

# THE LUTHERAN CHORALE, AN OVERVIEW OF OTHER TYPES OF CHORALES

Ph.D. student ANAMARIA LUPU  
National University of Music Bucharest

Anamaria LUPU is currently a first-year student in a Scientific Doctoral Programme at the National University of Music Bucharest and at the same time a permanent teacher at the “Dinu Lipatti” National College of Arts. With a rich and almost decade-long activity in the media as a TV and radio programme editor and producer at *Speranța TV* and *Radio Vocea Speranței*, the author has had the opportunity to host her own music programmes entitled “Amadeus”, attended by many prestigious guests from the Romanian musical world.



## ABSTRACT

Sixteenth-century Protestantism marked the entire history of culture and civilization and thus, implicitly, the history of music at least on a European level. The paper *The Lutheran Chorale, An Overview of Other Types of Chorales*, attempts to briefly capture the context of the emergence of the chorale during the Reformation, the most representative musical forms that developed based on the chorale, as well as a few hallmarks of the Protestant chorale. The chorale reflects a variety of musical styles, ranging from the medieval *cantus firmus* and the songs of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century meistersingers, to the continuo lied of the Baroque period. In a wider sense, the chorale can refer to two types of choral hymns: (1) *cantus choralis* – the Roman Catholic liturgical chant; (2) the Lutheran hymns of the German-Evangelical tradition. For the first 200 years after the Reformation, the chorale provided raw material for a wide variety of musical compositions, among which the *chorale prelude*, *chorale motet*, *chorale cantata*, *chorale fugue*, *chorale partita*, *chorale fantasia*, *chorale mass*, *chorale variations*, *figured chorale*, or *chorale concerto*. The promotion of the chorale (initially called *Kirchenlied*, or *geistliches Lied*, or *geistliches Gesang*) by Luther and his colleagues was a step of major importance in the history of church music.

**Keywords:** Lutheran chorale, Protestant chorale, Lutheran reformation, Lutheran hymn, Martin Luther, Protestantism.

500 years after the Reformation, its echoes are still resounding from the perspective of an innovative mentality, both ideologically and artistically. Prominent figures such as John Wycliffe (1320-1384) – with his followers known as Lollards; Jan Huss (1369-1415) – with the Hussite movement; the Waldensian resistance movement (1173) in the valleys of Piedmont in northern Italy – with its

founder Peter Waldo and later assimilated by the Calvinist Protestant movement, all favoured the appearance of Martin Luther along this trajectory of growth and evolution of Christianity towards a new vision, more personal, more assumed and more liberated from formalism and dogmatism.

The music could only have one common path of metamorphosis on both the religious and secular level, both characterized by interwoven influences, at least on the European level. In this geographical space, secular music has from the beginning been closely related to religious music, with composers writing almost invariably both secular and religious works.

Up to the *Lutheran chorale* – this quintessence of the Protestant manifesto expressed through music –, the art of sound travelled along the ramified path of the Byzantine chant and of the Gregorian *cantus planus*, later used in *Ars Antiqua* and raised to its highest grandeur, then took a bold step into the world of *Ars Nova*, with the wide influences of the art of the troubadours, trouvères, meistersingers and minnesingers, to finally break free of the shackles during the Renaissance, with the invention of new instruments and the improvement of those already long in use and, not least, with the introduction of the Gutenberg printing press, which would facilitate the propagation of the art of sound in written, printed form. This evolution also includes the shift from modal to tonal, from long values in the measurement of durations, to highly improved beat divisions, which used increasingly shorter beat values.

The term *chorale* designates the congregational hymn used in the liturgical service of the German Protestant Church<sup>1</sup>. It contains stylistic and formal elements suitable for its parishioner-oriented purpose: a simple language, metric verse with rhyme, strophic form of the music and text and an easy-to-sing melody.

According to Gérard Denizeau<sup>2</sup>, the Protestant chorale, whose history dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, laid the foundations of the Lutheran musical tradition, although the full blooming of the genre took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when composers such as Johann Adam Reinken (1623-1722), Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707), Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706), Martin Luther (1483-1546), Johann Crüger (1598-1662), Alexander Agricola (1445-1506) and others used all their polyphonic expertise to integrate it into the religious worship. The inclusion of the Protestant chorale into scholarly music reached its culmination in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The process was continued by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847), César Franck (1822-1890) and Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), who introduced Lutheran songs in oratorios, symphonies or operas.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Marshall; Robin Leaver, "Chorale",

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/05652>, accessed: December 5, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Denizeau, *apud* Claudia Pop, *Martin Luther – eroul preot. Coralul protestant*, in "Sesiuni de comunicări științifice", Editura Universității „Transilvania”, Brașov, 2007, p. 405.

During the first 200 years after the Reformation, the chorale provided raw material for a wide variety of musical compositions including the *chorale prelude*, *chorale motet*, *chorale cantata*, *chorale fugue*, *chorale partita*, *chorale fantasia*, *chorale mass*, *chorale variations*, *figured chorale*, or *chorale concerto*, which will be detailed further on in this paper.

