

***Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*, the first Lutheran choral from the first collection of Protestant hymns – a rhetorical analysis**

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Abstract: *This material is an extract from a larger research of Lutheran chorals, focusing on the first collection of Protestant hymns, published after the Reformation, *Etlich Cristlich lider (Achtliederbuch - The Book of Eight Songs)*, signed by Martin Luther, Paul Speratus and Justus Jonas. Beyond the general considerations related to the place and year of publication, but also to the inner construction of the collection, the analysis focuses on the first hymn composed by Luther, original both as text and as music. The rhetorical perspective I approached in the study of chorals is not arbitrary, given the impact of Luther's vision of music for that period and the attention he himself paid to classical rhetoric in his sermons, or in the courses he taught at the University of Wittenberg. His chorals are impregnated with explicit messages, both in terms of his Christian creed, but also in terms of elementary principles of Christian living.*

Key-words: *protestant choral, lutheran choral, Martin Luther, musical rhetoric, rhetoric*

1. Introduction - *Etlich Cristlich lider (Achtliederbuch)*, general landmarks

According to the American researcher Leonard Woolsey Bacon (1830 - 1907), the first collection of hymns of the Reformation appeared in 1524 under the name of *Etlich Cristlich leader (Achtliederbuch - The Book of Eight Songs)*, signed by Martin Luther, Paul Speratus and Justus Jonas. It contained eight textually represented hymns, of which only five had a single voice attached (Bacon 1884, 16).

The description we find on the very first page gives us some general information about the collection: *Some Christian songs, hymns of praise and psalms, in accordance with the truth of God's Word, composed of Holy Scripture by people highly educated to be sung in church, as is already the case in Wittenberg.*

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In order to be able to more easily view the hymns with the related song and the associated author, we will present a scheme of the contents of the collection published in 1524, as it appears on the page *The Free Lutheran Chorale-Book*:

- *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* (tune *Nun freut euch*) – Martin Luther
- *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* (tune *Es ist das Heil*) – Paul Speratus
- *In Gott glaub ich, daß er hat aus nicht* (tune *In Gott glaub ich*) - Paul Speratus
- *Hilf Gott, wie ist der Menschen Not* - Paul Speratus
- *Ach Gott vom Himmel, sieh darein* (tune *Es ist das Heil*) – Martin Luther (Ps. XII)
- *Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl* (tune *Es ist das Heil*) – Martin Luther (Ps. XIV)
- *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* (tune *Es ist das Heil*) – Martin Luther (Ps. CXXX)
- *In Jesus Namen heben wir an* (tune *In Jesus Namen heben wir an*) – Justus Jonas

On closer examination we will find that, of the four chorales generally attributed to Luther, only in one case can we speak of a composition with original text and melody, the other three hymns being textual processing of some psalms on the same melody taken from Paul Speratus.

The collection was published in three separate editions that year, the first and second in Nüremberg, and the third in Augsburg. Contrary to the specifications noted on the introductory page and linking its publication to Wittenberg, in fact the localities are those mentioned above. We can imagine that the association with Wittenberg could add credibility to the collection of hymns, being received with more openness by the public willing to worship.

The next three chorals, in the order in which they appear in the collection, are: *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* (tune *Es ist das Heil*), *In Gott glaub ich, daß er hat aus nicht* (tune *In Gott glaub ich*) and *Hilf Gott, wie ist der Menschen Not*, all belonging to Paul Speratus (1484 - 1551). They also present the biblical passages that formed the basis of the compositions. Surprising as it may be, the last of them has no melodic representation, being recorded in the collection only with the corresponding lyrics. As a result, the collection has seven songs, of which only four are original.

We finally come to the three chorals on Luther's verses, *Ach Gott vom Himmel, sieh darein*; *Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl* and *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, all written on the melody of Paul Speratus (*Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*). They represent the poetic version of Psalms XII, XIV and CXXX, based on the translation of the Old Testament by the reformer.

The choral that concludes the first collection of hymns, *Achtliederbuch*, is *In Jesus Namen heben wir an* (tune *In Jesus Namen heben wir an*), composed by

Justus Jonas (1493 - 1555), theologian, reformer and creator of hymns, who remained beside Martin Luther in the last moments of his life.

2. Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein – a rhetorical analysis

The first hymn, *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*, on the song *Nun freut euch*, belongs to Martin Luther both as music and as text, structured on ten stanzas, of seven verses each. From the text will be presented only the first stanza, in the original German version and the English translation, personally made.

Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein,
und lasst uns fröhlich springen,
dass wir getrost und all in ein
mit Lust und Liebe singen,
was Gott an uns gewendet hat
und seine grosse Wundertat;
gar teu'r hat er's erworben.

Dear Christians, now, rejoice,
And let us leap for joy,
Full of confidence,
Let's sing with desire and love,
How God turned to us,
And His great miracle;
It cost Him such a great price.

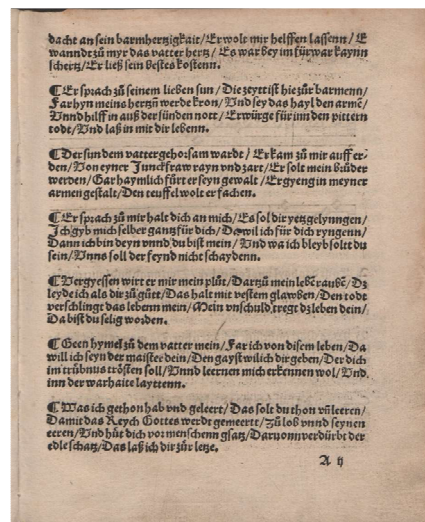
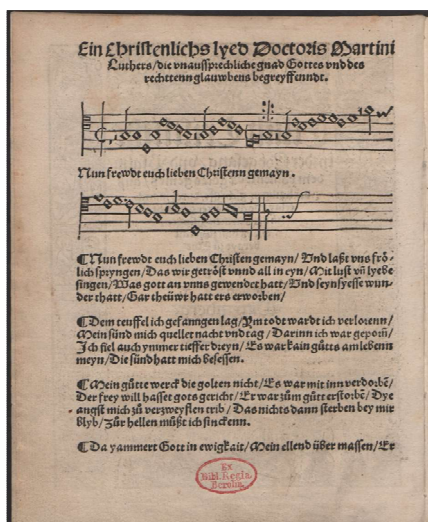


Fig. 1, 2. M. Luther - *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* - Berlin State Library, p. 6, 7.

In the analysis of this choral I will follow Dietrich Bartel's treatise on rhetoric, *Musica poetica - Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music*, which

presents a sum of all rhetorical formulas defined by the most important composers and theorists of the time (Bartel 1997, 438 - 448).

A surprising aspect at first glance is the construction of ten stanzas, each with seven verses in its composition. We know very well that the symbolism of the numbers in the sacred writings was of extraordinary importance, especially since Luther was an erudite of the Scriptures and was certainly very familiar with it. Although ordinary poetic structures follow symmetries, using four, six, or eight verses in the stanza, the reformer writes the text of this choral using asymmetry, while emphasizing the number seven.

In the Bible this number is directly related to the presence of God, through the seventh day of creation, the Sabbath, when He rested and put His seal on this day, sanctifying it and consecrating it for a special purpose, to relegate the relationship with the man created by Him. Likewise here, we can intuit that his use of seven is in direct connection with the Divinity, in the desire to emphasize His holiness, but also the rest of salvation and peace of soul to which He calls us all, by rebuilding our relationship with Him. Beyond the lyrics of the hymn *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* which explicitly proclaims the power, goodness and greatness of God, we also find on an individual level, enciphered in each stanza, this unique attribute of the holiness and perfection of the Creator.

Moreover, the number ten is not accidentally chosen by the author to include all the lyrics of the choral, because ten, a round number, represents totality, fullness, just as the call to praise God is addressed to all people, all nations and the whole earth. At the same time on the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar was established one of the most important Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) in which the whole people were atoned for their sins, just as this hymn speaks of the deliverance of mankind from the burden of sin through the intervention and sacrifice of God. Luther certainly had a thorough knowledge of all these symbols and sought to include them, explicitly or ciphred, in the construction of his choral.

And the symbolism of the numbers does not stop here, because step by step we will notice that the whole anthem is built on structures of seven, starting from its construction in the musical form of Bar (AAB) in which the A contains two repeated phrases $[(a - a^1) \times 2]$, and B has three distinct sentences $(b - b^1 - b^2)$, thus summing up seven sentences of the stanza, but also at the level of the microstructure of each sentence, where we find almost invariably seven quarter notes that begin anacruically with an eighth note before.

The melodic scale used is that of the plagal mode Hypomixolydius for the first part, in which the vox finalis is on G and the recitation chord, *repercussa*, is on

C, while for the second part, Luther uses the authentic Mixolydian mode, in which the *vox finalis* is on G and the recitation chord is on D.

