



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Martin Luther and the metaphysics of music

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Abstract

This article traces convergences and differences within the classical philosophical tradition of *musica* and its later Christianisation, exploring Martin Luther's engagement with such metaphysical accounts of music's significance. Recent scholarship on Luther's agreement with a reformulated Boethian account of music is critiqued, distancing Luther from the main currents of this tradition. The article goes on to explore the way Luther subverts Platonic emphases in his theological understanding of music, drawing on a longer tradition of criticism for musical cosmologies. The article concludes with an extended reading of Luther's most substantial hymnal preface, to articulate his alternative, dynamic account of music in creation, which grounds musical realities in the gifted contingencies of human musicianship.

Keywords: creation; Martin Luther; metaphysics; music; Plato; song

Music has been both a practical resource and a subject of philosophical reflection for the Christian church throughout its history. Prevalent within such reflection have been questions about music's power. What does music *do* to us? How should it affect us? What occasions its effects, and how should they be used? Such questions take a more explicitly metaphysical and theological turn when they touch on the question of what music is doing in the universe, how the orderedness of harmonic phenomena relates to the divine logic of creation, and how the immediacy of the experience of live musical sounds relates to music's ability to be contemplated through rational, formal theory. Within such questions, Martin Luther emerges as a provocative figure who not only knew of the established answers of the classical philosophers and their early Christian reformulation, but formulated fresh answers that challenged their foundational premises.

In this article, I focus a discussion of music within Luther's thought first by placing him in the context of several key earlier philosophers and theologians, for whom musical reality was rooted in the metaphysical harmony of the universe's proportionality. I shall examine critical revisions of such a scheme, both in antiquity and closer to Luther's day, before seeing what relation Luther's thought has to this set of traditions. Whilst Luther knows of, makes brief use of, and shows little concern for arguing against

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a metaphysic of musical transcendence, I shall argue that not only are there very few indications of Luther's adoption of these particular concepts of music's cosmic grounding, but that his own scheme for rooting music's wonder in the created cosmos goes against the grain of the metaphysics of some of these earlier thinkers. With that conclusion in view, I shall go on to examine what theological and metaphysical commitments Luther himself commands in the way in which he roots music's cosmic significance in terms of his own, through a reading of his most comprehensive and cohesive (though still brief) writing on the nature of music, his preface to the hymnal *Symphoniae iucundae*. I will thus demonstrate how Luther constructs his metaphysic of a musical universe, and a musical humanity, not through concern for contemplating rational form, but through the living testimony of the jubilant grace of musical creativity.¹

The tradition of *musica*

By Luther's time, music theory already had a long history of rooting music in cosmic order and proportion, and a whole system of thought and educational discipline. The study of *musica* was at root an investigation into numerical relations – not only, and indeed not principally, the relations of pitches and rhythms produced by instruments, but of fundamental mathematical proportionalities. Musical sound was a participation in this greater, primal harmonisation, and a first step on the elevation of the intellect to contemplate this higher, incorporeal mathematical order.

The origins of *musica* are found among the Pythagoreans, who gained a reputation for researching number theory and music, and for discovering that key musical consonances could be expressed in pleasingly simple numerical ratios (a note with its octave as 2:1, with its fifth as 3:2, with its fourth 4:3). In this line of thinking, music gains its delight, worth and power from its resonance with a mathematical coherence intrinsic to the fabric of the cosmos. Such a principle is alive in Plato's imagination also, as Henry Chadwick summarises:

[In *Timaeus* (35b, 36a)] ratios are the basic principle by which the world soul is immanent in the cosmos and gives it its ordered structure ... [At] the end of the *Republic* [617ab] each of the planets gives out a sound together with the fixed stars beyond them. In the *Cratylus* (405cd) Apollo as god of concord presides over the cosmic harmony of the heavenly bodies as well as earthly music.²

In this tradition, astronomical order is itself charged with musical harmony; musical sound is a microcosm of, and participation in, that which is absolute in the macrocosmic planetary order. Plato was also aware of music's affective power, for good or ill, treating sounded music with suspicion.³ This power could be harnessed through performing appropriate 'modes' (forms of musical scale) for different effects – the Phrygian for courage, the Ionian for relaxing, etc.⁴ Due to music's persuasive power, Plato held that one ought not to aim for pleasure in music, but for truth:

¹ References to Luther's works will be taken principally from the American edition of his works: Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American edition (hereafter *LW*), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St Louis, MO: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86).

² Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 78–9.

³ Plato *Republic* 398–400; *Laws* 669cd.

⁴ Plato, *Republic* 398e–399c.

[W]e should judge by the standard of truth ... As they aim at the noblest kind of song, they will have to aim not at a music which is pleasing, but at one which is right ... the rightness of a representation [lies] in reproduction of the proportions and quality of the original.⁵

In this view, musical sound's aural qualities ought to be submitted to an intellectual ordering contemplated in the cosmos' higher harmony: the 'real' music is an incorporeal harmony which is perceived through the physical sonorities of creation.

Augustine's treatise *De musica* transmitted this approach into Christian thought, maintaining that the principal value of sounded music was as a means to the contemplation of that on which the consonance of all things was based. The enquiring student of musical number ought 'to move on from the corporeal to the incorporeal'.⁶ In his later *Confessions*, Augustine is delighted by, yet suspicious of, music's emotive power, fluctuating 'between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect' of music.⁷ For him, the power of sounded music must be tamed by the rigours of the intellect's contemplation. It is something to go 'through' and 'beyond': the aural qualities of music have their value in resonating with, and leading us toward, a reality beyond themselves.⁸

It is through Boethius that this tradition became firmly established within medieval musical thought and educational practice, and comes to bear on the thought-world of Luther. Boethius, in his treatise *De institutione musica*, is largely disinterested in musical sounds in their own right. Boethius articulated a threefold division of music, as Calvin Bower succinctly summarises:

cosmic music (*musica mundana*), which was subdivided into the harmony of spheres, the concord of the elements, and the consonance of the seasons; human music (*musica humana*), which was subdivided into the harmony of the soul and the body, the consonance of the parts of the soul, and the concord of the parts of the body; and instrumental music (*musica in instrumentis constituta*), which is subdivided into string, wind, and percussion instruments.⁹

The goal of studying these *musicae* was to ascend from the lower to the higher. Boethius agrees with Plato and Augustine that sounded music, through the effects of modes, has power to influence the human listener because 'the order of our soul and body seems to be related somehow through those same ratios by which ... sets of pitches, suitable for melody, are joined together and united'.¹⁰ Exhibiting the same fundamental harmony,

⁵Plato, *The Laws* 2.668, trans. A. E. Taylor (London: Dents, 1960), pp. 46–7.

⁶Augustine, *De musica* 6.2.2, trans. M. Jacobsson (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002), p. 9.

⁷Augustine, *Confessions* 10.50, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 208.

⁸Carol Harrison, 'Augustine and the Art of Music', in Jeremy Begbie and Stephen Guthrie (eds), *Resonant Witness: Conversations Between Music and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 27–45.

⁹Calvin M. Bower, 'The Transmission of Ancient Music Theory into the Middle Ages', in T. Christensen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 146. Cf. Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, trans. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 9–10.

¹⁰Boethius, *Fundamentals*, p. 7.

the higher *musica* provides order to the lower – the cosmic to the human and instrumental – the lower leading therefore to the higher.

To this main set of traditions several other voices emerge in contrast, in ways that will also assist in bringing Luther's thought into relief against this background. First, Aristotle. The Platonic concept of a 'music of the spheres' was based on the observation that the planetary spheres moved; that sound is produced by movement (of one thing, such as air, against another); and therefore that the moving planets must emit a colossal concordant sound.¹¹ This begged the question as to how it was that the planets seemed silent to the ear. Pythagoreans held that humankind is deaf to this music because it is always there. Aristotle, though, in *De caelo*, rejects the idea of planetary music as absurd: 'melodious and poetical' but not a 'true account of the facts'.¹²

