

## The Evolution of the Protestant Chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* by Martin Luther Part I

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**Abstract:** *In this paper we intend to follow the evolution of the Protestant chorale "Ein' feste Burg ist Unser Gott", the hymn of Martin Luther's Reformation. Written in 1529 by the great theologian, the chorale was a source of inspiration both for the contemporaries of the Theological Reform of 1517 and for subsequent generations. In order to understand the importance of this coral in Protestant life, we will start our study by presenting a brief history of what the Great Reform was, and how its manifestations spanned over multiple levels of society: from the religious to the political, from the linguistic to the artistic. The changes made in the liturgical worship service by Martin Luther, himself a creator of hymns, will have unforeseen effects on the development of the history of Western music. Through his work of harmonizing Protestant Chorales, composer Johann Sebastian Bach, concludes a long pursuit in attaining a system of functional tonality. Many composers have approached the "Ein' feste Burg" (A Mighty Fortress) chorale, providing the work a fresh and contemporary quality with each such endeavor.*

Keywords: *Protestant Chorale, Protestant Reformation, prosody, Martin Luther, Ein' feste Burg*

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Historical context

On October 31, 2017, Evangelical churches celebrated 500 years since the reformer **Martin Luther** (1483-1546) shook Christianity by publishing 95 theses, bearing the Latin title of *Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum*.

Of course, the reform did not belong exclusively to one person, having been the result of a long historical process prepared by theologians and important social and political figures, such as **Jan Hus** (1369-1415) of Bohemia, **Pierre Valdes** (1140-

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1205) of France, **John Wycliffe** (1330-1384) in England, or **Girolamo Savonarola** (1452-1498) in Italy. The use of the term evangelical churches refers to those that have accepted the Protestant theology, following the principles put forth by theologian Martin Luther. The term is not to be confused with the identical one of *(Christian) evangelical churches*, referencing the Christian churches originating in the United States of America.

This theological reform, which seriously questioned the practice of the Catholic Church's use of indulgences,<sup>3</sup> brought significant changes not merely to Europe's theology, but also to other aspects, such as its linguistics. Martin Luther's Bible translation – from Hebrew and ancient Greek to the particular German dialect spoken in the Saxony area, where he worked – had a great influence on the development of the modern German language. Besides the fact that Latin was the official language in the church, politics or literature, the multiple German dialects spoken in different areas made communication between the existing regions to be difficult, so having a single official, unitary language became absolutely necessary. A secondary but positive effect of the distribution of prints in a single dialect was the significant decrease of illiteracy due to the fact that people were beginning to read more and more in their own language, with a Bible being part of almost every household.

## 1.2. The reform movement brings substantial changes in Liturgical practice

- **The use of the German language** in the church service is an important step which has ensured an increase in the number of church members. This was possible by translating not only the Bible into German, but also many consecrated verses, which were used in beloved hymns, and were already familiar to the people.
- **Public singing.** Before the Great Reformation, only priests and certain trained monks carried out the religious service, for they were the only connoisseurs of the Latin language and the theoretical notions of music. Luther composed chorales inspired by folk melodies in order to get closer to the people. This music was warmer and more familiar than the austere Gregorian chants, sung in unison.
- **Promoting the use of musical instruments** in the church makes music play an increasingly important role in Protestant religious life. In addition to the organ, string or wind instruments have been used in churches, leading to their development and refinement. Practicing believers were encouraged to have musical training, thus forming choirs and orchestras that in Johann Sebastian

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<sup>3</sup> indulgences - acts that a commoner earned through money or charity work (such as building churches to have his sins "forgiven")

Bach's life had come to perform *cantatas*, *oratorios* or *passions*, complex works that required serious musical training.

- **The involvement of women** in liturgical services was a novelty given the strict prohibition of their active participation. In time, the role of women becomes more and more important within religious service. Nowadays, in Evangelical churches, women take on different priestly roles, and even officiating liturgy.

## 2. The *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* Chorale composed by Martin Luther

The hymn of reform, *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*, composed in 1529 by Martin Luther himself, appears in the first editions printed in free form, without bars, as it was the practice during the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries).

The neumatic notation is a *rhombus* shaped one, representing the last evolutionary stage before the present system of notation. The value that indicates the time is *semibrevis*, the phrases concluding on *brevis* values, even *longa* being used at the ending, while the shortest value we encounter is *semiminima*. The original clef used is the C alto clef - in Ionian mode. The range of the piece is a small one-octave (F3-F4) male tessitura, with a simple, clear melodic line.