For section A the cadence is achieved by a gradually ascending scale that starts from E, passes through G's *sensibile* (F Sharp) and stops on *vox finalis* (G). The B section instead gravitates in the first part around the recitation chord (D), which it reinforces with an inner cadence that uses the *sensibile* (C Sharp), but which later returns to the natural form (C) when the song is recentered on *vox finalis* also by a cadence in gradual march, this time descending, from B through A, to the G.

For a visual representation of the sounds used in each section we've made below the melodic scale with the corresponding ambitus (Fig. 3). The latter is based on the same numbers, seven (small seventh - for A section) and ten (small tenth - for B section), which may not be a pure coincidence.

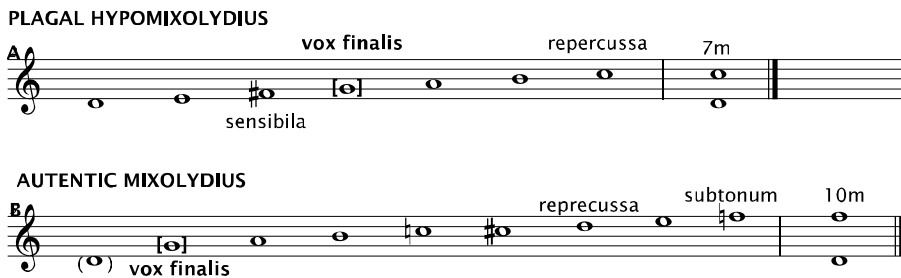
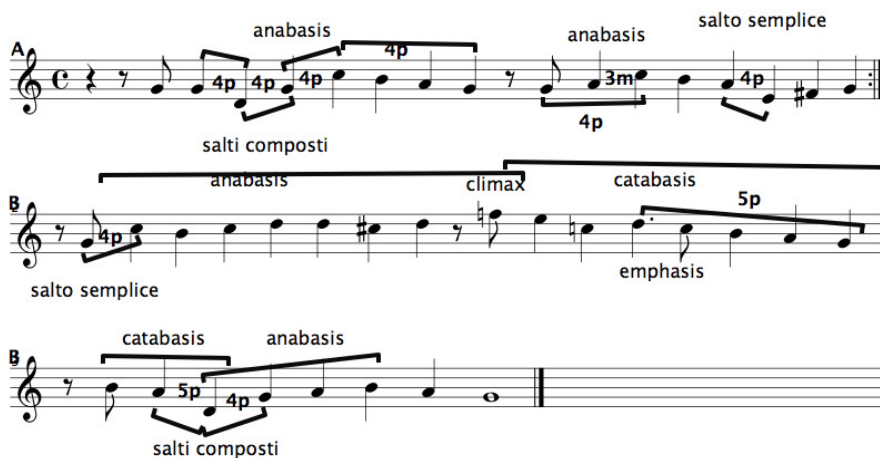


Fig. 3. The modal scale of the anthem and the ambitus of each section

The melody of the hymn is full of hope and has a pronounced folkloric character through the frequent use of unprepared, or unresolved leaps, or by joining a series of leaps (Fig. 4). The writing of the sacred hymns until then was reserved, with



prepared and solved leaps and a predominantly gradual course of the song.

Fig. 4. Martin Luther - *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* – in current notation

Luther is not shy to bring influences taken from the German's folk music, thus refreshing the ethos of the hymns, but he justifies all these by associating the text with the respective melody. Recognized as one of the most talented handlers of the German language, as well as the ancient languages, the reformer from Wittenberg offers pleasant surprises even today when we approach a more detailed analysis of his chorals.

If we follow the sequence of intervals that are associated with the words, we can extract some extremely suggestive aspects of musical rhetoric.

4427. Etlich Cristliche Lieder. Wittenberg. A. 1. (Vierf. M.)

(Nun freut euch, lie = ben Chri = sten gmein, und laßt uns fröh = lich
daß wir ge = trost und all in ein mit Lust und Lie = be
↓ gold section
(sprin = gen, was Gott an uns ge = wen = det hat und sei = ne
(sin = gen,
2)
gro ße Wun = der = that; gar teuer hat ers er = wor = ben. (Luther.)

