

## **From Miriam to Flois Knolle-Hicks**

### **Women as poetesses, composers and musicians**

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The tradition of women singing, composing and otherwise making music stretches from Miriam, Moses' and Aaron's singing and dancing sister, to contemporary Afro-American musicians from Frankfurt/Main. The beginnings of Protestant composition and Protestant hymnody lie in the middle in the Reformation period. In all historical periods, women have expressed their joy, enthusiasm and thankfulness, but also their woes and cries for help in song and dance, with instruments and with their own voices.

As the Hebrew Bible tells us: Following the happy deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt, Miriam, Moses' sister spontaneously composed the first known song of praise and thanks when she began playing a drum and singing.

I first encountered Flois Knolle-Hicks in 2007 at the ecumenical Women's Congress in Stuttgart, where she thrilled the attendees with her workshop choir. Her music is inspired by the powerful lyrics and rhythms of spirituals. In a very lively and bodily fashion, these sounds and rhythms convey the liberating message of the Gospel and plant it in our hearts. During the Reformation, and in the centuries thereafter, women have repeatedly summarized their experiences and new realizations in song lyrics and compositions. In published collections of songs and hymnals, these texts have been made public and handed down. There has not been as much of women's musical production preserved as that of men, but we can hope that further research in this area will bring more discoveries and findings to light. Nonetheless, the musicologist Linda Maria Koldau managed to publish a 1000-page manual on "Women, Music and Culture" in 2005. It is a manual containing the most recent scholarship on German language composition in the early modern period.

The Reformation and subsequent centuries have mainly influenced and encouraged the development of songs sung in unison, hymns and education. The ability to express one's own faith individually and in the German language has motivated both laymen and laywomen throughout the centuries to write songs and compose and publish music.

In this theme year of "Reformation and Music", I would like to ask where women have been musically educated and where they have been able to work, from what sources

did the first Protestant song writers draw, and I would like to unfold the wideranging field of work of these women in some degree.

Women of all estates were active as poets, composers and musicians. The musical testimonies of women of nobility and women living in convents is especially well documented. The patronage of music and culture was a luxury in the early modern period and was a status symbol for those who could afford it. Any principality or court of nobility that employed musicians and singers was thereby showing off its prosperity. Musically talented rulers had themselves, their wives and their children educated in this area as well. Therefore, courts of nobility and convents provided women and girls the opportunity to be formally educated in music or to teach themselves.

Because the patronage of music and culture was such a great status symbol, women from patrician and bourgeois circles also sought to promote music or develop their own musical talents.

Devotional meetings in the home were especially encouraged in Protestant territories since the 17th century. Singing was an important part of these meetings. The Reformation envisioned women as being responsible for the home. In that role, women were to take care of the home in general and train their children and the servants. This catechetical and educational function included an active role in the devotional meetings held in the home. The parsonage often developed into a place where spiritual and secular music was cultivated. There are strong indications that the poets wrote new texts for old well-known melodies, and sometimes even composed new melodies. This method is still practiced today. Consider for example the new creations of feminist women, in which they are writing new verses or completely new texts for older well-known hymns.

### **Courts of nobility as places where woman make music**

At all the great royal courts, in noble families and homes of the gentry, music was made and promoted. Whoever could afford it, employed small groups of musicians, instrumentalists, singers and music teachers for the children of the nobility. As a result of the marriage politics of the European aristocracy, women were often musical ambassadors, who transplanted new music, compositions and cultural innovations. For example, Italian princesses and daughters of the Medici family brought the Italian

opera and ballet to Vienna and Innsbruck and thus permanently influenced the cultural landscape of Austria. Women from lesser houses such as Countess Ämilie Juliane von Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Henriette Catherine Baronness von Gersdorff, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf's grandmother and the countesses von Zinzendorf are all well-known names in the Protestant context. Songs written by these noblewomen have survived the centuries and can be found today in the hymnals of their various confessions.

One of these noblewomen from the early phase of the Reformation, who wrote spiritual songs herself, was Duchess Elisabeth zu Braunschweig-Lüneburg, Princess zu Calenberg-Göttingen. She was born Elisabeth von Brandenburg in Cölln, which is part of today's Berlin. In 1525, she was married to Duke Erich I. von Braunschweig, who was forty years older than she. Following the death of her husband in 1540, Elisabeth ruled the principality of Calenberg-Göttingen until her son, Erich II. became of age. In 1538 Elisabeth converted to Lutheranism, promoted the spread of the Reformation in her territory and prevented her Catholic-minded son from reversing the Reformation there. She is known as the "Reformation Princess", who together with Antonius Corvinus (1501-1553) carried out the Reformation in southern Lower Saxony. Elisabeth was one of the most prolific writers of the Reformation, writing hymns, lyrical and didactic works and more. For instance: She wrote a government handbook for her son in 1545, which featured religious and political exhortations. She wrote a marriage book for her daughter Anna-Maria in 1550, and a book of consolation for widows in 1556.

