

## Michael Weisse transmitting Medieval Songs to Bach

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Michael Weisse, born c. 1488 in Neisse, Lower Silesia, became in 1522 the pastor of the German-speaking community of the 'Bohemian Brethren' or 'German Congregation of God and Christian Brotherhood' as they called themselves, in the towns of Landskron (Lanškroun), Bohemia, and Fulnek, Moravia. At the request of the Brethren, Weisse compiled a German hymn book – with 157 songs the largest so far in the history of the reformation – and had it printed in 1531 in Jungbunzlau under the title *Ein New Geseng buchlen*. Twentieth-century facsimile editions and hymnological research, especially by Konrad Ameln, have made the circumstances and contents of this work widely familiar.<sup>1</sup> But in addition to this scholarly recovery there is another, longer history: that of the practical experience with the book of many musicians and congregations since the sixteenth century. The copy of an early reprint owned by J.S. Bach is but one testimony of that history:

EJn hubsch new Gesang/buch darinnen begrieffen die Kirchen or=/dnug  
und geseng die zur Lantskron unnd/Fulneck jnn Behem, von der  
Christlychen Bru=/derschafft den Picarden die bißhero für unchris=/ten,  
und ketzer gehalten, gebraucht unnd teglich/Gott zu ehren gesungen  
werden.//

Gedruckt zu Vlm bey Hans Varnier./An. M.D.XXXVIII.//  
(University Library, Glasgow, Euing Music Library, E. e. 41)

This reprint is augmented with an extra preface by the printer (fol. [Aii]), concluding celebratory verses in Latin by Gaspar Bruschius Egranus and a colophon by Varnier (fols Giii-Giv); the table of contents (Register) is placed just before the concluding verses and is slightly adjusted. Otherwise, the contents are exactly the same as in the 1531 original edition. Handwritten commentaries on loose leaves inserted at the beginning document the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history of this volume; the most significant is fol. 5r of the insertions, written by Charles Burney: 'This book w.ch formerly appertained to Sebastian Bach, was given to me at Hambro by his son Charls Philip Emanuel. 1772'.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Weisse, *Gesangbuch der Böhmischen Brüder 1531*, facs., ed. Konrad Ameln (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1957).

Weisse knew Martin Luther personally and printed several of his hymns in his own collection; Luther, in turn, highly esteemed Weisse as a poet, and the Lutheran hymn book of Babst, 1544/45, contains twelve songs by Weisse. In later times, the repertories became even more mixed, as the Bohemian Brethren created further melodies and texts which were published in new editions of the Weisse print and taken on by the German Lutherans. By Bach's lifetime, Protestantism in Bohemia and Moravia had been suppressed by the Habsburg administration, and a new settlement of the Brethren in Herrnhut in Oberlausitz, Saxony, became the nucleus of the worldwide Moravian Church. Nevertheless, the spirituality of the old Bohemian Brotherhood lived on, mainly through the sense of strength and unity conveyed by their songs. Bach's musical use of songs from the Weisse hymn book is a fascinating testimony of that appeal. Altogether there are about 10–12 chorales set by Bach that originated in either text or melody, or both, in Weisse's book.

Bach sometimes connects Weisse texts with newer melodies, for example by Melchior Vulpius, or he uses Weisse's melodies with different texts. Some items from Weisse appear only in modern Lutheran hymn books, having been introduced by the various reforms of Lutheran church music. The Evangelical Church Hymn Book (EKG) of 1957, for example, contains four Weisse hymns which Bach never used. Others, which Bach did use, were dropped, but musicians still remember them through his and other musical settings.

In his preface, Weisse mentions as one of his own sources the Czech reformed hymnal, of which editions of 1501 and 1519, without melodies, are extant. As Ameln explains in his commentary,<sup>2</sup> Weisse apparently translated the Czech words of some songs and perhaps used new melodies for them that fitted his translations. He may sometimes also have created translations that fitted the original melodies of the Czech tradition. Another source he mentions was an old *Cancional* of the German Brethren which, however, has not been found; Ameln supposes it may only have existed in manuscript.

