

# Music of the Reformation Era

October 25, 2020  
Chorales of Lutheranism

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a German professor of theology, priest, author composer, and Augustinian monk. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1507 and grew to reject many teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly the practice of indulgences<sup>1</sup>. In 1517, he wrote his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, more commonly known as his *Ninety-five Theses*. According to legend, he nailed a copy to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31<sup>st</sup>.



Luther was a strong advocate of music in the church, especially singing. Aside from composing many hymns, some of which can be found in modern hymnals, he sang (tenor) and played the lute and the flute. He was well acquainted with the music styles of his day and used his talents to reform liturgical and religious music of the emerging Lutheran church.

Arguably his most famous composition, *Ein feste burg* is a chorale<sup>2</sup> paraphrasing Psalm 46. Luther believed that there must be a balance between a simple, accessible musical style and the use of the vernacular in the text. In his own words, “both text and music, accentuation, melody and gait, must come from the true mother tongue and voice.”

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1. Indulgences – according to the Roman Catholic Church, a way of reducing the amount of punishment one must endure for their sins.

2. Chorale – a musical composition consisting of or resembling a harmonized version of a simple, stately hymn tune.

## ORIGINAL GERMAN TEXT

Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,  
Ein gute Wehr und Waffen.  
Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not,  
Die uns jetzt hat betroffen.  
Der alt böse Feind,  
Mit Ernst er's jetzt meint.  
Groß Macht und viel List  
Sein grausam Rüstung ist.  
Auf Erd ist nicht seinsgleichen.

Mit unsrer Macht ist nichts getan,  
Wir sind gar bald verloren.  
Es streit' für uns der rechte Mann,  
Den Gott hat selbst erkoren.  
Fragst du, wer der ist?  
Er heißt Jesus Christ,  
Der Herr Zebaoth,  
Und ist kein ander Gott.  
Das Feld muß er behalten.

Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär  
Und wollt uns gar verschlingen,  
So fürchten wir uns nicht so sehr,  
Es soll uns doch gelingen.  
Der Fürst dieser Welt,  
Wie saur er sich stellt,  
Tut er uns doch nicht.  
Das macht, er ist gericht't.  
Ein Wörtlein kann ihn fällen.

Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn  
Und kein' Dank dazu haben.  
Er ist bei uns wohl auf dem Plan  
Mit seinem Geist und Gaben.  
Nehmen sie den Leib,  
Gut, Ehr, Kind und Weib,  
Laß fahren dahin.  
Sie haben's kein Gewinn.  
Das Reich muß uns doch bleiben.

## ENGLISH TRANSLATION

A mighty fortress is our God,  
a trusty shield and weapon;  
He helps us free from every need  
that hath us now overtaken.  
The ancient evil foe  
now means us deadly woe;  
deep guile and his great might  
Are his dread arms in fight;  
on Earth is not his equal.

With might of ours can naught be done,  
soon were our loss effected;  
But for us fights the Valiant One,  
whom God Himself elected.  
Ask ye now, who is this?  
Lord Jesus Christ it is.  
He is of Sabbath Lord;  
There is none other God;  
He holds the field forever.

Though devils all the world should fill,  
all eager to devour us.  
We tremble not, we fear no ill,  
they shall not overpower us.  
If his world's prince should still  
scowl fiercely as he will,  
For he can harm us none,  
he's judged; the deed is done;  
One little word can fell him.

The Word they still shall let remain  
nor any thanks have for it;  
He's by our side upon the plain  
with His good gifts and Spirit.  
And though take they our life,  
Our goods, fame, child and wife,  
Let these things all be gone,  
they yet have nothing won;  
The Kingdom ours remaineth.