Aristotle's main writings on music in his *Politics* are interested in the role of music in three main areas. These areas are not unimportant to the Platonic tradition, but in receiving Aristotle's attention over and above any concern with speculative musical cosmology, they create a strikingly different metaphysical emphasis to music. The first is the area of affect. Aristotle is sure that music affects the hearer, and that the harmonious pleasure it affords us merits its importance. Modes had associated affects for Aristotle as for Plato. Aristotle, however, held that all modes ought to be used since, with good education, music did not truly have a 'vulgarizing effect' of which to be suspicious.¹³ Aristotle is concerned with the affinity between musical harmony and the soul's harmony, and not with the foundation of both in a scheme of cosmic music.¹⁴ The second area, linked to the first, is character formation. Music can help in forming right judgments, and is vital to Aristotle's educational outlook, since music teaches the pursuit of leisure.¹⁵ The two areas defined thus far beg a question: should one be able to (and teach children to) play and sing, or only to listen to music? Thus the third area concerns musical practice. In distinction from Plato's preference for intellectual *musica*, and contrasted with Boethius' later concept of the 'true' musician as one who does not play but listens and judges theoretically, Aristotle advocates practical performance:¹⁶

Clearly there is a considerable difference made in the character by the actual practice of the art [of music]. It is difficult, if not impossible, for those who do not perform to be good judges of the performances of others ... [Children] should be taught ... to become not only critics but performers.¹⁷

Aristotle, then, rejected the Pythagorean tradition's cosmic assertions as speculative rhetoric, preferring pragmatic discussions about music's usefulness and educational potential. He appreciates music's pleasurable affective power and is not so suspicious of it. Furthermore, he advocates an emphasis on practical music-making and the effects of sonorous harmony on the soul's own harmony.

¹¹Plato, *Republic* 617ab.

¹²Aristotle, *De caelo* 2.9, trans. John Leofric Stocks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), §§290b–291a.

¹³Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens* 1340a–1342a, trans. Benjamin Jowett, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 201–5.

¹⁴Aristotle, *Politics* 1340b.

¹⁵Aristotle, *Politics* 1337b, 1339a, 1339b, 1340a.

¹⁶Boethius, *Fundamentals*, pp. 50–51.

¹⁷Aristotle, *Politics* 1340b.

The second figure of distinction who departs from the main *musica* tradition is Aristoxenus, Aristotle's pupil. In *Elementa harmonica* he criticised the relegation of sensory musical phenomena in favour of 'fabricated rational principles'.¹⁸ Pythagorean theory paid much attention to addressing the various difficulties of formulating, from the simple consonant ratios, a scheme of interval multiplications that accounted for the presence of 'irrational numbers' further along in the harmonic calculations. Aristoxenus criticised this approach, arguing that the ear ought to be sovereign, not, in Chadwick's sharp words, 'the mathematical reason with its doctrinaire imposition of abstract theory'.¹⁹ Aristoxenus retains an emphasis on ratio, but notes that the simplicity of the fundamental musical ratios is only appealing since the ear judges the consonance. His critique was that musical coherence was not dictated by mathematical theory, which became untenable in the face of more complex sonic evidence, but by the ear's perception of the sensory phenomenon of consonance.

The third figure to consider, as we edge toward Luther, is the early humanist music theorist Johannes Tinctoris (c.1435–1511), who demonstrates a late medieval turn from the Pythagoreo-Boethian²⁰ conceptions of *musica* to a new musical aesthetics. In *The Art of Counterpoint* he applauds Aristotle's critique of the celestial harmony, emphasising that 'there is neither actual nor potential sound in the heavens'.²¹ Tinctoris criticised the interest in *musica mundana* over *musica instrumentalis* maintained by other contemporary humanists who held on to a qualified Pythagoreo-Boethian approach; he insisted that if only earthly instruments sound harmony, then studying music should happen with the ears, rather than the mind's reason.²²

These voices are precursors of Luther's engagement with Pythagoreo-Boethian traditions: Aristotle for his critique of abstract musical contemplation and preference for practical questions of music-making; Aristoxenus for his emphasis on the sensory phenomena of sound; Tinctoris in bringing these Aristotelian and Aristoxenian emphases to bear on an early humanist rebuttal of *musica*.

Luther's engagement with *musica*

Textual evidence of the extent to which Luther knew of *musica* suggests that he is aware of the concept of music as a hermeneutic for foundational cosmic coherence. I will argue, however, that this claim must be qualified, and that recent scholarship has overstated the argument that Luther was influenced by and in turn propounded Pythagoreo-Boethian approaches. In what follows, I shall argue that whatever metaphysics of music Luther may have held to is based in his theology of the created cosmos, but in markedly different ways than those advocated in most *musica* traditions. Rather, Luther's view of music is profoundly material and creaturely: the cosmos' musical potential is to be formed and fulfilled through the devotional, linguistic and artistic lives of creatures.