Many pre-Reformation *cantionalia* containing a traditional Latin hymn repertory, often with translations and vernacular additions, still exist in central Europe. Weisse reflects the presentation of such *cantionalia* by printing the traditional hymns in neumatic notation, giving the new German words under the notes but referring to the Latin original as title. This is the case, for example, with the hymn melody *A solis ortus cardine* for Lauds at Christmas with the underlaid translation 'Lobsinget got und schweiget nicht'. This old hymn had already been translated into German in the early fifteenth century by the Monk of Salzburg, with the words 'Von anegangk der Sonne klar'. The earliest Lutheran hymn book, the Erfurt *Enchiridion* of 1524, presents the song with Luther's translation 'Christum wir sollen loben schon'. For several traditional hymns Weisse provided more than one translation and used more than one melody, pointing to the different layers of source material available to him. Plainsongs in question are the Holy Ghost sequence *Veni sancte spiritus*, adapted by Luther as 'Komm heiliger Geist Herre Gott', by Weisse as 'O heiliger Geist herre got', with significant

<sup>2</sup> Konrad Ameln, 'Geleitwort', in: Weisse, *Gesangbuch*, p. 2–8.

variants of the song form, or the office hymn *Veni creator spiritus*, where Luther's 'Komm Gott, Schöpfer, heiliger Geist' adapts the plainsong melody but Weisse's 'O got schepfer heiliger geist' reverts to another now-forgotten fifteenth-century tune. In such cases, Bach tends to select the Lutheran version, not the parallel existing in Weisse. A case in point is the famous Latin hymn 'Jhesus Christus, nostra salus', traditionally ascribed to Jan Hus (see Examples 1a-c). The Lutheran version, 'Jesus Christus, unser Heiland', well-known in the church music tradition and often used by Bach, is already in the Erfurt *Enchiridion* of 1524, where it is labelled 'Das Lied S. Johannes Hus gebessert' (the song by Johannes Hus improved): the melody has been changed for the new words and for musical reasons. Weisse's translation, 'Jhesus Christus, gotes son von ewigkeit', is underlaid to an older variant of the original melody. Michael Weisse's allegiance to the Hussite tradition is underrated today, for example when the provenance of a melody transmitted by him is given in modern hymn books simply as 'medieval' or 'fifteenth century', suggesting it came from a Roman Catholic repertoire. Some melodies and texts, however, came from the Protestant Czech communities.



Jhe - sus Chri - stus no - stra sa - lus, quod re - cla - mat om - nis ma -  
 lus, no - bis su - i me - mo - ri - am de - dit in - pa - nis ho - sti - am.

Example 1a: Bohemian Corpus Christi hymn 'Jhesus Christus nostra salus'  
 (14<sup>th</sup> century)

*Jhesus Christus nostra salus*



Jhe - sus Chri - stus go - tes son von e - wig - keit, inn die welt ge - ge - ben aus barm - her - tzi - keit,  
 nahm an sich hie fleisch und blut, von ei - ner junc - fra - wen uns sün - dern zu gut.

Example 1b: Translation of 'Jhesus Christus nostra salus'  
 in Weisse 1531, fol. C iiiiv

Je - sus Chri - stus, un - ser Hei - land, der von uns den Got - tes - zorn\_\_\_\_\_

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wandt, durch das bit - ter Lei - den sein\_\_\_\_\_ half er uns\_ aus der Höl - len Pein.

