

WESTERMEYER EXCERPTS

In anticipation of the celebration of Reformation Sunday on October 25, I present you with these excerpts from Paul Westermeyer's book "Te Deum: The Church and Music".

"At the center of the turbulent sixteenth-century event we call the reformation stood the question of how humanity is set right with God, or justified before God. Over and against the notion that one could gain God's favor by doing something, all the Reformers set their understanding of the biblical message: humanity is justified by grace through faith. That is, human beings can't get right with God by anything they do, by any human merit or meritorious acts at all; God justified us by grace alone through faith. On this central matter of justification the Reformers were agreed. But beyond that they disagreed at a number of points, music among them. Those who were forced out or who broke off from the Roman Catholic Church themselves split into an ever-increasing number of divisions. Two major ones were Lutheran and Reformed. These bodies were in large measure controlled by three Reformers, Martin Luther (1483-1546), Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), and John Calvin (1509-1564). Luther recovered the congregation's singing, Zwingli denied it, and Calvin restricted it..."

"Luther clearly loved and supported music. Why?...What was Luther's theology of music? Luther said that music is next to theology....Luther also said, however, that 'next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise.' Music is not only next to theology, then; it is next to the word of God. Here we get a more profound and theological sense of what Luther has in mind. Oskar Soehngen expressed it this way. 'That music comes from the *auricularia*, i.e., from the sphere of the miraculous audible things—like the Gospel, that is a unique gift of God's creation which comes to us in the same way the Word of God does, namely, mediated by the voice, that is a point at which Luther is lost in wonder again and again.' Luther was not simply fond of music. Luther thought music has a theological reason for being: it is a gift of God, which comes from the 'sphere of miraculous audible things,' just like the word of God. Music is unique in that it can carry words. Since words carry the word of God, music and the word of God are closely related....one can certainly isolate certain elements in Luther's thought by referring largely to his 'Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*,' one of his most complete and 'systematic' statements about music."

"First, music is a gift of God's good creation. There are two parts here. Music is an incredible gift about which Luther was overwhelmed; he could not find words to describe it. And it is a creation of God, not of humanity. That distinction does not mean humanity should leave it in its 'natural' state. On the contrary, 'when [musical] learning is added to this and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God's absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music.' Second, music bears the word. 'God,' says Luther, has the 'Gospel preached through the medium of music.' This statement has a rich and varied meaning. It almost seems as if Luther sees music in its own right as a parallel to preaching: it is the instrument for the proper work of the Holy Spirit through whom the inclination to virtue was instilled in the prophets, and it casts out Satan. But the weight falls on its association with the word and words that carry the word: '...the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated with the Word of God as music. Therefore we have so many hymns and Psalms where the message and music join to move the listener's soul...' Or again, 'Music and notes...do help gain a better understanding of the text.'...Third, Luther joined praise to proclamation. 'The gift of language combined with the gift of song,' he said, was given to human beings to let us know that we 'should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming the [word of God] through

music.' To praise is to proclaim, and to proclaim is to praise. They both take sounding form. There is a circle of musical doing here where exegesis and proclamation run into each other on a circuit of sound. Fourth, a closely related point is sufficiently different to be separated out. The following quotation isolates it. 'For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. Be he must gladly and willingly sing....'"

Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 141, 144-147