¹⁸ Aristoxenus, 'Harmonic Elements', in Oliver Strunk (ed.), *Source Readings in Music History: From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), p. 26.

¹⁹ Chadwick, *Boethius*, pp. 87, 91. Plato derided those who 'prefer to use their ears instead of their minds'. Plato, *Republic* 531b, p. 262.

²⁰ For ease of expression, the construct 'Pythagoreo-Boethian' will here refer to the identifiable agreements of Pythagoreans, Plato, Augustine, and Boethius in their conceptions of music.

²¹ Johannes Tinctoris, *The Art of Counterpoint*, trans. and ed. Albert Seay (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1961), p. 14.

²²Ibid. See Loewe, 'Musica', pp. 6, 23–5.

I turn now to examine the textual evidence of Luther's engagement with *musica*. The concept of cosmic sound emerges in his *Lectures on Genesis*. His comments on Genesis 2:21 show an awareness of the concept of the 'music of the spheres':

We do not marvel at the countless other gifts of creation, for we have become deaf toward what Pythagoras aptly terms this wonderful and most lovely music coming from the harmony of the motions that are in the celestial spheres ... [The fathers] did not want to be understood as though sound were given off by the motion of the celestial bodies ... All these developments afford the fullest occasion for wonderment and are wholly beyond our understanding, but because of their continued recurrence they have come to be regarded as commonplace, and we have verily become deaf to this lovely music of nature.²³

Luther is clearly aware of the Pythagorean concept of a musical harmony built into the cosmos, and of the explanation that humanity does not 'hear' this music due to familiarity.²⁴ Like Aristotle and Tinctoris, Luther argues that this does not refer to actual sound, but is a poetic portrayal of the wonder of the created order and humanity's negligence thereof. In this respect, Luther rather likes the idea, provided it does not result in undue speculation about celestial motions and ratios. Elsewhere in his *Lectures on Genesis*, though, Luther becomes more critical. He considers Dionysius' interest in the heavenly orders and celestial spheres to be 'the silliest prattle' and Dionysius' attempts to project earthly (and ecclesiastical) order from an order discerned by cosmic speculation to be 'trifles worthy for the papists to learn'.²⁵ As to the discourses on celestial motions in Plato's *Timaeus*, these are to be 'entirely rejected'.²⁶

If there is any glimpse in Luther of a musical cosmology, it is found in his *Preface* to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae* (hereafter *Preface*). In the *Preface* Luther opens with the highest praise of music, then begins his examination by noting music's foundation in creation: 'First then, looking at music itself, you will find that from the beginning of the world it has been instilled and implanted in all creatures, individually and collectively. For nothing is without sound or harmony'.²⁷ Luther's original Latin reads *Nihil enim est sine sono, seu numero sonoro* ('For nothing is without sound, or sounding number').²⁸ Here Luther sees music as inherent within the fabric of creation – a creation that is naturally noisy, it seems – and intimates that sound has a numerical basis; thus the numerical orderedness of created things commits them to music. This suggests an essential connection between music and mathematics; however, Miikka Anttila counsels against reading anything properly Pythagorean into the comment.²⁹ Indeed, this isolated phrase is not developed at all either in the *Preface* or elsewhere in Luther's writings to advocate the sort of cosmic approach to music that we have seen of the Pythagoreo-Boethian tradition.

²³Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, in LW 1.126.

²⁴Cf. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 26–30*, in LW 5.22–3.

²⁵Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, in LW 1.235.

²⁶Ibid., 1.47.

²⁷Martin Luther, *Preface to Georg Rhau's Symphoniae iucundae*, in LW 53.322.

²⁸Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter WA), 121 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009), 50.369; cf. Luther, *Preface*, p. 322, n. 1: 'Literally, "sounding number".'

²⁹Miikka Anttila, *Luther's Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 85.