The form is a simple tripartite ABAV, a characteristic form of the *lied*. The first part proposes a vigorous A theme with a descendant melodic line that begins with the highest note, ending on the lowest. This part gets repeated, bringing novelty only in the text. The B part brings a tonal contrast, modulating to the dominant<sup>4</sup>, the melodic line being an ascending, interrogative one. The third part is a varied A, with a descending diatonic concluding phrase (Figure 1).

This original version is also known as the *rhythmic version*, some even interpreting it as a syncopated one. We are not against the use of syncopation in sacred music, which has a rhythmically contrasting effect, but we will try to demonstrate that in the *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* hymn, we are not witnessing the use of syncopated formulas but that of metric alternation.

Considered as the *Marseillaise* of the Protestant Reformation,<sup>5</sup> the chorale first appeared in Andreas Rauscher's *Hymn Collection* in the year 1531, under the title *Der XXXVI Psalm. Deus noster refugium et virtutis*. (Psalm 46, *God is our refuge and strength*.)

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<sup>4</sup> In the original version, there is no leading tone of the dominant harmonic function, but the subtonic, which leads to the Mixolydian interpretation of part B. However, with the development of the system of functional tonality, the leading tone of the dominant is required, being used in all the versions of this chorale.

<sup>5</sup> Comparison used by Christian Johann Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), considered the last Romantic poet, in his work on *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*.



The chorale begins with a *procatalectic*<sup>8</sup> anacrusis, which already announces that the text will begin with an unstressed syllable. (*Ein* - indefinite article)

The text contains words whose initial vowels are missing. The absence of these sounds forms non-literary words, which are at times grammatically inconsistent, however, these elisions are practiced in poetry in order to achieve prosodic fluency. For example, in German, the word "Burg" is feminine, so the correct form is *Eine feste burg*. For metric reasons, the article's vowel "e" is dropped to remove a syllable, forming the indefinite article *Ein'*.

Considering the basic poetic rhythm as being a iambic one, and fully respecting the emphasis of the poetic text, here is the rhythmic-musical transcription of the hymn, using an alternative metric with binary, ternary and even composite measures. ( $7/4 = 3 + 2 + 2$  or  $8/4 = 3 + 3 + 2$ ). (Figure 2)

*Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott, Psalm 46*  
 Melody and text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)  
 Metrical arrangement: Soporan Teodor-Aurelian

Fig. 2. Metrical arrangement with alternative measures

<sup>8</sup> An expression proposed by Dan Voiculescu, referring to the fugue themes that begin with a rest. According to the ancient Greek prosody, *procatalectic* means the lack of a stressed syllable in the first foot of a verse.

## 2.1. The relationship between text and music

Music was used to emphasize the importance of the religious message in order to bring man closer to God. The word had a rational, direct, simple meaning, while the music was in accordance with the semantics of the poetic text. The underlying principles of the theological creed are based on humility and simplicity, in contrast with the opulence found by Martin Luther at the Vatican.

The importance of understanding the text brings metric, melodic and rhythmic changes to church music, gradually reaching the isorhythmic form of the Protestant chorale.

Homophony replaces polyphony for a greater understanding of the text. A heightened interest in text and interpretation is also found in the practices of the Catholic liturgy.<sup>9</sup>

The text was so important that note values, inner rhythms and metric were constructed according to the prosodic accents of sacred texts.

## 2.2. The *Ein' feste burg* Chorale within the Hymnology of Christian Evangelical Cults

We consider the understanding of the poetic rhythm to be important for a correct interpretation that highlights the message of the text, by its natural rendition.

Even the subsequent editions that still used this "rhythmic" version did not help in metric conducting, leading to a homogeneous gesture, which in this context is unnatural (Figure 3).

**Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott** Dr. Martin Luther, 1529

A migh - ty fort - ress is our God,  
He helps us free from ev - 'ry need

Fig. 3. The "A mighty fortress" Chorale from the *Christian Hymns of the Lutheran Church of Pennsylvania, 1868*

<sup>9</sup> In parallel with the Reformation, one of the most important composers of the Renaissance, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594), a composer who mainly created sacred music (*hymns, masses and motets*), notes that excessive use of counterpoint technique brings a misunderstanding of the text, due to the polyphonic alternation of voices. That is why he proposes new technique of composition, which will emphasize the message of the text, which is the essence of sacred music.

