

A Preface for All Good Hymnals

1538

Translated by Paul Nettl

Revised by Ulrich S. Leupold

Johann Walter (1496-1570), Luther's musical friend and adviser, was, like most musicians of his time, not only a composer but also a poet. He contributed a number of hymns to the early Lutheran hymnals. In 1538 he published a rimed encomium of music, *Lob und Preis der loblichen Kunst Musical (Glory and Praise of the Laudable Art of Music)*, a didactic poem of 335 verses in which he developed a whole theology of music along the lines of Luther's scattered remarks on music. The Reformer provided the rimed introduction, entitled *A Preface for All Good Hymnals*.

Artists of the sixteenth century liked to personify the arts, sciences, virtues, etc. It was a common device of painters, sculptors, and poets to represent music as a lady. Luther followed this trend when he put his preface on the lips of "Dame Music" and had her extol her own gifts.

Actually, *A Preface for All Good Hymnals* was not printed in any hymnal in Luther's lifetime, except in Joseph Klug's hymnal of 1543, where it was appended at the end. The German text, *Vorrhede auff alle gute Gesangbücher*, is given in WA 35, 483-484. The translation, with minor revisions, is that by Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, pp. 65-66.

A Preface for All Good Hymnals

Dame Music [speaks:]

Of all the joys upon **this earth**
None has for men a greater worth
Than what I give with my ringing
And with voices sweetly singing.
There cannot be an evil mood
Where there are singing fellows good,

¹ Published in Wittenberg: Georg Rhau, 1538.

There is no envy, hate, nor ire,
 Gone are through me all sorrows dire;
 Greed, care, and lonely heaviness
 No more do they the heart oppress.
 Each man can in his mirth be free
 Since such a joy no sin can be.
 But God in me more pleasure finds
 Than in all joys of earthly minds.
 Through my bright power the devil shirks
 His sinful, murderous, evil works.
 Of this King David's deeds do tell
 Who pacified King Saul so well
 By sweetly playing on the lyre
 And thus escaped his murderous ire.¹
 For truth divine and God's own rede
 The heart of humble faith shall lead;
 Such did Elisha once propound
 When harping he the Spirit found?
 The best time of the year is mine³
 When all the birds are singing fine.
 Heaven and earth their voices fill
 With right good song and tuneful trill.
 And, queen of all, the nightingale
 Men's hearts will memly regale
 With music so charmingly gay;
 For which be thanks to her for aye.
 But thanks be first to God, our Lord,
 Who created her by his Word
 To be his own beloved songstress
 And of *musica* a mistress.
 For our dear Lord she sings her song
 In praise of him the whole day long;
 To him **I** give my melody
 And thanks in all eternity.

¹ Cf. I Sam. 16:23.

² Cf. II Kings 3:15.

³ It is not quite clear whether the original reads "*mein*" or "*Muien*," i.e., "mine" or "May." The thought in either case is that spring with the music of the birds is more than others the season of music.