Andreas Loewe, however, has recently argued in detail that the *Preface* firmly adopts Pythagoreo-Boethian traditions. Loewe is in good company in the scholarly community in arguing so: Jeremy Begbie and Paul Helmer both argue toward this conclusion. Since Loewe offers the most thorough examination and evidence, I shall concentrate on his essay ‘Musica est Optimum’: Martin Luther’s Theory of Music'.³⁰ Luther, according to Loewe, follows a classification of ‘natural music’ (*musica naturalis*) and ‘artificial [or composed] music’ (*musica artificialis*).³¹ *Musica naturalis*, Loewe argues, is then subdivided into categories that came to Luther from Adam von Fulda’s treatise, *On Music* (1490). Von Fulda, ‘broadly following Boethius, identified distinctive subgroups of natural music: *musica mundana*, the sounds of the natural world; *musica humana*, the music that humans and animals make when they laugh, cry or speak; and *musica caelestis*, the music of heaven’.³² Loewe envisages a structure in the *Preface* that traces these three types of *musica naturalis* and then turns to *musica artificialis*.³³ Loewe’s association of these classifications with the *Preface*, however, is problematic, and these problems undermine his conclusion that Luther’s theology of music was based on Boethian *musica* as transmitted by Von Fulda and others. I shall examine the problems of locating this classificatory scheme in the *Preface* and in due course offer an alternative exegesis of the text and a different view of Luther’s metaphysics of music.

First then, whilst the *musica mundana* section identified by Loewe is concerned with creation and mentions, as we have seen, ‘sounding number’, there is no talk otherwise of planetary or cosmic music; the phrase ‘sounding number’ is epexegetical, isolated and undeveloped. The comment is followed immediately by a remark about motion and the sound of air: ‘Even the air, which of itself is invisible and imperceptible to all our sense, and which, since it lacks both voice and speech, is the least musical of all things, becomes sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when it is set in motion.’³⁴ So in mentioning ‘sounding number’ Luther is likely more interested in the material link between the mechanics of motion and the production of sound than he is in incorporeal number (and indeed, it is *sounding* number he mentions; *musica caelestis* does not, problematically, ‘sound’). Von Fulda’s concept of *musica mundana* includes the ‘music of the spheres’,³⁵ which is absent from Luther’s *Preface*; and, as we have seen above, he affords such notions little credibility elsewhere. Secondly, Loewe’s identification of a *musica caelestis* section is unsubstantiated. In the relevant section Luther considers music as

³⁰ Andreas Loewe, ‘‘Musica est Optimum’: Martin Luther’s Theory of Music’, www.academia.edu/1028886/Musica_est_optimum_Martin_Luthers_Theory_of_Music; accessed 2 February 2023. Begbie’s latest argument relies on Loewe’s analysis: see Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity and God* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 28–32. Begbie’s earlier summary lays Luther’s emphasis less heavily on the Platonic tradition: see his *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 100. Anttila has associated Brian Horne with this school of Pythagorean readings of Luther, which is unfounded. Horne offers a reading of Luther that, rather like the one I am advocating, roots his thought in a cosmic approach, but distances him in key ways from thinkers like Augustine. Paul Helmer, ‘The Catholic Luther and Worship Music’, in Christine Helmer (ed.), *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), pp. 153–4, 159–60. Cf. Anttila, *Luther’s Theology*, p. 85, n. 351. Brian L. Horne, ‘A Civitas of Sound: On Luther and Music’, *Theology* 88/721 (Jan. 1985), p. 27.

³¹ The distinction is not from Boethius, as Loewe claims, but emerged later in the tradition.

³² Loewe, ‘Musica’, pp. 23–4.

³³ In this hypothesis, Luther’s section on *musica mundana* is from *Preface*, p. 322, l. 6; *musica humana* from p. 322, l. 20; *musica caelestis* from p. 323, l. 5. From p. 324, l. 9, Luther is concerned with *musica artificialis*. See Loewe, ‘Musica’, pp. 24–43.

³⁴ Luther, *Preface*, p. 322.

³⁵ Loewe, ‘Musica’, p. 24.

