

# Introduction

“Three fingers do it”, they say of writers;  
but a man’s whole body and soul work at it<sup>1</sup>.

[Martin Luther]

It is usually said that an Introduction is the part which one finds first in a book, which the author writes last, and the reader never reads. Thus, I have made the unusual decision to start my book by writing the Introduction first, so that it will have a chance to be read, after all. So, in front of me, I have my laptop with a new file open, a pile of books, and two gigantic posters with enormous tables, whose rows represent the hundred years between 1500 and 1599, while lists of facts, people and musical works fill in the many cells.

The plan of my book is already written in detail; hundreds of pages of notes have been taken, digested and ordered; and I feel the usual mixture of thrill and worry that always accompanies the first stages of writing a book.

Why did I choose to explore the role of music in the sixteenth-century European reformations? This is not only a question sometimes I ask myself – especially when the pile of books on my desk sways menacingly or the file of carefully taken notes unexpectedly crashes – but also a question I need to answer for my readers.

I must confess that the first stimulus for this task came from a couple of dear friends of mine, who asked me to prepare a short introduction on a subject of my choice regarding music in the sixteenth century, as part of a cultural project they were creating in my home land of Piedmont. After some reflection, I concluded that what most fascinated me about that epoch was the religious turmoil that shook the foundations of European Christendom, society and thought.

I also realised that there might be the need for a book like the one you are reading now: despite the fact that there is a plethora of excellent studies on individual aspects of sixteenth-century sacred music, perhaps a relatively agile but reasonably comprehensive introduction to the topic – especially with a focus on the religious reformations – ought to be written.

Obviously, this book should be taken only as a guide to research or as an introduction to the music of the European Reformations. The immensity of the sixteenth-century “sacred” repertoire (and the very difficulty in defining what “sacred music” was for sixteenth-century Christians), the quantity of aspects in-

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<sup>1</sup> *LW* 46, p. 249; *WA* 30<sup>H</sup>, p. 574.

volved (religious, theological, sociological, historical, philosophical, cultural, political, economic...) and the quantity of studies focusing on one or more of these aspects should have discouraged me from undertaking such a task. However, hopefully, this work will encourage further research in a field that has still much to reveal to musicologists, musicians, historians and theologians alike.

Indeed, most of the literature already published focuses on music of a single Protestant confession (e. g. Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican...), or on the Council of Trent, or on Protestant music, or on the opposition of Reformation and so-called Counter-Reformation, or on individual composers of great renown.

My own viewpoint in this book will be (or will attempt to be) decidedly different from any of the above. First of all, I would like to avoid contrasting one Christian confession against another. This is, for me, more of a necessity than of a choice: in my own religious experience, music has always crossed the confessional boundaries, and I have been constantly enriched in my spiritual insight by the diversity of the confessional perspectives on music. Music allows us to practise an ecumenical approach in a spontaneous and natural fashion: most works of Christian sacred music transcend confessional belonging; and even in those whose confessional identity is more marked, music seems to blur the edges of separation, and to present diversity only as a different perspective, another nuance or a shade of colour which will likely enrich our understanding of faith.

I would like to avoid a confessional approach in this book for yet another reason: in the sixteenth century, even the theological approaches in the different Churches were much less clearly defined than they would later become. Even more so, both the liturgical and non-liturgical repertoire practised by Christians in worship, in church, at home, in schools and in the streets was permeable to external influences, and in many cases different denominations (or what would later be indicated by different denominations...) shared a common ground of praise, repentance and prayer.

One of the hardest tasks for us inhabitants of the post-modern era is to abandon our categorisations when approaching a time when they were, at best, only starting to be constructed: this applies to confessional identities, to aspects of music theory and practice, as well as to considerations of history, politics and relationships between men and women. Obviously, I cannot claim to have succeeded in this respect: however, it is crucial that both writer and reader are constantly aware of how our cultural bias may influence our interpretation of the past.

Moreover, as this book will show, from the musical viewpoint many reformers shared similar concerns and wishes, which were in turn the product of a cultural atmosphere encompassing the religious divides. We will constantly ob-

serve, for instance, how the humanist perspective conditioned the insight of several reformers on sacred music in a similar fashion.

Furthermore, the musical aspects of the Christian Reformations in the sixteenth century should also be conceived as part of a broader movement of renewal from the religious, philosophical, artistic and sociological points of view. From this perspective, although the Reformations and their socio-political consequences had a dramatic impact on European history, they were also part of a difficult evolution, of a painful crisis (and yet of a fascinating development) which characterised the “Old World” in the Early Modern era.

