

Renaissance Lute Music

Sacred Music for Lute

Settings of chorales and psalms for lute alone, lute with voice and lute with other instruments by several illustrious composers, among whom are Esaias Reusner, Adrian LeRoy, Mattheus Reymann, Nicolaes Vallet, Richard Allison and Michael Praetorius.

Edited by Catherine Liddell

Volume I: Renaissance tuning



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Cover art: A relief of Martin Luther from the Lutherdenkmal, Eisleben
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PREFACE

“Where did this come from?” I asked myself while playing through several pieces in preparation for my next lesson thirty years ago at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. I had just acquired the CNRS edition of Nicholas Vallet’s music, and had found his beautifully crafted variations on the Lutheran chorale tune *Vater Unser im Himmelreich*. Since I was also trained as an organist, I was used to finding elaborate settings of chorale tunes in the organ repertoire. But I had never seen such a piece for lute. Could this be the only one of its kind? How might I go about finding other such pieces? Did they even exist?

This edition is a sampling from my collection of sacred music for the lute that has gradually assembled itself as part of the continuously evolving answer to those questions. I offer it to experienced amateurs and budding professionals as a source of repertoire that is not, for the most part, difficult to play. And it is a repertoire that comes with a venue for its performance: the church during worship. There, depending on the Pastor’s attitude toward music, a performer can play with as much or as little attention from the listeners as he or she desires. If you prefer to be in the background, you can play music while the congregation assembles, or as they leave. You can also perform with others, if that makes you more comfortable. And if you don’t mind playing alone while nothing else is going on, there are several times during the service which might be appropriate for doing so. These options make the church particularly suitable for the experienced amateur looking for opportunities to perform. This edition provides the music to play there. For more seasoned professionals, this edition introduces a substantial repertoire and an approach to performing it that they may not have considered before.

Up until that moment of discovery at the Schola, the only sacred music for lute that I had known came in the form of intabulations of motets and Mass movements. It was not clear to me what function those pieces were intended to serve, beyond teaching composition. To be sure, some intabulations of mass movements are more musically satisfying than others. But often, they are quite abstract and extremely difficult to play, leaving me to wonder under what circumstances they might have been performed or if they were intended for performance at all. Vallet’s *Vater Unser* variations seemed to be in a completely different category. They were not necessarily easy to play, but they were much more idiomatic to the lute. Moreover, the way these variations were composed struck me as unusual. Most sets of variations I knew kept the tune in the top voice and played around with different ways of decorating it. These variations by Vallet did that, too, but in two of the variations, the tune appears in the lowest voice, once in the tenor range and once down in the bass range. This technique is often found in chorale variations for organ, but I had never seen lutenists make use of it. That’s what caught my attention.

My question about the existence of other such pieces was not answered at that time but stayed with me over the years and was gradually answered as, manuscript by manuscript, I assembled the collection that would serve my career as a performer and teacher. One by one, items containing sacred music would find their way into my library and I cannot say today how -- first the Reusner, *Musikalische Lustgarten*, then his son’s *Hundert Geistliche Melodien*. After a while I realized I had assembled quite a few sources containing settings of chorales and psalms spanning the entire period of the lute’s popularity.

In choosing pieces for this edition, I made a distinction between intabulations and settings, even though the line was difficult to draw in some cases. An intabulation is a pre-existing contrapuntal piece that has been put into tablature. Such pieces attempt to capture the exact movement of each of the voices of the original. By settings I mean pieces that focus on the melody of the original. The composer/lutenist creates either his own harmonic progression under the melody or bases his harmonies on some pre-existing original. The resulting piece tends to be much more idiomatic to the lute. The music in this edition falls into the category of settings.

About the Repertoire in This Edition

Given the fact that sacred music for the lute appears in prints and manuscripts from the early 1500s until well into the 18th century, the repertoire forming the basis for this edition comes from a fairly narrow time period. Small bunches of pieces (from one to six or eight), are found in prints from the first half of the 16th century by German composers such as Virdung, Schlick, Judenkünig, Gerle and Newsidler.¹ In the second half of the 16th century the number of settings increases, in Germany with Ochsenkuhn's *Tabulaturbuch auff die Lauten*, 1558 (containing 12 chorale settings) and in France with Adrian Le Roy's *Pseaumes de David*, 1567 (containing 150 psalms). At the turn of the 16th into the 17th century, a flurry of activity produced several complete settings of the psalms, some for solo lute and some for voice and lute, and at least one substantial collection of chorale settings. All of this music is for lute in Renaissance tuning; the later the print, the more likely it is to require a lute of more than 8 courses. The music for this edition comes from this later period from Le Roy's psalms through Esaias Reusner's *Musikalischer Lustgarten* (1647).