Due to its metric diversity, polymetry was abandoned in favor of isometry. Of course, this change brought a higher level of synchronization to public singing; still, it lost its original archaic charm. In his chapter dedicated to the *Ein' feste Burg* chorale, Edouard Roehrich writes in no uncertain terms about this aspect, stating that “almost all of melodies of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were disfigured by bad taste and routine.” He goes on further, saying that the elegance, grace and expressiveness of the melisma has been replaced by a heavy and burdensome melody.

Analyzing several chorales attributed to M. Luther, E. Roehrich establishes two specific components of the Lutheran melody: *rhythm* and *melisma* (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. *Original melody with mixed metric - modified melody with isorhythmic metric*

Often as a coda, the chorale ends with a plagal cadence, following the end of the stanzas (Figure 5).

Fig. 5. “*Ein' feste Burg*”, *isorhythmic version*

In the Christian Evangelical practice of Romania, we find this hymn in the binary metric of 4/4 in which certain note values have been extended, replacing the fermatas, for a symmetrical framing. For making it easier for public singing, a lower key is also preferred.<sup>10</sup> (Figure 6)

Vrăj-ma - şul cel bă - trăn Se cre - de - a - cum stă - pân, Pu - te - re, vi - cle -  
 Şi - n - trebi tu ci - ne - i El? El e E - ma - nu - el, E Dom - nul Sa - va -  
 Al răz - vră - ti - rii prinţ Scrâş - neş - te - a - mar din dinţi, Dar ori - cât ar scrâş -  
 Şi de - ar a - me - nin - ta, Chiar via - ta să ne ia Ti - ra - nul i - na -

Fig. 6. Fragment of the chorale from the “Christian Hymns” collection, *Viaţă și sănătate*, Bucharest, 2006

In the Hymnal Books of the United States, two metric versions are distinguished: an *anacrusical* one and a *procatalectic* one. Note that the latest version returns to an anacrusical form at the end of the sentence. These differences occur because the original melody has a free metric structure (Figure 7).

United Methodist Hymnal (110), Presbyterian hymnal (260), Baptist hymnal, 1991 (8)

A migh - ty for - tress is our God, a bul - wark ne - ver fail - ing.

Evangelical lutheran Worship (509)

Gods word is our great her - i - tage and shall be ours for - ev - er.

Fig. 7. Fragments of the “Ein' feste Burg” chorale, from various Christian denominations

<sup>10</sup> *Christian hymns*, *Viaţă și Sănătate*. Bucharest, 2006.



The Romanian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Augustan Confession in Romania uses a version which alternates the binary with the ternary metric, resembling the original form of the Lutheran chorale (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. *Ein' feste Burg* in *The Book of Hymns of the Evangelical Church of Augustan Confession from Romania*

A hymn book of the Hungarian Reformed Church, published in Cluj-Napoca in 1926, presents a less common version. Due to the fact that in Hungarian the prosodic accent is on the first syllable of the word, we have a crucial metric which brings important changes in the melodic line (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. An excerpt of the “*Ein' feste Burg*” chorale in an edition of the Hungarian Reformed Church’s Book of Hymns

### 3. Conclusions

The *Ein' feste Burg* chorale is one of the most beloved hymns of the Lutheran Christian musical tradition. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hymnologists debated its origin, establishing – though, not without claims to the contrary - that Martin Luther is the author of its music and text. Its metric simplification led to a clearer understanding of the text than its initial, melismatic form. And as the musical tendencies of the late Baroque and onward, continuing with the age of Classicism were those of symmetry and clarity, the isometric form was imposed.

The chorale was a source of inspiration, both from theological and political standpoint, and was also used as a hymn of social and communitarian hope.

In the second part of our study on the evolution of the *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* chorale by Martin Luther, we will analyze some of the representative works that have been inspired by this vivacious hymn.

Beginning with the end of the Renaissance and reaching the 20<sup>th</sup> century, composers quoted this chorale in their works, each imposing his own personal creativity, which led to an impressive stylistic, metric, rhythmic, melodic and harmonic diversity of the work. The work's multiple, diverse approaches lend it a contemporary and universal quality, which makes this chorale a symbol of Christian life, of permanent struggle and victory.

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