I am fully aware that the complexity of such an all-encompassing viewpoint can hardly be sustained in a consistent fashion through a book of this length; once more, therefore, I wish to invite my readers to share this effort with me, and to take into constant account this bird’s-eye view even when the necessities of an orderly exposition will force us to accept categories, periodisations and confessional segmentations which should better be avoided.

In the past, music historiography on the sixteenth century has been heavily conditioned by confessional belongings. Memory of the persecutions and of the violence practised by one confession against the other has not always led to humility and reconciliation, but rather to the not-too-hidden effort to demonstrate the (musical) superiority of one tradition over another. Within such a “competitive” approach, what distinguished a confession from another became a kind of “supporting evidence”, something that strengthened the alleged supremacy, or at least something that helped to define the historic and social identity of a confessional group.

Therefore, music historiography tended to point out the innovative elements (even when their novelty was only seeming), to focus on diversity and musical revolutions, without caring too much for the perspective on continuity and commonality, which I hold to be at least as important as the former.

While claiming that the confessionalized approach is ideologically conditioned, I am aware that my attempt at an ecumenical perspective is no less “ideological”. I would even argue that a neutral approach to matters pertaining to religious conflicts and divisions is possible only if one observes Christianity from the outside: however, in this case, I think that what would be gained in neutrality would be lost in involvement, passion and personal experience. If one’s approach must be conditioned by one’s belief, convictions and spirituality, I personally favour a perspective tending towards the unity for which Jesus himself prayed (cf. John 17:23) rather than one fomenting division.

I will therefore constantly underline the elements of continuity and similarity among the sacred music of the various Christian churches, believing – as I do

– that music, similar to prayer and worship, can bridge the religious divides and boundaries created by humankind.

Thus, as my research progressed, I decided to abandon (at least in most cases) the term of “Counter-Reformation” to indicate the experience of Roman Catholicism in the sixteenth-century. Whenever possible, I will speak of Catholic Reformation instead: first, since this avoids describing Early Modern Catholicism merely in terms of a reaction to Protestantism; secondly, since it allows us to take into account a process which started well before Luther and continued well after Trent; thirdly, since it de-emphasises the opposition between Catholics and Protestants which I am trying to eschew.

From the temporal viewpoint, however, I have decided to adopt a very clear limitation, and to consider almost exclusively the sixteenth century. This choice was not only determined by safety reasons (my desktop is already groaning under the pile of books as it is), but also by the need to keep the length of this book reasonable without sacrificing a certain quantity of details. Musically speaking, between the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries several aspects of compositional technique and musical forms or practices evolved, even though the idea of a “Baroque revolution” is now considered to be an artificial construct. Even a summary exposition of the stylistic, musical, theoretical, practical and aesthetic perspectives of the seventeenth century would have required a much longer book.

Within the framework of the hundred years I will discuss in the following pages, and of the hundred cells of the gigantic posters hung in front of me now, one cannot but observe the hardships, sufferings and lacerations striking entire populations, shaking the whole European territory, and affecting the lives of innumerable men and women, the elderly and children, clergy and laity, popes and kings. One wonders, sometimes, whether the sense most lacking among the rulers and religious leaders of the sixteenth century was common sense or the sense of hearing. As a practising musician, I think that music teaches us how really to listen to each other: listening is a process, it is a lifelong learning itinerary, in which the other (with his or her music, personality and words) is accepted and progressively understood, within the framework of a relationship which should be based first and foremost on mutual respect and loving kindness. This kind of listening is conspicuous by its absence in most of the leaders and rulers we will meet in the following pages: few seem to have stopped to consider the consequences of their actions, to try and understand the other, to discern whether the other might have been inspired by God, by sincere love for the Church, or by selfish interest. Very often, all-too-human reasons and considerations have provoked divisions which in turn determined endless sufferings, countless deaths, violence and war.

Although we will see that music has often been an instrument of propaganda, polemics and derision, satire and scorn, if not an outright invitation to violence, it has also accomplished another fundamental – and much more laudable – task: it has often been the only means of unity, traversing boundaries and building bridges made of melodies, words and people who crossed the religious divides and weaved an invisible communion.

