

Martin Luther (der 10. November 1483—der 2. Februar 1546)

MARTIN LUTHER'S LEGACY

How Martin Luther became the first Christian pop star

Still haunted by the terrible fate of the martyrs, Luther composed the song "Dear Christians, One And All, Rejoice." In 10 verses, Luther described how God has saved humanity. The song appealed to many people and contributed to the spreading of reformist principles. It was sung all over the text was even printed on flyers. Its composer came to understand just how powerful a song can be.

Had he decided differently, the course of history could have been changed. After all, it was his expertise in theology that enabled Luther to take on the Catholic Church in 1517 and transform social and political thought at the threshold of the modern era.

Luther's breakthrough as a songwriter

Things soon got busy — and stressful for Luther. Besides developing his reformatory thoughts and putting them in writing, he had to deal with tough disputes with the pope and the clergy, as well as the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and a Church ban against him. Luther didn't have much time for music.

That changed in 1523, when he composed his first song. It was full of defiance, says Burkhard Weitz: "When the first martyrs who followed his teachings were burned in Brussels, the reformer was shocked and horrified. He commented on the events in a song."

Recipe for a church hit

But that wasn't always the case. When a melody fit a particular text, Luther was also willing to borrow popular songs that were sung in pubs or on the streets. The original version of the Christmas song "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" was based on a ballad.

"The guy was totally uninhibited," commented Falk, adding, "Considering 'From Heaven Above to Earth I Come' and the similarly constructed 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,' I come to the conclusion that, like many modern musicians, Martin Luther also used to steal from his own repertoire. These songs are hits."

Dieter Falk knows how to identify a hit. The records he produced for Patricia Kaas, Pur, Roger Chapmann, Paul Young and Gildo Horn have sold more than 20 million copies worldwide.

"Earworms — that's the keyword," said Falk. "An earworm, a catchy tune, stays in our memory for a very long time. The structure of Luther's verses was quite simple, differing from the structure of modern pop songs with a verse, a refrain, and a bridge. Luther's verses were pure verses. Once in a while, there was also a refrain, like in folk songs."

Catchy melodies and verses that were easy to memorize were an ideal combination in a time when most people were able to read neither texts nor music. "The big advantage of these songs was that they provided two different ways of memorizing them — by the rhythm and rhyme of the verses, or by the melody," explained Burkhard Weitz.

From memory to the printing press

But memorizing alone wasn't enough. The first collection of reformist songs was published in late 1523, namely the "Achtlieder Buch," a collection of eight songs of which four were composed by Luther. One year later, all 24 of his songs were published in a choir songbook for schools.

But Luther did not intend to limit himself to working as a poet and a composer. In 1523, he wrote to his companion and friend Georg Spalatin: "I have the intention to create psalms for the people, in other words spiritual songs so that the word of God will remain among the people also by means of music. That's why we are looking for poets everywhere." More and more Christians were daring to express their faith in German rhymes.



Martin Luther was far more significant as a musician than commonly assumed