In the first decades of the Reformation, Martin Luther and his contemporaries were referring to the individual structures of the newly reformed congregational genre of the vernacular hymns using terms such as '*geistliche Lieder*' (spiritual songs), '*Psalmen*' (psalms), or '*christliche Lieder*' (Christian songs). Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the term *chorale*, which traditionally referred to the Latin melody of the Gregorian *cantus firmus*, began to apply to the church hymns sung in the national language. This probably happened, on the one hand, because congregational singing in Luther's time was led by the monophonic *chorus choralis* (different from the polyphonic *chorus musicus*, or *figuralis*) and, on the other, because in the Protestant religious service the congregation and the singing of hymns received the liturgical importance and symbolism which in the Roman Catholic religious service (*chorus choralis*) was occupied by the choir and the Latin songs (*Gregorianischer Choral*)<sup>1</sup>.

In modern Germany, the term *chorale* refers to harmony or simply to melodic organization, whereas *Kirchenlied* (hymn) commonly encompasses the text and tune together. In today's common terminology, the term applies both to the hymn in its entirety (tune and text), and to the harmonic structure of a melody. A common practice for the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries used the term to refer to the simple harmonization of a German hymn, such as *Bach's chorales*, or the *four-part chorale*.

In *New Grove Dictionary* we find a typology of the different forms of chorales that stemmed from the same root, made by Robert L. Marshall and other authors, which will be presented below:

- The *chorale monody*<sup>2</sup> – a sacred composition based on the text of a German chorale and written in the expressive declamatory style of the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian concertato madrigal from the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; it differs from the *chorale concerto* (Ger. *Choralkonzert*) of the same period in that it makes no obvious use of the traditional chorale melody. Johann Hermann Schein (1586-1630) and Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) included such chorales in their collections of Religious Concertos (Ger. *geistliche Konzerte*).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Marshall; Robin Leaver, "Chorale", *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> Robert Marshall, "Chorale monody", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05654>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

- The *chorale concerto* (Ger. *Choralkonzert*)<sup>1</sup> – as a subcategory of the *sacred concerto* (Ger. *geistliches Konzert*), developed during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, based on a German chorale and scored for one or more voices and basso continuo; occasionally it also included obbligato instrumental parts. Depending on the size of the ensembles used, the chorale concerto was divided into two categories: the large-scale chorale concerto, cultivated between 1600 and 1620, which used two or more vocal choirs or instrumental ensembles and was employed by Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612), and more intimate settings, for one or two voices and basso continuo, which emulated the small *concerti ecclesiastici* of Lodovico Grossi da Viadana (1560-1627). Other composers of the chorale concerto were Michael Praetorius (1571-1621), Johann Schein and Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654).
- The *chorale fugue* (Ger. *Choralfuge*)<sup>2</sup> – an organ composition in which the first line and occasionally the first two lines of a chorale are treated as subjects of a fugue. Chorale fugues were written by composers such as Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703) and Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706) and their function, like that of the *chorale prelude*, was to serve as an introduction to the congregational singing of the chorale. It is synonymous with the *chorale ricercar*.
- The *chorale ricercar*<sup>3</sup> – a genre for organ similar to the *chorale motet*, particularly popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in which each voice of a German chorale was elaborated imitatively as a fugue, to which an ornamental figuration could be added in the keyboard instruments. It is also known as *chorale canzona*, *chorale motet* and *chorale fantasia*. Among the composers who wrote in this genre are Michael Praetorius and Samuel Scheidt.
- The *organ chorale*<sup>4</sup> – an organ composition based on a traditional melody of a German Protestant chorale.
- The *chorale partita*<sup>5</sup> – beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the terms *chorale variations* and *chorale partita* have been used interchangeably, representing a set of variations starting from a chorale. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Pachelbel and other German musicians approached the genre in a different way from that of their predecessors, using structural principles associated until then with variations based on secular dances and songs; each variation would retain the initial

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Marshall, "Chorale concerto [chorale concertato] (Ger. *Choralkonzert*)", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05658>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Marshall, *Chorale fugue* [chorale fughetta] (Ger. *Choralfuge*)", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05656>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marshall, "Chorale ricercare", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05662>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Marshall, "Organ chorale", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.20432>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Marshall, "Chorale partita", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05660>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

proportions and rhythmic values, remaining in the harmonic spectrum from beginning to end.

- The *chorale prelude* (Ger. *Choralvorspiel*)<sup>1</sup> – as mentioned earlier, it is an introductory section of small dimensions. As a standalone genre it developed only beginning with the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, notably in the works of Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707) and other North German composers. The chorale melody, most often expressively ornamented, is usually accompanied by a polyphonic accompaniment with no interlude separating the individual phrases of the chorales. Its culmination was reached through the 46 chorale preludes written by Johann Sebastian Bach, included in the *Orgelbüchlein* collection between 1708 and 1717, while he served as organist at the Weimar ducal court. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the chorale prelude continued to be cultivated by other composers such as Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), Max Reger (1873-1916), Hugo Distler (1908-1942) and Ernst Pepping (1901-1981).

