and then throwing it away in the trash.

Significantly, it is precisely this vice, the vice of ingratitude, that Luther faulted in Catholic church music. Here is how Luther himself put it, in his *Steps to the Fifteen Psalms*, written a few years before his death. While commenting on Psalm 122, *Laetatus sum*, and speaking of King David's joy at the gifts of God, he remarked:¹⁷

„Nam illi demum vere sunt grati, qui exosculantur dona Dei et laetantur in donante. Alii, qui hanc laeticiam non sentiunt, etsi hunc Psalmum organis et symphoniis ornant, tamen sunt et manent ingrati, neque enim intelligunt haec beneficia.“

„For in the end only those are truly grateful who cherish the gifts of God, and rejoice in the giver. Others who do not feel this joy are and remain ungrateful, nor do they understand those kind deeds, even though they decorate this psalm with organs and consonant harmonies.“

If one does not feel genuine gratitude towards God, as Luther says, the worshipper is in effect abusing music for what must necessarily remain empty display – just like an organist who would play for money.

In these respects, Luther was decisively – and I would add, delightfully – out of step with his time. In my recent monograph *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe*, I have traced the emergence of a wave of criticism against church music from the 1470s onwards, fueled by novel arguments: that music, especially polyphony, was nothing more than sound, that it was empty and vain, of no profit to worshippers, that the Church Fathers had never endorsed polyphony, that it was a waste of money, that singers were known to lead dissolute lives, and so on, and so forth. Of course these criticisms provoked a counterwave of polemical writings in favor of music, and this whole debate would transform European musical culture in a matter of decades. Luther must have been

¹⁶ For this issue, see Wegman, Rob C., *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470-1530*, New York 2005.

¹⁷ WA 40/3, p. 81a.

aware of this debate, for he sometimes borrowed arguments that were used by the defenders of music. The best example is the stereotype of the music hater, a straw man who was made to stand for people who were unable to appreciate music, being depicted either as inanimate rocks or demons in human guise. We find this straw man occasionally in Luther, perhaps because the image reminded him of Karlstadt and the *Schwärmer*. But otherwise Luther kept entirely aloof from the debate, and I suspect the arguments on both sides would have been surprising to him. For example, defenders of music came up with the counter-argument that music is not empty and vain if the listener understands it. For it is that understanding which will remain and endure in the form of knowledge, even after the sounds have died out. For Luther an argument like this could only be self-defeating: if music is the gift of God, then what difference does it make whether we understand it or not? In fact, could we even begin to understand God's boundless grace in giving us the gift of music in the first place, when we have done nothing to deserve it? Why should human understanding suddenly be the criterion of value?

There is much else in the debate that would not have resonated with him. For if, like Luther, you are acutely conscious of the difference between divine grace, on the one hand, and human good works, on the other, it can only be disturbing to see music treated, in those debates, as a work, as literally an *opus*, a thing to be understood and analyzed, that either has content or is worthless, and whose price is determined by the market place. It is perhaps telling that Luther's own view that music is the gift of God was never invoked by the defenders of music – perhaps because most of them were Catholics arguing against Catholics.

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All this inevitably brings us to Luther's most comprehensive statement on music as a human art and a divine gift, his preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae* of 1538.¹⁸ This text is so astonishingly rich in content that it would take several papers to do proper justice to all the ideas he managed to pack into it. Viewed in the context of its time, Luther's encomium stands out as unique, not only for being so passionate and heart-

¹⁸ WA 50, pp. 368-374. See also Wegman, Rob C., „Isaac's Signature“, in: *The Journal of Musicology* 28 (2011), pp. 9-33.

felt, but also, once again, for being so arrestingly original in its language, so obviously independent of prevailing thought. Its opening premise, tellingly, is *musica donum Dei*, music as the gift of God. But now we also learn when and how God gave this gift. Music permeates creation, Luther notes, and as such it is part of the very earth over which humans were given dominion in the book of Genesis. Heaven and earth resonate throughout with the principles of harmonious sound. Although Luther does not specifically mention Plato at this point, there can be little doubt that the creation myth of *Timaieus* was a major inspiration behind his effusions of praise. Indeed it might well be *Timaieus* that inspired the idea of music as the gift of God, even if that is not said there explicitly. Certainly Luther must have borrowed from Plato's *Timaieus* the powerfully evocative idea of the divine dance – though once again it is a sign of his originality that he immediately transfers that idea from the cosmos, where the divine dance stands for the musical motions of the spheres, to human art, and more specifically to the art of counterpoint. It is an extraordinary conceptual leap, to view the art of counterpoint, of all things, as directly analogous to the principles of harmony that govern the universe.