If the sixteenth-century concept of art had seemingly lost much of the symbolic value it had possessed in the Middle Ages, it remained however a powerful *symbolon*, something that could “hold together” what the theological discourse was no longer able to do. Theology had moved from the kneeling stool – i. e. from the attempt of talking about God as a consequence of talking with Him – to the academic chair; and its symbolic dimension had got lost in the relocation.

Music continued to inhabit the places of worship – be it in church or at home – and thus maintained a liaison with transcendence which mysteriously “kept together” what humankind was dividing. Music is neither irrational nor asemantic or insignificant, but its symbolic power makes it inherently “polyphonic”, contrapuntal, multi-voiced.

Thus, as I wrote at the beginning, in my own experience as a Catholic musician, the music of Lutherans, Calvinists, Orthodox and Anglicans has always been a further gift of beauty, of spirituality and of amazement, helping me to get a little nearer to God, to understand better and more deeply his Word, and to experience his love and truth.

Therefore, I think, studying the music of a time when Western Christianity became separated might help the path of reconciliation that today’s Churches are treading with difficulty but also with determination. Even though theological differences cannot be ignored (if the service of truth concerns us all), they might become a little less crucial if our perspective takes into account other elements as well: music may be one of them, being like a thread of beauty unifying the worship of innumerable Christians through centuries and through divisions.

I hope, thus, that this work will be my own humble and simple attempt at contributing to reconciliation, and to the retrieval of a lost *harmony*. The five-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s Reformation, which will be commemorated soon, may offer us a chance for reflecting on these issues: in coincidence with the stylistic evolution of music which culminated in tonal harmony, the European *corpus christianum* was splitting itself apart, and losing its capacity for resounding as a polyphony, in which diversity is enriching and not disrupting.

A certain polyphony is found also in the layout of my work, since this book consists of three parts: the first, comprising three Chapters, will try and offer an overview of music theory and of the practice of sacred music at the beginning of the sixteenth century, with a very short historical contextualisation, and a survey

of the cultural atmosphere of the time and of the problems of contemporaneous sacred music.

In the second part, with its six Chapters, I will examine first the reformers' perspectives on music, on sacred music and on its functions in the lives of the faithful; then – bowing to the very confessionalisation I have tried to avoid! – I will discuss at some length the theory and practice of music in the different Christian churches; finally, I will explore the role of music at the Council of Trent, showing its impact on subsequent Catholic music.

Part Three will concern cross-confessional perspectives: I will consider first the role of music as an instrument of propaganda and confessionalisation; then how it overcame the confessional walls; and finally I will dedicate a Chapter to women's music within the context of the European Reformations. Hopefully, this “*dodecacorde*” of Chapters will provide a stimulating starting point for more in-depth scholarship.

Unavoidably, my choice of considering the cultural, spiritual and musical processes and evolutions in sixteenth-century music from a variety of viewpoints will provoke several overlapping discussions, and the inescapable repetition of concepts, facts and ideas. Although I understand that this may test the reader's forbearance, I thought that presenting the same facts from different angles might help to grasp the complexity and fascination of the times under consideration.

I must also apologise in advance for my decision to dedicate ample space to the confessions which would eventually develop into the numerically major components of Western Christianity. The obvious omission of Eastern Christianity is due by no means to a lack of consideration, but simply to the necessity of limiting a field of study which is already overwhelming. On a different plane, I had to renounce a thorough and detailed discussion of the concept of sacred music for reformers who, in the long run, did not gather around them as many followers, or did not exert as strong an influence, as the most famous ones, although at that time they may have had a comparable importance.

From the musicological viewpoint, I favoured the history of genres and forms over that of composers of genius. Although the history of music is adorned by immortal masterpieces, whose authorship often belongs to comparatively few individuals, it intertwines with the history of humankind (and of its spirituality) especially in the daily experience of musicianship, which is often made of humbler – but not less meaningful – artistic productions.

Once more, finally, I must stress that this book may have many goals, several of which are surely too ambitious for me, but it certainly does not aim at thoroughness or completeness. It has been conceived and is now offered to the reader simply as an introduction, hoping to serve as a stepping-stone for further studies and as a springboard for original research.



Being more than conscious of these limits, I can simply say that my work has been inspired by three words, three very short words written by Luther with no theological refinement, confessional polemics or pedagogical aim. It was simply the man Martin Luther who wrote: “I love music”; and the very same love still inspires countless believers and non-believers to seek transcendence in the world of sounds.