

# Concordia Theological Monthly

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Volume 24

Article 62

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10-1-1953

## Brief Studies

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### Recommended Citation

Buszin, Walter E. (1953) "Brief Studies," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 24, Article 62.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol24/iss1/62>

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## BRIEF STUDIES

## "THE CHORALE—THROUGH FOUR HUNDRED YEARS"

While it has not been the policy of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY to discuss extensively books which are not intended chiefly for the clergy of the Church, various reasons prompt us to make an exception in the case of Edwin Liemohn's interesting and provocative little volume, whose full title is *The Chorale—Through Four Hundred Years of Musical Development as a Congregational Hymn* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953; 170 pp., \$2.50). First, the subject covered by Dr. Liemohn is indeed timely, since much is being said, claimed, and written regarding the chorale by Christians of many denominations. Secondly, the columns of this journal have tended to neglect the important field of hymnology, despite the fact that hymn singing is an integral part of Lutheran worship.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Liemohn applies the name "chorale" not only to the hymns used by the Lutherans of Germany, but also to those used by the Lutherans of the Scandinavian countries. This is significant already because some speak of chorales as though they were products of Germany only. There is no reason whatsoever why the Lutheran hymns of Scandinavia may not be called chorales. The name *chorale* itself suggests nothing that is nationalistic or provincial; one is justified, too, in speaking of English and American chorales. This implies, of course, that there are many types of chorales and that some differ radically from others. It implies, too, that there are very good chorales and very poor chorales and that a hymn may hardly be said to be good only because it is a chorale. Finally, it is altogether possible and even likely that the spirit and character of a people and nation, or even of an era, can assert itself in a chorale. This applies to the text as well as to the tune.

When we are asked to define the word *chorale*, experience and common usage have taught us that ordinarily it is most simple and convenient to define the chorale as a Lutheran hymn.<sup>2</sup> True, the word has been used also when referring to Reformed hymnody. We have in our possession an old and precious volume of Reformed hymn tunes which was published in Holland. It is called *Choralboek*, which is the equivalent of the German word *Choralbuch*. The hymn tunes contained in this volume have very much in common with its contemporary Lutheran chorales. Not a few so-called Lutheran chorales like "*Christ ist erstanden*,"<sup>3</sup> "*Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist*,"<sup>4</sup> "*Gott der Vater wohn' uns bei*,"<sup>5</sup> and a host of others date from pre-Reformation times and were written not within the Lutheran Church, but within the



medieval Western Church. Already because they employed the German language, the church authorities forbade their use for ecclesiastical worship purposes. It was their adoption by Lutherans which to this day prompts also non-Lutherans to call them Lutheran chorales. In our own day sundry composers and publishers use the term *chorale preludes* even when said preludes are based on hymn tunes which were by no means composed by Lutherans. The name *chorale* has been applied also to absolute instrumental music for orchestra, piano, organ, and various other instruments by such composers as Cesar Franck, Theodore Dubois, Hendrik Andriessen, and many others. Nevertheless, when people ordinarily speak of chorales, they speak of Lutheran hymnody. Limiting the meaning and use of this word to Lutheran hymnody of Germany only is, we believe, unwise and too restrictive, because the Lutheran hymnody of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway shares many of the qualities of the Lutheran hymnody of Germany. The word *chorale* itself, as well as its derivation and history, suggests no nationalistic implications, though most chorales, as well as the majority of the better-known ones, have come out of Germany. The problem concerning their national origin is very much like that regarding their denominational origin, and one can both easily and effectively question and dispute the justification of referring to chorales as being either Lutheran or German hymns. However, while the practice of referring to them as Lutheran hymns is quite common and even universal, this may hardly be said of their being German. The Reformed denominations of our day do not ordinarily refer to their hymns as chorales, but the Scandinavians do, and we honestly believe they have as much right to do so as the Germans, nor have we ever heard of Germans trying to deny them this right.

When one meets with Lutheran groups and conferences in various parts of the world, one soon discovers how the chorale binds Lutherans together regardless of their nationalistic background. This fact is usually ignored by those who undervalue the chorale and its import for Lutheran worship. Taking into consideration much present-day opposition to the chorale, Dr. Liemohn would have contributed to the intrinsic value of his book had he called attention to this important point. That Lutherans use also other hymns testifies to their belief in Christian ecumenicity, and the very fact that non-Lutheran denominations of the Christian Church incorporate chorales into their hymnals likewise offers proof not only for the ecumenical character of Christendom, but likewise for this virtue of the Lutheran chorale.

