

500 Years of the Protestant Hymnal

“Therefore the printers do very well to print good hymns diligently and make them agreeable for the people with all kinds of ornamentation, so that they are stimulated to find joy in faith and sing with pleasure.” This is how Martin Luther (fig. 1) commented on the new initiative of several printers who began to publish the new hymns of the Reformation in small anthologies from 1524 onwards. The first was Jobst Gutknecht, who had acquired Nuremberg citizenship in 1511 and opened a print shop there. He initially printed school books and popular treatises and then discovered the financially lucrative literature of the Reformation. In addition to pamphlets with texts by the Nuremberg preachers Wenzel Linck and Andreas Osiander the Elder, he issued 102 reprints of Luther’s writings and single-sheet prints with hymn texts.

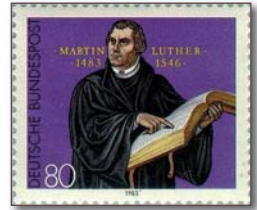


Fig. 1: Martin Luther



Fig. 2: The Eight-Songs-Book (1524)

Around the turn of the year 1523/1524, he grouped a number of these hymn sheets into a booklet, which he published under the title “Etlich Cristlich liden / Lobgesang und Psalm” (Several Christian Songs / Hymns and Psalms; fig. 2). The fact that he did not publish the pamphlet under his own name probably has nothing to do with an often suspected “disguise”; rather, the indication of Wittenberg as the place of publication was probably also intended to arouse the interest of potential customers outside the free imperial city of Nuremberg. The work, now known as the “Achtliederbuch” (Eight-Songs-Book), contained the music of five melodies, as well as four hymn texts by Luther, three by Paul Speratus (1484-1551), and one anonymous text. This first German-language collection of Protestant hymns is considered the forerunner of all Protestant hymnals. In the same year, “Eyn geystlich Gesangk Buchleyn” (Spiritual Hymn Booklet) by Johann Walter (1496-1570), who set numerous texts by Martin Luther to music, was published in Wittenberg. In contrast to the monophonic Eight-Songs-Book, this volume contained polyphonic choral songs. Also issued in 1524 was the “Erfurt Enchiridion” (Greek: “little handbook”), a collection of sacred songs published in two competing but virtually identical editions by the printers Johannes Loersfeld and Matthes Maler.

Emanating from the Jewish roots of Christianity, singing was already practised in the early church. Over the centuries, many different Christian singing traditions developed in Europe. Pope Gregory I (approx. 540-604) imposed a certain degree of standardisation and established the Roman rite in the form of the so-called Gregorian chant in the Catholic Church. >>

Latin chant in church services was reserved for the choir (schola) and the clergy. It was not until the late Middle Ages that sacred songs in the vernacular emerged, which were sung during spiritual games and processions. The aim of the reformers was to strengthen the participation of the congregation in the church service. Congregational singing thus became an equal part of the liturgy. Thomas Müntzer (fig. 3) began to translate well-known pieces of Gregorian chant into German, and Martin Luther himself wrote numerous hymns and even composed the melodies to “Ein feste Burg” (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God) and “Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her” (From Heaven Above to



Fig. 3: Thomas Müntzer

Earth I Come), to name but two.

During the Reformation period, mainly songs for the liturgy and festivals throughout the year have been composed. Philipp Melanchthon (fig. 4) and Elisabeth von Meseritz were among the many lyricists of this period. The melodies were often taken from older folk tunes.



Fig. 4: Philipp Melanchthon

In the period that followed, regionally differing collections of hymns appeared throughout the German-speaking world. Of particular importance is the “Geneva Psalter”, a series of hymnals with rhymed psalm texts in French, published by John Calvin (fig. 5) from 1562 onwards and translated into German in 1573.

When the Catholic Church, with the help of the Habsburg Emperor, attempted to suppress the spread of Protestantism with a kind of counter-reformation, the content of the Protestant hymns changed. Songs of faith and confession should emphasise pure doctrine. The numerous wars, the plague and the famines were also reflected in the hymns, resulting in songs that were intended to provide comfort and referred to the return of Christ, death and eternity. The melodies of this period were no longer based on folk tunes, but were often polyphonic choral songs by composers and court chapel masters such as Melchior Franck, Hans Leo Haßler and Michael Praetorius (fig. 6).



Fig. 5: John Calvin

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Fig. 6: Michael Praetorius „In dulci Jubilo“

In the first half of the 17th century, which was profoundly shaped by the Thirty Years' War, Passion songs became more prominent in Protestant congregations. Composers such as Heinrich Schütz (fig. 7/8) and Johann Hermann Schein hereby adopted the so-called basso continuo, a new style of music from Italy in which the melody of the vocal part is accompanied chordally by a keyboard instrument, for example the organ.