- The *chorale cantata* (Ger. *Choralkantate*)<sup>2</sup> – a composition written for a vocal-instrumental ensemble, divided into distinct and relatively independent sections, of which two or more are based on the text, but also on the melody of a German Protestant chorale. The chorale cantata developed out of the *chorale concerto*, a genre much used by Scheidt and other composers between 1650 and 1750, in northern and central Germany. Thus, at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century we find two types of this genre: the “pure” chorale cantata, in which all the movements are based on the strophes of a single chorale, and the “mixed” chorale cantata, in which the first and last, and perhaps a central movement too, are based on a Protestant chorale, while the remaining movements are settings of other texts. A third type of chorale cantata appeared in 1720, when Bach introduced the *chorale paraphrase cantata*, in which the interior movements, set as arias and recitatives, are based on poetic paraphrases of the internal strophes of a chorale, while the outer movements retain the original text and melody of the first and last strophes of the chorale.

- The *chorale fantasia* (Ger. *Choralfantasie*)<sup>3</sup> – in its broadest meaning, this type of chorale includes any large organ composition based on a Protestant chorale. Heinrich Scheidemann (1595-1663), Franz Tunder (1614-1667) and Dietrich Buxtehude dedicated numerous works to this genre, although the term itself was rarely used by the composers. Bach, for example, during his Weimar period, applied the term *fantasia* to a wide variety of different organ chorale types, but in

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Marshall, “Chorale prelude (Ger. *Choralvorspiel*)”, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05661>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Marshall, “Chorale cantata (Ger. *Choralkantate*)”, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05653>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marshall, “Chorale fantasia (Ger. *Choralfantasie*)”, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05655>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

Leipzig he limited the term to large compositions in which the chorale melody was presented as a *cantus firmus* in the bass. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the chorale fantasia was revived by Max Reger as a rhapsodic organ composition of monumental dimensions, based on a chorale melody.

- The *chorale mass*<sup>1</sup> – a cyclical composition based in whole or part on Lutheran chorales derived from the Ordinarium section of the Mass. In 1526, Luther introduced an alternative to the Catholic mass through his *German Mass*, a genre also cultivated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably by Ernst Pepping and Hugo Distler.

- The *chorale variations*<sup>2</sup> – generally composed for organ, this genre presents a series of compositions or compositional sections in which the same chorale melody is presented several times in succession, each time in a different polyphonic arrangement. Chorale variations were cultivated in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century by composers such as Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621), Samuel Scheidt and Heinrich Scheidemann (1595-1663). Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the term has been used interchangeably with another type of chorale, the chorale partita, while the distinctions between the two genres have gradually disappeared.

- The *figured chorale*<sup>3</sup> – an organ chorale, or *chorale prelude*, in which a distinct figure or motif is exploited in one or another contrapuntal part throughout the piece, usually below the *cantus firmus*, but not obviously derived from it. The term was used for a type of organ chorale found, for example, in Johann Sebastian Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* (1713–15), although for centuries composers had based organ accompaniments on continuous motifs extracted from chorale melodies. In this respect, the *Orgelbüchlein* consists of organ pieces which, taken separately, resemble one of the variations in a *chorale partita*.

- The *chorale motet* (Ger. *Choralmotette*)<sup>4</sup> – a polyphonic vocal work in two or more parts, based on a German chorale. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century this genre was the most prolific form of chorale composition; although it could be performed *a cappella*, instruments were frequently used either to reinforce or to replace one or more vocal parts. After its eclipse by the chorale concerto in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *a cappella* chorale motet experienced a significant revival in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Marshall; Robin Leaver, "Chorale mass", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05657>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Marshall, "Chorale variations", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05665>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Williams; Robin Leaver, "Figured chorale", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09624>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Marshall, "Chorale motet (Ger. *Choralmotette*)", <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.05659>, accessed: October 9, 2018.

The chorale therefore reflects a variety of musical styles, starting from the medieval *cantus firmus* and the songs of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century meistersingers to the lied of the Baroque period, accompanied by the continuo. In a wider sense, the chorale can refer to two types of choral hymns: (1) *cantus choralis* – the Roman Catholic liturgical chant; (2) the Lutheran hymns of the German-Evangelical tradition. The phrase structure of the chorales is usually the bar form (AAB). In line with the poetic structure of the text, only some of them use the usual meter with long and short durations, while most of them use a wide variety of metrical subdivisions. Typically, there are two types of rhythmic movements in the chorales. The former one consists of lively rhythms, with regular patterns built mainly from quarter-notes and a few longer durations, especially at the end of the phrase, and is called *isorhythmic chorale*. It is typical of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is most often associated with the harmonization of chorales in the style of Johann Sebastian Bach. The latter type of chorale is known as *rhythmic chorale*, consisting mostly of irregular and syncopated rhythmic formulas typical of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation period, where there was no accompaniment. Bach's genius consisted not so much in the composition of new hymns, as in the harmonization of the already existing church chants. He made full use of the chorale in his cantatas and passions, harmonizing most of the four-part melodies, to be sung by professional choirs. Some of his harmonizations can be found in today's hymn books, either in the original version or simplified, for congregational use.

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