

May 24, 2020

## Hymns We Love: A Mighty Fortress

The Scottish theologian and historian James Moffatt described A Mighty Fortress as “the greatest hymn of the greatest man in the greatest period in German history.” The man was, of course, Martin Luther, who wrote both the words and music of the hymn. Luther based his text on Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change.

The hymn first appeared in a Leipzig hymnal in 1528. Its success in Germany was immediate, and it quickly spread to other lands where the Reformation had taken root. It was first translated into English in 1543, but it was not widely known or used in English-speaking countries until the middle of the nineteenth century. The translation in our Pilgrim Hymnal dates from 1853.

Luther was endowed with above average musical ability. His knowledge was based on first-hand experience as a performer on the lute and the flute, as well as training as a singer. Luther’s writings frequently allude to the power of sacred music:

I am not ashamed to confess publicly that next to theology there is no art which is the equal of music, for she alone can do what otherwise only theology can accomplish, namely, quiet and cheer up the soul of man, which is clear evidence that the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, flees from the voice of music.

We can also find comfort in this timeless hymn that over the centuries has conveyed a tangible sense of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Luther describes God’s awesome power in these lines:

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him.

His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure.

One little word shall fell him.

Luther’s hymn inspired large scale masterpieces by Sebastian Bach (Cantata No. 80) and Felix Mendelssohn (Symphony No. 5, the Reformation Symphony). The rhythm of Luther’s original tune was very different from the four-square rhythm of the version we know today. Luther’s melody was a product of its time, influenced by the lively rhythms of Renaissance dance.

Here’s a link to the hymn, in which the choir switches back to Luther’s original version on the third verse:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9uGNb8Zfic>

Take care and keep singing!