We are gratified that Dr. Liemohn includes the final "e" in the spelling of the word *chorale*. We have followed this practice for some



time, as have also others,<sup>6</sup> to distinguish the word from the adjective "choral." We cannot agree with Dr. Liemohn, however, when he states on pages 48 and 55 that it was Lukas Osiander who introduced the practice of putting the melodies of chorales into the upper voice rather than into the tenor, as had been done in earlier days. Taking into consideration various scholarly works listed by the author in his excellent bibliography, we were doubly surprised that Dr. Liemohn refers to Osiander as an innovator along these lines.

Dr. Liemohn is at his best when discussing chorale developments and uses in the Scandinavian countries. We have often desired to know more about what has transpired among the Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes, but our inability to read and understand the Scandinavian languages has prevented us from learning various facts which Dr. Liemohn brings to light for us through the medium of the English language. Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*<sup>7</sup> has been of some help to us, as have also a few works like Dr. Ryden's *The Story of Our Hymns*,<sup>8</sup> and J. C. Aaberg's *Hymns and Hymn Writers of Denmark*.<sup>9</sup> Oddly enough, Mr. Aaberg's little volume of 170 pages is not listed in the author's bibliography. Understandable linguistic barriers likely kept the author of *The Chorale — Through Four Hundred Years* from discussing Lutheran hymnody and its development in Finland and in Iceland.

Although Dr. Liemohn discusses interesting facts regarding the history of the chorale in Germany, and though his deductions and conclusions are often informative as well as sound and logical, those who have studied the history of the chorale in Germany will likely be disappointed by the sections of the book which discuss chorale developments in Germany. These sections do not plumb the depths sufficiently to render satisfaction. The author treats his subject with much better effect when he discusses developments in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Here he supplies also a sufficient amount of detail to make his presentation more challenging and fascinating. In fact, what he states concerning developments in Scandinavia is by itself worth more than the price of the book and the effort one puts forth in order to read it.

The fact that the Lutheran chorale, like the religion and faith which it bespeaks, has always been obliged to struggle for its existence also in the Scandinavian countries becomes apparent particularly from Professor Liemohn's discussion of its history in Sweden. Basically this struggle was no different from that of our day in some sections of America. In Sweden any kind of change, even when for the good and rather self-evident, met with resentment and antipathy. "In some instances feelings ran so high that parents compelled their children to swear by the Bible that they would not sing them," reports Dr. Lie-



mohn.<sup>10</sup> Strife developed between organists and members of the congregation, and the clergy, too, was in the very midst of the fray throughout the 19th century. Various hymnals appeared, each seeking either to establish or to perpetuate certain standards and practices and each appealing to one element while antagonizing the other. Abominable customs which had developed in Germany, notably in the Age of Rationalism, found their way also into the Scandinavian countries. These included, for example, the custom of playing flourishes and interludes between phrases and lines of the hymn.

Dr. Liemohn very wisely included no fewer than 120 musical illustrations, which add substantially to the lucid clarity and interest of his book. Some of these illustrations demonstrate how silly and inane these flourishes and interludes usually were and how they militated against the spirit of edifying worship.

From Dr. Liemohn's book we see, too, that many members of the Lutheran church in Sweden resented the importation of melodies from lands other than Sweden. As one reads *The Chorale—Through Four Hundred Years*, one marvels at how very well the so-called German chorale has held its own through the course of four long centuries and how all attempts to get rid of it ultimately led to a more complete victory for the chorale. The great heritage of the Lutheran Church, of which the chorale is a very important part, cannot be eradicated very easily by opposition which is based on prejudice and lack of understanding. The heritage of the Church is, after all, a gift of God; the greater it is, the more intrinsic and lasting is its value. While men may reject this heritage, God in His own way will be of help to those who strive to sustain the heritage of the Church and perpetuate its use. This, too, becomes evident while one is reading Dr. Liemohn's book.

The battles waged against the chorale are not always directed against its tunes and texts themselves. Instead they are often waged against certain distinctive features of these texts and tunes. The chorales of the 16th and 17th centuries were stalwart and rugged; at times they even seemed crude. In the 17th century the writers of chorale texts and tunes began to indulge in the use of niceties and smoother flow. They became less masculine and more effeminate. In addition, men like Martin Opitz (1597—1639) tried to improve and beautify the early chorales. This was like converting a forest primeval into a park; or better, it was like trying to improve the appearance of the rugged Rocky Mountains by rounding off their jagged edges and their promontories and then polishing their rough surface with a thin veneer of varnish. Dr. Liemohn calls attention to Martin Opitz' talents and to his attempts at refinement, but we regret that he does not make special



mention of the follies of Opitz. Martin Opitz and others of his lineage and school, including men like Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700 to 1766) and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724—1803), lacked the manly spirit of rugged 16th-century Lutheranism and hence manifested this lack also in their literary endeavors. J. S. Bach and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe were aware of this defect and deprecated its underlying lack of understanding and spirit. Again we are reminded of problems which confront the Lutheran Church today, for the lack of appreciation for the rugged and edgy type of chorale and of its concomitant stalwart and robust type of theology goes hand in hand with preference for a soft and pliant theology and its attendant sweet and smooth-flowing hymns. We are happy to note that Dr. Liemohn comes to the defense of a healthy and masculine type of Christian hymnody.