In 1546, Elisabeth married Count Poppo XVIII. von Henneberg, but kept her independence as the Dowager Duchess of Brunswick. It was the era of confessional, military conflicts. Following the defeat of her son Erich II. in 1553, the victor and long-time rival, Heinrich the Younger von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel had Elisabeth exiled and deprived of her livelihood. For the next two years (1553-1555), the city of Hannover took Elisabeth and her daughter Katharina into protective custody. She survived on donations and lived in very poor conditions. During this time of need, she wrote 15 hymns using the melodies of hymns already known. Her songs are a reflection of her dire situation and defend her work as ruler and mother of the Reformation in the land. Her songs combine private and political themes and testify that Elisabeth was very familiar with the Protestant hymnody of her time as well as

the works of Martin Luther. As did many educated princes and princesses, Elisabeth stood in correspondence with Luther. She begins her New Year's greeting from 1554 with the first two lines of "To God on high alone be glory", followed by a song of praise to her daughter Katharina for supporting her in her hour of need. She wishes Katharina a pious husband and asks God for true faith and a godly life for her daughter. Another New Year's song, "Nün wolle gott das unnsere gesanngk" was composed to the choral melody "Blessed art thou, Jesus Christ". The song was motivated by an old custom: On New Year's Day, the servants wished their lords good luck in the new year with a song, and got in return presents of money. Duchess Elisabeth died in 1558. Her hymns were not intended just for private use, but for the public. Her songs, like all her writings testify to her ongoing pedagogical and political interests, which she effectively combined in her songs.

### **The convent as a place of music**

There was often a close connection between the musical places of the convent and courts of nobility. Many a monastic foundation was initiated by aristocratic families, who also used the convent as a befitting residence for family members. Convents provided women with favorable conditions to become well educated in various branches of the arts and sciences. Convents such as those of the Benedictines and Cistercians were in principle dedicated to education, and offered women lessons in Latin, the sciences and the liberal arts. In order to sing and perform the liturgy, the liturgy of the hours and convent masses, a basic education in Latin liturgical singing was necessary. The office of cantrix, the mistress of singing, was a permanent institution in the life of the convent. Scattered evidence suggests that not only Latin singing in unison was practiced, but also polyphonic compositions, instrumental music and songs in the vernacular. The more prestige music was given, the more the convents actively sought musically talented and educated girls and women. The intentional training of girls in playing instruments, above all the organ, is documented since the 16th century.

Among the reformers' wives and women reformers were many with a previous career in a convent. Many of them came from noble families such as Katharina von Bora or Elisabeth Cruciger, the first female Protestant songwriter.

She was born Elisabeth von Meseritz in Pomerania on the German-Polish border around 1500. She entered the convent early on, probably the convent of the Premonstratensians near Treptow.

One of her songs is still found in the current hymnal of the German Protestant church. It is number 67, "Lord Christ, God's only Son", and is sung during Epiphany. Elisabeth Cruciger corresponded with a converted Jew by the name of Joachim in Stettin, with whom she exchanged theological reflections. She left the convent in 1522, and lived in the home of Johannes Bugenhagen in Wittenberg, where she met Luther's student and colleague Caspar Cruciger. The two married in 1524. Caspar Cruciger became rector and preacher of the newly founded school of St. John in Magdeburg, and was called to Wittenberg in 1528 as professor. Elisabeth gave birth to two children. The first was Caspar the Younger, who later became Melancthon's successor and eventually converted to the Reformed Church. The second was a daughter, Elisabeth, who as a widow married Luther's son Johannes. Elisabeth Cruciger died in 1535 in Wittenberg. Throughout her entire life, the Luther and Cruciger families enjoyed a close friendship.

While it is probable that Elisabeth wrote more songs than the single song which has been preserved, it has not yet been proven. Her "Psalm of Prayer", as Magister Cyriakus Spangenberg called it in 1571, was included by Luther in the Wittenberg hymnal of 1524 as well as in the Enchiridion of Erfurt that same year.

In the song, Elisabeth expresses her personal conviction of faith in the German language. Nonetheless the song exhibits strong connections to tradition. Elisabeth combines the biblical and patristic testimony with central aspects of Protestant doctrine. There are even echoes of medieval mysticism, including that of female writers.