„Vbi autem tandem accesserit studium et Musica artificialis, quae naturalem corrigat, excolat et explicet, Hic tandem gustare cum stupore licet (sed non comprehendere) absolutam et perfectam sapientiam Dei in opere suo mirabili Musicae, in quo genere hoc excellit, quod vna et eadem voce canitur suo tenore pergente, pluribus interim vocibus circum circa mirabiliter ludentibus, exultantibus et iucundissimis gestibus eandem ornantibus, et velut iuxta eam diuinam quandam choream ducentibus, vt iis, qui saltem modice afficiuntur, nihil mirabilius hoc seculo extare videatur. Qui vero non afficiuntur, nae illi vere amusi et digni

„But when, finally, human effort is joined with all of this, and man-made music, which improves on the natural kind, develops and unfolds, we can sense (but not comprehend) with astonishment the absolute and perfect Wisdom of God in His wondrous work of Music, in which nothing is more excellent than this, that when one sings with one and the same voice pursuing its own course, several other voices play around it in the most marvelous manner, exulting and adorning it with the most pleasing gestures, and seeming almost to present some kind of divine dance, so that it will seem to those with even the least bit of feeling that

LUTHER'S GOSPEL OF MUSIC

sunt, qui aliquem Merdipoetam interim audiant vel porcorum Musicam.“

there exists nothing more marvelous in our time. Those who are not moved by this are indeed unmusical, and deserve rather to listen to some shit-poet or to the music of swine.“

The image of the divine dance, with a fixed tenor in the middle and contrapuntal voices freely playing around it, beautifully sums up Luther's assessment of *Haec dicit Dominus*: it is an image of Law and Gospel, death and life, obligation and freedom, labor and gift. Of all the notes in this divine dance of music, it was only those in the tenor that might force a composer to do as they willed. And on that level, the level of Law, Josquin had attained greater mastery, for Luther, than other composers. But it was the spirit that allowed him to sprinkle the other notes around the tenor, like stardust brightening up the cosmos, freely arranging themselves in constantly shifting harmonies, a dance bound by nothing but the ties of consonance and friendship. And perhaps the image is one that also encapsulates what we are attempting to do here at this conference – exploring Luther in Context. The isolated comment „Josquin ist der Noten Meister“ has been like the dead letter of the law – a line whose meaning never changes beyond the simple point we have expected it to prove, a quotation, a mere textual authority that is immutably fixed. There is no freedom in repeating it. But this conference represents an invitation to engage in the contextual resonance of this and other lines like it, to find the hidden harmonies between the letters and the pieces of historical context that might endow them with life. May our endeavors be as joyful as the cosmic dance Luther heard in music.

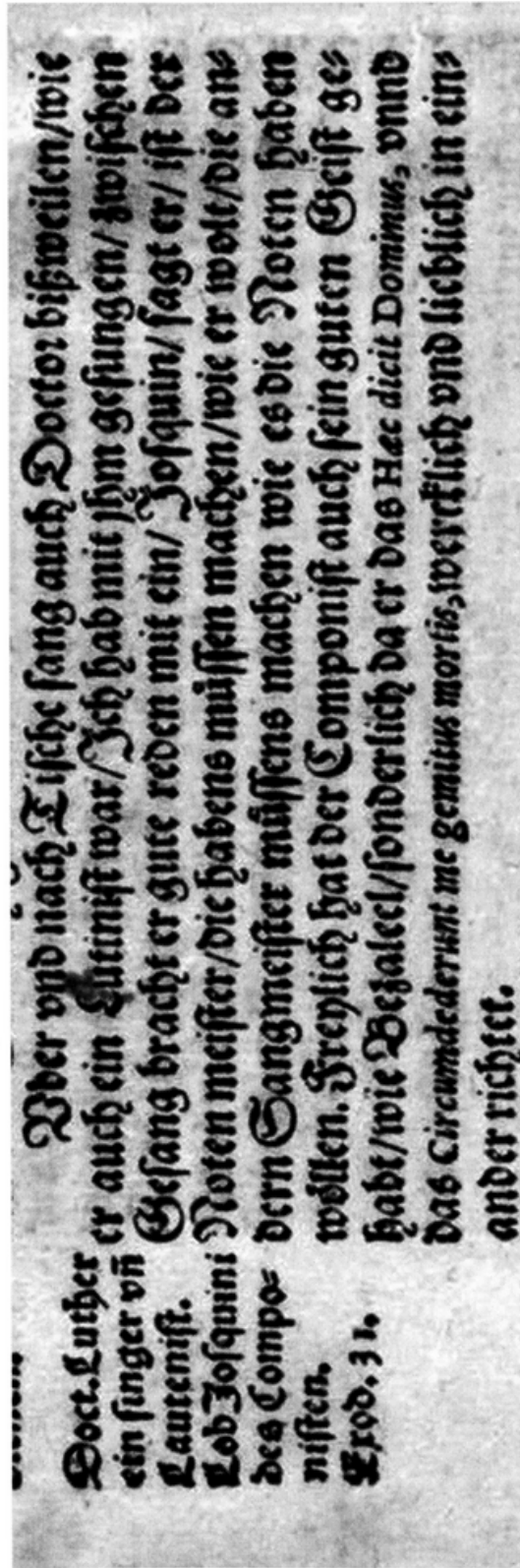


Fig. 1: Johannes Mathesius, Historien Von des Ehrwürdigen in Gott seligen theuren Manns Gottes, Doctoris Martini Luthers anfang, Lere, leben unnd sterben, Nürnberg 1570 (fol. 143v). Digitalisat der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek

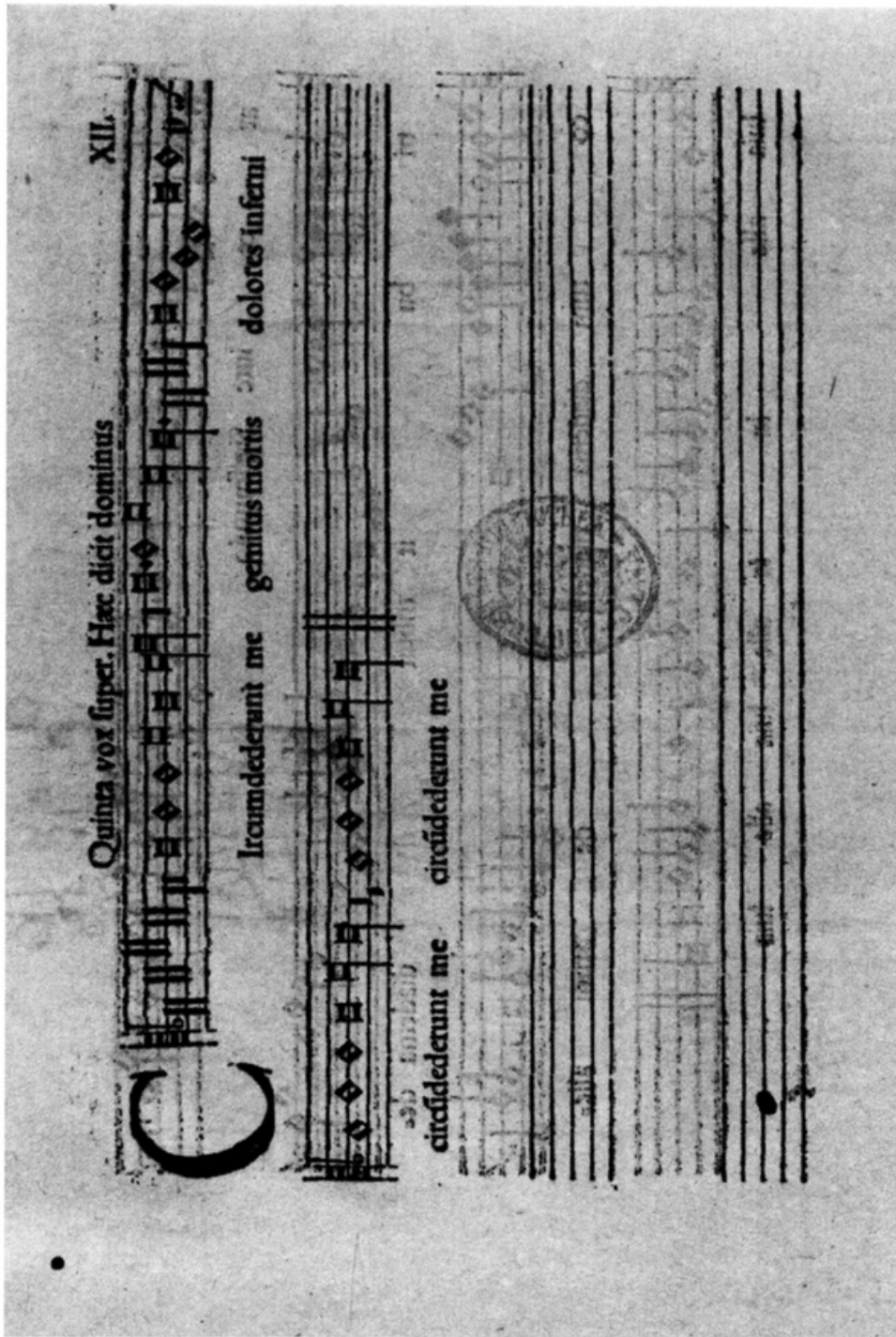


Fig. 2: Novum et insigne opus musicum, sex, quinque, et quatuor vocum, Nürnberg 1537, Quinta Vox (fol. [17]v). München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Mus. pr. 9606

Luther im Kontext

Reformbestrebungen und Musik
in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts

Herausgegeben von Michael Klaper
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