Almost all of the sacred lute music in the form of settings consists of chorales and psalms intimately connected to the Protestant Reformation.² That the lute was a carrier of this repertoire might come as a surprise, but I see the connection as follows: One of the main beliefs of the Reformation's first and most vocal advocate, Martin Luther (1483-1546), was that the Bible, not the pope was the focal point for receiving the word of God. Indeed, to bring the word of God closer to the people, he translated the New Testament into the vernacular. Another of Luther's beliefs was that music in the form of hymns, was an important purveyor of theological teachings. This led him to compose many hymns himself, tunes and text, sometimes borrowing secular tunes and putting religious words to them. So fervent was his zeal, that he wanted the hymns to be sung everywhere, on the streets, in pubs, in homes. Thus began the personalization of the religious experience. And the lute, being the most intimate of instruments, was a natural choice for playing these tunes. Add to that the fact that Luther himself played the lute and the connection is made.

¹ I am grateful to Sarah Davies, organist and Ph.D. candidate at New York University, for expanding my awareness of just how much music there is in this category. She is currently writing a dissertation entitled "'Resonet in laudibus:' Sacred and Spiritual Works for Organ and Lute in Sixteenth-Century Swiss and German Tablatures."

² Again, my appreciation to Sarah Davies for pointing out that some of the chorales may have Catholic vernacular roots. This may explain the existence of sacred pieces, especially for baroque lute, with titles and tunes that seem not to be found in sources specifically mentioning their connection to Martin Luther.

Influenced by the Lutheran-style singing of psalms and chorales, John Calvin (1509-1564) was one of the leaders in the development of Protestantism in Switzerland. He believed that the Mass should be replaced by the recitation of psalms as the central part of every worship service. Just prior to the middle of the 16th century, a project was undertaken to translate all of the psalms into French verse. These verses were then set to existing or new melodies. Soon after that the first settings began to appear for lute. The process of psalm versification took place in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany and England.

How Might This Repertoire Have Been Used?

One might think that these pieces were incorporated into public worship, since that is where people today commonly practice their religious activities. With a few exceptions, it unlikely that this was common practice.³ During Luther's time, congregational singing was largely unaccompanied and organ playing was limited to giving the key before starting and supplying postludes. Although the lute is capable of providing these functions, the difference in volume between the congregational singing and the lute's playing is such that it seems unlikely that it could have been a frequent occurrence. Some of the early Protestant church leaders forbade any instrument at all in church services, including organs, many of which were completely destroyed.

I suspect that this repertoire was used primarily for private devotions in the home. Once the liturgy had been opened up to congregational participation, it would have been a natural step to take the experience home. And if not a natural step, it would have been a necessary one, as more and more Protestants faced persecution and could only hope to worship in peace in the privacy of their own homes. Overt evidence of home worship shows up early in the 17th century.

A study of hymn texts written during this period [Thirty Years War (1618-1648)] reveals man's quest for an intimate relationship between himself and God. Confronted with the horrible killing and pillaging of the Thirty Years War, the individual sought enlightenment, self-understanding, comfort, and consolation in a personal subjective approach to God... These texts, which centered more and more upon the needs of the individual, were not intended for congregational use but for private devotionals in the home.⁴

Where and How These Settings Can be Used Today

This repertoire has received little attention, in part, because people are confused about where they can play it. It is not music that begs for applause. It seems so true to its function that presenting it in a public concert feels inappropriate. Since it is unlikely that a lutenist today will have the opportunity to perform these pieces in their original circumstances, within the context of house worship, I offer the following practical alternatives.

³ Some tantalizing bits of information from Sarah Davies, hint at Luther's recollection of a lute playing the mass in his youth and reports of a lute playing in a Calvinist church where the organ had been destroyed. I eagerly await her completed dissertation to learn more about this!

⁴ Riedel, Johannes. *The Lutheran Chorale: Its Basic Traditions*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967, pg. 56, as quoted in Reynolds, William J. and Price, Milburn. *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*. Carol Stream, Illinois: Hope Publishing Company, 1987, pg. 19.

1) If you have a connection to a church, speak to your Pastor to determine his/her inclination with regard to having lute music during the service. The lute's serenity works well as background to meditation after a prayer. It also works well as the Communion elements are distributed. Or you can play during the time the congregation is gathering for worship; but my experience has been that in this situation, the room is usually too noisy for the lute to be appreciated.

2) If your church holds special services during Advent or Lent, there might be an opportunity in that context for the lute to contribute to the mood of these celebrations. Keep in mind, too, that not all of the pieces in this repertoire are slow. Quite a few tolerate, even invite, brisk, joyful tempos, so you need not limit yourself to just the solemn times of the church year.

3) If you want to perform this music in more conventional concerts, but feel uncomfortable about accepting applause you might try requesting that the audience not applaud after the group. Treat it like a moment of meditation within the concert. This has worked well the few times I have tried it.

The psalm and chorale repertoire for lute is serenely beautiful. And with a bit of imagination and creativity on the part of the player, it has a place in today's life that can be occupied by both amateurs and professionals.