Fig. 7 + 8:
Heinrich Schütz
„Da pacem Domine“
(Give peace, Lord)



The most important hymnal of the 17th century is the song collection "Praxis Pietatis Melica" ("Musical Piety Exercise") by Johann Crüger (fig. 9/10), the cantor of St Nicholas' Church in Berlin, which appeared from 1640 in 44 always expanded editions. The new songs were intended for church services as well as domestic devotion and individual edification, and often focused on the personal concerns of individual Christians. For example, Paul Gerhardt's extensive oeuvre (fig. 11/12/13) features morning and evening hymns as well as numerous texts focusing on thanksgiving and prayers, trust in God or the longing for eternity.



Fig. 9 + 10: Stationery postcard and postmark
Johann Crüger „Jesu, meine Freude“ (Jesus, my Joy)

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Fig. 11: Paul Gerhardt

Fig. 12 + 13: Paul Gerhardt
„Praise the Lord, all who honour him“ and „Befiehl Du Deine Wege“



Fig. 14: Gerhard Tersteegen „I pray to the power of love“

Driven by the fear that the church could become rigid due to a lack of piety and an inadequate Christian lifestyle among believers, Pietism became the first reform movement towards the end of the 17th century. The themes of the new songs, at first intended mainly for the smaller circle of the “awakened”, were mostly repentance, conversion and assurance of salvation. However, through the “Geistreiche Gesang-Buch” (Witty Hymn Book), which

was published by Johann Anastasius Freylinghausen in several editions from 1704 onwards, they soon enjoyed a wide circulation. The two-volume work contained some 1500 songs. The song poets of the time include Gerhard Tersteegen (fig. 14), Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (fig. 15), Mathias Claudius (fig. 16) and Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf (fig. 17), the founder of the Moravian Brethren congregation, who alone wrote more than 2000 hymn texts. Among the composers, Johann Sebastian Bach (fig. 18) and Georg Philipp Telemann (fig. 19) merit particular mention. >>

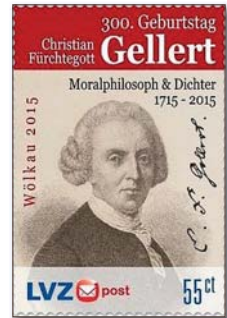


Fig. 15: Christian Fürchtegott Gellert



Fig. 16: Matthias Claudius



Fig. 17: Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf

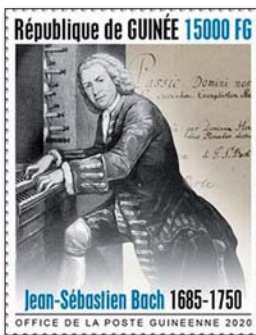


Fig. 18: Johann Sebastian Bach In the background the title page of the “Matthew Passion”



Fig. 19: Georg Philipp Telemann „Sing a new song to the Lord“

With the beginning of the Enlightenment and during the Classical period, interest in artfully composed hymns declined dramatically. The old hymns were often forgotten and replaced by sober new poems with instructive texts. Numerous old melodies were smoothed out, rhythmically simplified and adapted to the style of secular song of the time by arranging them “im Volkston” (i.e. as a folksong).



Fig. 20: The content of the common hymnal was determined in Bach's birthplace in 1854. (Error on postage stamp: Eisenbach instead of Eisenach)

After the Stuttgart pastor and hymn collector Albert Knapp published his “Evangelischer Liederschatz” (Evangelical treasure trove of songs) in 1835 with 3,590 hymns, Protestant church leaders recognised the need to define a common core of hymns that should be sung in all parts of the country. The outcome of the Eisenach Conference of 1854 thus became the guideline for the hymnals of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 1950s, the Council of the Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD) for the first time managed to publish a standardised hymnal with differing regional appendices.



Fig. 21: Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson

New spiritual songs in the style of the popular music of the 1960s, non-European traditions such as spirituals and gospel (fig. 21/22), as well as efforts to promote ecumenical co-operation between the various Christian denominations were reflected in the current Protestant Hymnal, which was introduced between 1993 and 1996 in all Protestant regional churches in Germany and some German-speaking regions in other European countries. >>



Fig. 22: Gospel choir (personalized stamp from Switzerland)

And the Protestant hymnal continues to evolve: several thousand new hymns from the last 30 years, many of which from songbooks for church congresses, liturgical changes and new forms of worship led the EKD Council to appoint a hymnal commission in spring 2020, which has set itself the goal of publishing a new hymnal and a corresponding app by the end of the decade.

The 500th anniversary (fig. 23) is a good opportunity to reflect on the history of the Protestant hymnal from a historical, theological, musical, and cultural-historical perspective and to realise that Luther's reformatory ideas could hardly have spread so quickly among the people without hymns.

Peter Lang



Fig. 23: Commemorative postage stamp „500 Years of the Protestant Hymnal“ (Germany, January 4th, 2024)



To mark the anniversary of “500 Years of the Protestant Hymnal”, the International Philatelic Music Study Group will issue a postcard and a special handstamp on June 1st, 2024.

Motif: “Spiritual Hymn Booklet” by Johannes Walther (Wittenberg 1524)
 From this the notes: “Come, Holy Ghost, Lord God” (postcard)
 and “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (handstamp)

Contact and order: Motivgruppe Musik e.V. / E-Mail: motivgruppe.musik@gmx.de