'a mistress and governess of those human emotions', as a way 'to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy', given by God to move humanity to praise him.³⁶ Loewe consistently attributes Luther's assertions about music's affective power to *musica caelstis*, without acknowledging that Luther himself draws no such terminological or categorical distinction, referring only ever to 'music' in general, and that nowhere in the *Preface* are heaven, the skies or any supra-earthly realm brought into view. Loewe's analysis fails to note that a whole portion of Von Fulda's *musica* classifications is absent from the *Preface*, namely that of cosmic music and the intellectual horizons of music's order, and thus Loewe too straightforwardly reads Luther to be a Boethian.³⁷

A more telling way of showing this is to employ Boethius' classifications as a lens, rather than Von Fulda's. Boethius, as I have noted, adopted a simple three-tier structure, which relates to Von Fulda's like so:

Boethius' system	Von Fulda's system
I. <i>musica mundana</i>	I. <i>musica naturalis</i>
II. <i>musica humana</i> ³⁸	I.i. <i>musica mundana</i> I.ii. <i>musica caelstis</i> I.iii. <i>musica humana</i>
III. <i>musica in instrumentis constituta</i>	II. <i>musica artificialis</i>

Undeniably present in the *Preface* is *musica in instrumentis constituta*, since Luther marvels at the musical sounds of birds and human voice, and commends the human vocation of shaping music into an art.³⁹ Music is also considered as a force for the inner harmony of the human (*musica humana*), in its governance of emotions.⁴⁰ With the Boethian scheme in view, what is markedly absent is *musica mundana*, which, in a narrower sense than Von Fulda's, encompasses only the cosmic category of music found in the ordered proportionality of creation, and of the planets in particular. *Musica mundana* is, for Boethius, the fundamental form of music which all other forms of harmony reflect: Luther, however, intimates no such musical hierarchy. Tested against either of these schemes, Luther's *Preface* tellingly omits any notion of music's reference to some higher order of intellectualised harmony that transcends sensory life. Loewe's application of Von Fulda's scheme to Luther's *Preface* is not borne out by the text, and the application of Boethius' scheme highlights that it is precisely this cosmic rooting of music's power in concepts of celestial harmony, ontologically prior in the *musica* tradition, that is tellingly missing from Luther's approach.

³⁶Luther, *Preface*, p. 323.

³⁷Loewe, 'Musica', p. 23.

³⁸There is a difference between their concepts of *musica humana*, since Boethius envisages the inner harmony of body and soul, etc., whereas for Von Fulda the set of sounds and noises produced by humans constitutes *musica humana*. The distinction bears little on the present argument, though.

³⁹Luther, *Preface*, p. 324.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 323.

The nature of music in Luther's thought

If Luther did not subscribe in any real sense to traditional assertions about the 'music of the spheres', what metaphysical grounding does he give to music? Luther founds his understanding of music on a theology of creation, viewing music as gift, and therefore intrinsically good. In the *Preface*, this is developed through five sections, which are here summarised in the order in which he develops them, and three of which will be expanded upon below to synopsize Luther's metaphysical vision of music. First, God created the 'stuff' of the earth with an inbuilt musicality that is a joyous and wonderful gift.⁴¹ Secondly, humans are 'gifted' in the further sense that the human voice offers musical possibilities that are unfathomable and unmatched within all of creation, and humans reciprocate this gift through their praise of the creator.⁴² Thirdly, music is given by God as a 'mistress and governess' of human emotions, by which God tempers the human heart.⁴³ Fourthly, music is given that it may be joined with the gift of language, and thus is a gift given for proclaiming the Word of God.⁴⁴ Fifthly, music is given by God that it may catalyse the creative enterprises of humans in their artistic vocation.⁴⁵

Notably, for Luther, the *more* human and artistic music becomes, the more it is shot through with God's goodness, power and purpose; the more it resonates with and amplifies other gifts given by God, and so calls into fulfilment humanity's broader giftedness. The first, second and fifth of these senses of music as 'gift' will be considered presently, since they together form Luther's metaphysics of music. (The third and fourth senses, though founded on and framed by the other three senses, more closely express their outworkings in music's impact on the human person.⁴⁶)

In his *Preface*, Luther first observes that 'from the beginning of the world [music] has been instilled and implanted in all creatures ... For nothing is without sound or harmony'. Air itself, though 'the least musical of all things', becomes 'sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when it is set in motion'.⁴⁷ This association of music and motion is found in the Pythagorean-Boethian traditions about moving planets producing sound, though notably Luther, like Tinctoris, draws attention to the sounds of the air around him, rather than the (silent) stars above. Music in creation is a gift of potential: the material order is ready and ripe to burst into sonorous beauty, seemingly out of nothing. Elsewhere, Luther, on hearing a group of singers, commented, 'So our God, in this life in the shithouse, has given such noble tasks, which will happen in eternity: is this here what is most perfect and interesting of all? This, though, amounts to prime matter [*materia prima*]'.⁴⁸ The term here may refer to music's existence being basic within material creation, as Loewe suggests.⁴⁹ Or, if we render *materia prima* something like 'a foremost subject-matter', it may serve to reinforce his words about music as a gift

⁴¹Ibid., p. 322.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 322–3.