Example 1c: Luther's version of 'Jhesus Christus nostra salus' (1524)

It seems to me that Bach was susceptible to that musical imagination of the oldest Protestant tradition. *Ave hierarchia caelestis et pia*, for example, is an old Bohemian hymn for the Trinity found in pre-Reformation sources (see Examples 2a-c). Weisse printed the tune, referring to the Latin incipit, with his translation 'Menschenkind merk eben'. Bach used the tune in four settings (BWV 318, 600, 703 and 724). One of the texts Bach knows for the tune, 'Gottes Sohn ist kommen, uns allen zu frommen', first appears in the Bohemian hymn book of 1544, possibly having been inherited from Weisse himself. Bach also seems to have been fond of the melody of *Patris sapientia*, with its strange and austere Phrygian mode. He used it with the words 'Christus, der uns selig macht', which is one of the two translations Weisse gives; the other is 'Christus wahrer Gottes Sohn'. The Latin text was created as a rhymed prayer for the hours of the Passion – thus not actually intended for singing – by Cardinal Egidio Colonna in the fourteenth century. Modern books also date the origin of the melody in the fourteenth century, but this is mere speculation.<sup>3</sup> Bach's use of the melody in the *Orgelbüchlein* is more similar to the medieval version in Weisse than Bach's other versions.

A - ve ye - rar - chi - a, ce - le - stis et pi - a, de - i mon - ar - chi - a,\_\_\_\_\_

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re - spi - ce nos di - a, ut e - ri - ga - mur er - ran - tes in vi - a.

Example 2a: The Bohemian cantio 'Ave yerarchia' (c. 1400)

<sup>3</sup> For the fifteenth-century transmission of the melody, and a suggested Hussite origin, see Reinhard Strohm, 'Late-medieval Sacred Songs: Tradition, Memory and History' (2006 Gordon Athol Anderson Memorial Lecture), in *Identity and Locality in Early European Music, 1028-1740*, ed. Jason Stoessel (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 129–48.

*Ave ierarchia, celestis et pia*

Musical score for 'Menschenkind, merk eben'. The score is in G major, 4/4 time, and consists of two staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The melody is written in a simple, homophonic style. The lyrics are: 'Men-schen-kynd, merck e - ben, was da sey dem le - ben, wa - rumb got sei-nen sohn ge - sandt vom höch - sten throhn, hat las-sen mensch wer - den hie auff die-ser er - den.'

Example 2b: 'Menschenkind, merk eben', Weisse 1531, fol. Aiiiv

(Text: Bohemian Brethren, 1544)

Musical score for 'Gott durch deine Güte oder Gottes Sohn ist kommen'. The score is in G major, 3/4 time, and consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written in a simple, homophonic style. The lyrics are: '[Got - tes\_ Sohn ist kom - men uns al - len zu from - men, hie auff die - se Er - den in ar - men Ge - bär - - den, dass er\_ uns von Sün - de frei - e und ent - bin - - - de.]'.

Example 2c: 'Gott durch deine Güte oder Gottes Sohn ist kommen'  
in Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* (BWV 600)

The oldest known German hymn, 'Christ ist erstanden' was used in more than one adaptation by both Luther and Weisse; Bach selects the Lutheran variants. He also knew an equally respected old hymn on the same topic, the widely-known cantio *Surrexit Christus hodie*. Weisse translated it as 'Gelobt sey got im höchsten trohn', to which words the next edition of the Brotherhood book of 1544 substituted 'Erstanden ist der heil'ge Christ'. The earlier text was given a new melody by Melchior Vulpus in 1609; Bach, however, related his settings of the melody to the 1544 text, which addresses the theme of the resurrection more directly.

Finally, a Weisse song – text and melody – which Bach still knew and set is the after-dinner hymn 'Den Vater dort oben'. It is simple and humble in style; in fact the melody is recommended in the children's song section of Weisse's book, to be sung to the words 'O herre jesu christ'. Bach's chorale setting, BWV 292, suffers from the constraints of its more modern metrical regularity, producing incorrect word accents. Conversely, this suggests to me once more how deeply the old hymn books inspired Bach's imagination, especially in his *Orgelbüchlein*.