Fig. 5. Martin Luther - *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* - in current notation

Right at the beginning we are greeted by three consecutive leaps of quarts, the first descendant and two other ascending, a variant of the rhetorical formula *salti composti*, followed by a gradual descent also in a quart interval. The melody describes the joy, as does the text, and the auftakt that doubles the finale (G), only strengthens the exaltation that the author proclaims "now" (*nun*), the present moment, the only one on which we can rely on to make a decision, because the future does not belong to any of us.

Christians who are appealed to are from all corners of the earth, and the ascending and descending leaps seem to want to describe the scope of this call, which is intended to be very wide. It is as if two arms were opened to embrace all believers, and the warmth with which the message is expressed, illustrated by the adjective "*lieben*" (*dear*), coincides with a rhetorical formula of *anabasis*,

symbolizing the elevation of the soul to noble feelings. The same call is repeated in the second part of section A, which also starts on a formula of *anabasis* on the words "*und lasst uns*" (*and, come on, let's*), continued with a downward leap of the quart (*salto semplice* in rhetorical language) which ends with a gradually ascending scale through the *sensible*.

The first part is repeated on other lyrics, "*full of confidence, let's sing with desire and love*", and the melodic scale highlights key words, such as "*getrost*" (*confidence*) - by an upward quart leap, "*Lust*" (*desire*) - also by a small third ascending leap and "*Liebe*" (*love*) - on a gradually descending scale. The cadence of section A is formed on another key word, "*singen*" (*to sing*), by a gradually ascending scale mediated by the *sensible* of the mode.

The second part begins with the invocation of God on an *aufakt* on the G followed by an ascending quart leap (*salto semplice*) emphasizing the support pillar, "*Gott*" (*God*), as a reason for joy and praise throughout this choral. Another formula that stands out is the insistent repetition of D, the recitation chord (*repercussa*), in the sequence of 2 + 1, where C Sharp appears interposed after the first two notes of D, on the text "*gewendet hat*" (*He returned to us*). Here we can think of the unitary Trinity which returns to the man altered by sin, to bring him back to holiness and glory, just as the three notes of D embrace the altered note C Sharp, to ascend to the climax of the whole fragment, F, for a short period of eighths.

We could do a calculation to find the placement of the golden section of the choral. According to Euclid's definition, (Ghyka 1927, 34) it is realized when the ratio between $a + b$ and a is equal to the ratio between a and b , meaning $(a + b) / a = a / b$, where a is called "*extreme ratio*", and b is called "*average*". This leads to an irrational number, marked by the Greek letter Φ (phi), being approximately equal to 0,618 (to three decimals). We know that our anthem has 7 phrases of 8 times each, resulting in a total of 56 times that will need to be multiplied by the golden number to find the place where the golden section is. So it turns out: $7 \times 8 = 56 \times 0,618 = 34,608$. We will be amazed to find that moment, right at the beginning of section B, on the word "*Gott*" (*God*).

Further, B section presents for the first sentence an *anabasis* (starting from G to F at a distance of a small seventh), continued in the second sentence with a *catabasis* (also completed on G), having as connection point the same F, located at the climax of the entire choral. It is thus outlined, as an imagistic representation of the text (*assimilatio* in rhetorical language), two arms oriented from top to bottom, in the shape of an inverted "V", reminding us of the grace of God poured over all mankind. Moreover, the only prolonged value that appears throughout the song is used next to the word "*grosse*" (*big*) on the sounds D (dotted fourth) and C (eighth), a real *emphasis* (in rhetorical language).

The final sentence speaks of the immense sacrifice that God made and that cost Him such an expensive price (*gar teu'r hat er's erworben*), on a melody that brings the first unprepared and unresolved leap of the descending fifth, followed by a leap of the ascending quart, a possible symbol of the fall and ascension, or ascension of the One who gave the supreme price for our salvation. The same rhetorical figures and musical intervals also support the lyrics in the following stanzas.

3. Conclusion

A keen connoisseur of classical rhetoric, Martin Luther encouraged the use of rhetorical techniques, both in preaching and in teaching at the department, familiarizing his students with it. Among his disciples was Nicolaus Listenius (1510-1538), a valuable student at the University of Wittenberg, the first to write about the concept of *musica poetica*, in *Rudimenta musicae planae* (1533), which he later explored in more detail in the first chapter of *Musica* (1537), one of the most popular treatises of the sixteenth century in Germany. In conclusion, I consider that, based on the information we have at our disposal, the rhetorical analysis of Lutheran chorals is a justified approach, even if the actual theorizing of rhetorical formulas was done later.

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