⁴³Ibid., p. 323.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 323–4.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 324.

⁴⁶For an examination of these other sections of the *Preface*, and their anthropological, liturgical and ethical implications, see James Crockford, 'Get Happy: Luther and the Power of Musical Affect', *Logia* 26/1 (Epiphany 2017), pp. 47–52.

⁴⁷Luther, *Preface*, p. 322.

⁴⁸Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–1920), 4.191.

⁴⁹Loewe, 'Musica', pp. 10, 14, n. 3.

to accompany us into eternity. In his *Preface*, Luther uses the same phrase, but of the human voice, though in *Luther's Works* it is translated as 'the original components of the human voice'.⁵⁰ If, with Loewe, we allow that the term *materia prima* might be being used by Luther in the more technical Aristotelian sense, the assertion of music as 'prime matter' implies that it exists foundationally within the material world: sounded music is neither God's afterthought nor humanity's invention. This assertion is decidedly different from those cosmic theories of music which rendered the universe musical by virtue of its distillation in dematerialised proportionalities. Whilst in both Luther's and the Pythagoreo-Boethian schemes music is foundational in creation, Luther's intimations about music as 'prime matter', and the sonority of all created matter, weight his emphasis on the 'stuff' itself – that is, on physicality and its sensory phenomena, not on a transcendent reality lying beyond the material. In this regard Luther's approach shares with Aristotle, Aristoxenus and Tinctoris a chief interest in music as *sounded*. In Luther's view, the 'stuff' of creation is bursting with musical potential. As Anttila notes, 'Music is a completely outward, physical phenomenon ... Luther wanted to emphasize the importance of the physical world as the bearer of spiritual reality'.⁵¹ For Luther, musical power is invested in the cosmos' materiality.

Even more marvellous for Luther, as he goes on to say in his *Preface*, is the music of living things, 'especially birds'.⁵² Luther makes much of the example of birds, including several lines of his poem 'Dame Music'.⁵³ In his lectures on the Sermon on the Mount, he goes beyond the trusting faith of the birds which the text implies, and considers their musical praise:

You see, [God] is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers ... [We] have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air ... Whenever we hear a bird singing toward heaven ... we are as hard as stone, and we pay no attention even though we hear the great multitude preaching and singing every day.

... Whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher. He exhorts you with this Gospel, not with mere simple words but with a living deed and an example. He sings all night and practically screams his lungs out.⁵⁴

The birds stand as an example of both the continual disposition of praise and the actual resounding music that ought to be automatic for life in the gospel. They are creatures in whom Luther sees the free resonance of that joyful musicality that God has 'instilled and implanted' in all of creation.⁵⁵ Here, Luther provides another hierarchical subversion of the Pythagoreo-Boethian tradition: rather than the planets producing abundant music to which humanity has become deaf, it is the humble sparrow whose music is most notable in all creation, yet whose witness humans fail to hear and heed. Luther insists that what is most importantly musical about the universe – what can be taken as an example or, indeed, *the example* – is the little bird chirping outside the window,

⁵⁰ Luther, *Preface*, p. 322; cf. Luther, WA 50.370.

⁵¹ Anttila, *Luther's Theology*, p. 97.

⁵² Luther, *Preface*, p. 322.

⁵³ Marting Luther, *A Preface for All Good Hymnals*, in LW 53.320.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, in LW 21.197.

⁵⁵ Luther, *Preface*, p. 322.

whose song is unrelenting, happy and involves such gusto that his whole body is caught up in it.