Dr. Liemohn likewise comes to the defense of the rhythmical chorale tune and points to the dangers of isometric tunes. In this latter type the notes of the melody are about all of equal value. The Germans refer to them also as *ausgeglichenen Choräle* (evened-out chorales). One of the gravest dangers involved in using isometric tunes is that they tend to drag and easily become rather dull. Our objection to this type of hymn tunes is not directed so much against those which were thus written originally,<sup>11</sup> but against those which have been converted from rhythmic into isometric hymns. A good example to point to is the long-meter melody known as Old Hundredth, which is sung with the well-known Common Doxology.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Liemohn calls attention to this melody, to its original rhythmical version (as we sing it), and to the oft-heard practice of singing it isometrically. Of course, when he says on p. 84: "We have come to know it only as a melody of equal note values," he overlooks the fact that our church body has never sung it isometrically, but always according to its original rhythmical version. The author of the volume we are discussing does call attention to the fact that the most recent Presbyterian hymnal of America restores this widely used melody to its original version.<sup>13</sup> When one reads Dr. Liemohn's book and sees from his many illustrations what endless confusion has been wrought in Lutheran churches of Europe by departing from the original rhythmical version of chorales and by seeking to simplify and "improve," we of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod should be thankful that we have been spared this confusion and that the attempts made within our ranks to "even out" melodies have been sporadic and relatively rare. In Germany as well as in the Scandinavian countries the isometric chorale version has caused a tremendous amount of disorder and embarrassment. Likely one important reason why many Americans consider the chorale too staid and dull is because the vast



majority of American hymnals have been using chorale melodies in their isometric form and with Bach harmonizations besides. The same applies to England, though England has been more receptive to the chorale and has shown a deeper appreciation for it, particularly in recent years. Bach, of course, wrote his beautiful chorale harmonizations for choirs and not for congregations. In addition, his harmonizations almost invariably presupposed an orchestral (not organ) accompaniment. Bach lived in an era of decline for the chorale; he had no choice and was in most cases forced to use isometric versions of chorales, since these were fostered and stressed in the era of Pietism. What is more, Bach's harmonizations are quite "soft" because he was not at his best in the old medieval modes and expressed himself best in terms of major and minor tonalities.

It would have been well, we believe, had Dr. Liemohn pointed to the fact that our church body, together with a very few others, has always used the rhythmical version of the chorale and has profited from such use. It would have been well, too, to call attention to the fact that the new hymnal which is to be published jointly by the United Lutheran Church of America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church is to include rhythmical chorales, though likely not to the total exclusion of the isometric. Finally, it would have been well, too, to state that after decades of strife and battle the Lutheran churches of Germany will concentrate on the use of one hymnal, and in this hymnal the chorales are to be found in their true, original form; chorales written originally as rhythmical hymns do not appear in this hymnal in isometric settings.<sup>14</sup> The *Choralbücher* and hymnals of Germany likewise do not subject hymns written originally without measure bars to "the tyranny of the measure bar" and thus encourage the practice of singing these chorales not rigidly and pedantically, but with their pristine and original elasticity and freedom. A number of hymns, including "*Ein' feste Burg*"<sup>15</sup> and "*Herzlich tut mich verlangen*,"<sup>16</sup> are published thus in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, and we regret that many more were not published thus. Dr. Liemohn repeatedly and rightly urges that a freer rhythm be employed in our hymn singing and discusses this difficult subject with discretion and understanding.

Nevertheless we find it difficult to agree with him when he says: "Thus to find the 'correct version' of an old melody is impossible because there is none" (p. 149). The statement is too sweeping. We cannot agree with Dr. Liemohn either when, in this connection, he discusses "*Ein' feste Burg*." We agree that "the modern concept of musical meters and measures was not achieved until the end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries" (p. 149), but we fear at