In both these subversions, Luther suggests an incarnational theology of music: the ‘real’ music is found in the here and now, in the musical sounds we find all around us in animate and inanimate created things. Albert Blackwell posits a distinction between creational theologies of music: the Pythagoreo-Boethian traditions focus on ‘transcending contingency’, whereas an ‘incarnational’ tradition focuses on ‘manifesting transcendence’ in material sound.⁵⁶ The latter, Blackwell notes, has origins in Aristotle and Aristoxenus who, as we have seen, were concerned with musical sounds themselves, and insisted that any intellectual rumination on musical theory be anchored in and submissive to the ear’s experience of actual musical phenomena.⁵⁷ Luther’s concern with the physical immanence of God’s gift of music shares this concentration on the integrity of musical phenomena in the physical, material order, and on the aural experience of musical beauty.

Luther develops this position as he considers the gift of the human voice in creation, compared to which birdsong and whistling air ‘hardly [deserve] the name of music’. The voice is, for Luther, a simple instrument but a profoundly mesmerising one:

[The] air projected by a light movement of the tongue and an even lighter movement of the throat ... [produces] such an infinite variety and articulation of the voice and of words... [which] sound forth so powerfully ... it cannot only be heard by everyone over a wide area, but also be understood.⁵⁸

The singing voice – and still at this juncture in the *Preface*, Luther is only referring to the bare human voice, not yet to crafted musicianship – is, for Luther, not an imitation of or secondary to the foundational musicality built into the physical universe. The singing voice is itself, as we noted above, *materia prima*, yet is an even more wonderful gift against which the more basic sounds and chirps of creation pale almost, but not quite, into insignificance. If all creation has an inbuilt musical potential, the human voice is the instrument in which this potential becomes more actualised.

Furthermore, then, the climax of God’s provision of music, for Luther, is *musica artificialis*, in which the abilities of the voice are crafted through artisanship into a work of beauty. Toward the end of the *Preface*, Luther writes:

[How] rich and manifold our glorious Creator proves himself in distributing the gifts of music, how much men differ from each other in voice and manner of speaking so that one amazingly excels the other ...

But when [musical] learning is added to all this and artistic music [*musica artificialis*] which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music [*quae naturalem*], then at last it is possible to taste with wonder ... God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), pp. 49–50, 91–2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁸ Luther, *Preface*, p. 322.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 324.

Artisanship is a vocational gift given to humans that they might ‘improve the gifts of creation’.⁶⁰ God calls humanity into musical activity, and thus it is insufficient simply to say that nothing is without sounding number. Whereas Calvin and other reformers insisted on restricting music to simple forms, in order to keep its power in check, Luther is keen to see compositional skills employed to heighten music’s beauty and power. This is not mere entertainment, but a given vocation that humanity ought not to shun, since the correcting and developing of natural music reveals God’s ‘absolute and perfect wisdom’. As Anttila notes, only in this final section on *musica artificialis* does Luther refer to music as a work of God.⁶¹ Music not only resides as potential within the fabric of created ‘stuff’, and sings out from creatures great and small, but is also pre-eminently brought into fulfilment as humans apply their creative faculties in shaping what God has given into forms of music which display the glory of God, the providence of God and at the same time become offerings of praise and glory to God.

Luther anchors his account of music in a theology of creation which emphasises the musical potential of all created matter. His vision of created musicality is deeply committed to music’s physical immediacy and sees the profundity of music’s allure in that which passes into our ears. In this regard, Luther resonates with the approach of Aristotle, Aristoxenus and Tinctoris to the integrity of the musical encounter of the listener (thus locating in the listener the judgement, power and purpose of music), rather than the Pythagorean-Boethian approach to the musicality of the universe, in which the mind’s journey beyond sensuality and toward abstracted contemplation is prioritised (which would thus locate in abstracted ‘form’ the judgement, power and purpose of music). In Luther’s scheme, sound itself is to be trusted and is of chief interest; it is the *sound* of music that brings music’s pleasure, its purpose and its power. This incarnational emphasis is integrated into an account in which humanity is the climax of creation, and human activity an ongoing sharing in God’s creativity, bringing the gift of musical potential to fulfilment through the gift of musical vocation.

⁶⁰ Anttila, *Luther’s Theology*, p. 93; cf. Loewe, ‘Musica’, pp. 38, 43.

⁶¹ Anttila, *Luther’s Theology*, p. 93.