the same time that Dr. Liemohn banks too much on the claim that Luther's melody for "*Ein' feste Burg*" was "a product of the plainsong technique of his day" (*ibid.*). If it is true, as is generally assumed, that the melody of "*Ein' feste Burg*" manifests Gregorian influence, it still remains doubtful that Luther would have had scruples of conscience about taking liberties with the Gregorian idiom. Even composers who otherwise remained loyal to the medieval tradition indulged in such liberties, particularly when they tampered with Gregorian *cantus firmi*. That Luther would have regarded it as bad taste to depart from Gregorian practice is indeed questionable. His "*Ein' feste Burg*" does evince Gregorian influence, but it likewise bespeaks the heart, soul, spirit, and character of Martin Luther, whose entire nature was unlike the smooth-flowing and subtle Gregorian plainchant, which he nevertheless so dearly loved and also used. What is more, "*Ein' feste Burg*" is deprived of its interesting symbolism when it is isometrified, and it is hardly necessary to deny the existence of such symbolism simply because it does not apply and help to interpret the corresponding text of other stanzas. The serpentine motif used by Luther in connection with the words "*Der alt', böse Feind*" (st. 1) may lose its symbolic value when applied to the words "*Fragst du, wer der ist?*" (st. 2) and to "*Nehmen sie den Leib*" (st. 4), but it still fits in very well, though its symbolic value is lost thereby. Since Luther himself did not state that he here attempted to use a motif of a serpentine nature in order to describe the old evil foe, we cannot say with certainty, of course, that the motif was given its serpentine character either consciously or subconsciously. However, the very character of the music at this point in particular represents a radical departure from Gregorian practice, and we believe one cannot put great stress on traditional Gregorian practice in connection with this hymn. For such proof we have better examples to point to in the music written by Martin Luther himself, e. g., his setting of the Words of Institution in his *Deutsche Messe* of 1526. Other hymns of Luther's day prove to us that deviations from Gregorian practice were made in chorale tunes based on Gregorian chant. It is known definitely that the troped hymn "*Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit*"<sup>17</sup> is based on the chant *Kyrie, fons bonitatis*. This hymn, too, like a great many others, transgresses precepts of Gregorian practice.

Dr. Liemohn points to "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" and states that its unbarred version can well be sung by a choir, but hardly by "an unwieldy group, such as a congregation" (p. 150). History and experience prove that this statement is hardly true. Our own congregations have no difficulty along these lines, as may be seen when they



sing the tune of this great hymn. Those who have such difficulty are thus handicapped because they have been enslaved by "the tyranny of the measure bar." In our own parishes we have no trouble singing "*Ein' feste Burg*" as we have it in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, which is the rhythmical version in its original form. People who are not acquainted with it, particularly those who are accustomed to the isometric version, do have trouble singing it, but that is hardly the fault of the hymn and its original version; it is the fault of the negligence and training to which people have been exposed. We agree that "A congregational hymn tune must, first of all, be simple and follow a *natural* rhythmic and melodic pattern" (p. 150), but much depends upon what is regarded as natural and simple. Even what is intrinsically simple and natural may be complex and unnatural for the ill-trained. We wonder why Dr. Liemohn did not follow in the footsteps of many others who refer to the case of "*Nun komm', der Heiden Heiland*," which poses some very real problems along these lines, problems which we find it very difficult and well-nigh impossible to explain satisfactorily.

The author closes his book with the sentence: "The heritage of Lutheran hymnody from its various sources presents today one of the greatest single stores of congregational music and the greatest challenge to the Lutheran Church in America to refine and preserve this treasure for posterity" (p. 155). The remark is very pertinent, but we cannot help wondering what Dr. Liemohn means with the word "refine." We hope it is not what Stokowsky did to Bach or what Martin Opitz and the Pietists did to the chorale. We are reminded of Goethe's remark to C. Fr. Zelter, when the latter informed Goethe that he was keeping great choral works by J. S. Bach in his cabinet and would not make them available for performance until he had corrected and improved them. Goethe retorted: "How can one improve on a great work of art?"

Despite the fact that the Solesmes monks have done a marvelous job of analyzing, synthesizing, and making available for posterity Gregorian chant in its true, authentic form, and despite the fact that the Solesmes monks have likewise uncovered for their own and for future generations the meaning of Gregorian notation, much still remains a mystery to us, and we are learning more and more from year to year that plainchant was not as "even" as is generally supposed. We have learned, too, that the medieval Church did not always sing plainchant in a very subdued and undramatic manner. However, it remained for others not identified with the Solesmes school to discover this last point for us. At any rate, it is interesting indeed to note that one of the most vigorous and dramatic hymns of the Christian Church, "*Ein' feste Burg*



*ist unser Gott,*" is likely a descendant of Gregorian plainchant and yet at the same time a hymn whose character differs widely and radically from its likely antecedent.

We urge our readers to purchase and read Dr. Liemohn's book *The Chorale—Through Four Hundred Years*. While we have called attention to various instances where we must part company with the author, we are happy to state that our points of agreement far outweigh those of disagreement. We thus heartily subscribe to a remark he makes on the last page of his book, where he says: "One is not convinced that our present hymnals are the product of both competent musicians and competent hymnists" (p.155). We look forward to reading further publications written by Dr. Edwin Liemohn, chairman of the music department at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa.

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