Verses one and two, for example, refer back to John 1:18 (Jesus being in the Father's bosom) and Revelation 22:16 (Jesus as the morning star). A patristic precursor for these lines is found in the hymn "Born from the Heart of the Father", written by Prudentius in the 4th century. The Nicene Creed as well provides material for the thoughts expressed in these verses. There we read, "(We believe) in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made."

References to the Bible "even as it is written" in verse one are thoroughly Protestant in nature. Also very Protestant is the Christ-centeredness, the implied direct

relationship with God and the allusion to what happens during baptism in verse 5. Luther's explanation of baptism from the catechism is echoed here, where he writes: "(Water baptism) means that the old Adam in us is drowned and is to be killed by daily contrition and repentance. . . and a new man is to emerge and be resurrected each day." Elisabeth used basic themes of salvation history such as penance, repentance and renewal in her song.

In verse 3, Elisabeth employs the language of mysticism, when she speaks of the "sweetness in the heart" and addresses the thirst for God's love in Christ. The sensual tasting the sweetness of God and the thirst for God are images with biblical roots (Psalm 34:9), which have since the Early Church (Augustine, Bernhard of Clairvaux) belonged to the mystical world of experience and expression. The concept of the "mystical death" and the experience of spiritual rebirth are also expressed in verse 5. Elisabeth combined patristic and mystical traditions with her new Protestant insights and her influence continues to this day through her hymn.

### **Poets, editors of collections of songs and musicians**

Female poets other than Elisabeth Cruciger who have been able to hold their own until today and are still represented in a Protestant hymnal include Countess Ämilie Juliane von Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt (1637-1706). From her we have the songs "God has brought me this far" (EG 329) and "Who knows how near is my end" (EG 530). In the regional section of the Protestant hymnal of Württemberg (EC 588), there is still found today a song by the poet Magdalena Sibylla Rieger (1707-1786), "My soul in the cave seeks you in the dark light". From Zinzendorf's grandmother and guardian Henriette Catherine Baroness von Gersdorff (1648-1726/28) there are a total of 99 hymns preserved, including seven, which are printed in the 1967 edition of the hymnal of the Moravian church.

Linda Maria Koldau lists in her manual 117 songwriters of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries who are known by name. Most of them are Protestant and sixty-two of them are from the nobility.

The daughter of a squire, Anna Ovena Hoyers (1584-1655) came from respected bourgeois circles. She left behind a large number of hymns and books of devotion and edification. Her works were especially suited for the needs of women. As the wife of an official with aristocratic privileges, she was very self-confident and independent. Anna also published controversial writings in defense of the Anabaptist movement,

which were satirical and anti-clerical. This brought her enemies, who together with her financial problems forced her to emigrate to Sweden in 1632. In 1650 a publisher in Amsterdam, Elzevier, published Anna's works under the title, "Sacred and Secular Poems". Her sons published approximately 50 of her songs during the 1650s in Stockholm. Her songs were specifically written for singing, as the printed works show by their inclusion of musical notes above the texts. Anna wrote her songs not only to the melodies of hymns, but also to the melodies of folk songs and other secular songs. In so doing she incorporated something that was to become a key feature of songs of revival, where the melodies of common popular songs are converted to transporters of religious content.

Women not only wrote song lyrics, but also issued hymnals and collections of songs. The new art of printing facilitated the rapid spread of printed songs and collections of songs. Women were also active as printers. Following the death of their fathers or husbands, women frequently took over the printing business and continued it themselves. Kunigunde Hergot(t) (died 1539) from Nurnberg, whose husband Hans was executed in Leipzig in 1527 for distributing a Protestant writing, was probably the first woman to print works of music. In 1527 she married the printer Georg Wachter. The printing office of Hergot/Wachter contributed greatly to the spread of Reformation hymns. The same is true of Berg & Neuber, whose matriarch was the printer Katharina Gerlach (approx. 1520-1592). In Nurnberg alone there were 16 female printers. Moreover, independently active female printers have been identified in 35 other cities and towns in German-speaking Europe. Through marriage, the printing families were frequently closely connected with each other within their profession.

Katharina Zell belonged to the women who published hymnals. A native of Strasbourg, Zell was a lay theologian, the wife of a Reformer and Reformer in her own right. From 1534 to 1536 she published four small hymnals in pocket format comprised of songs of the Czech Brethren, which could be sold at a low price. The catechetical, pedagogical and pastoral goals, which she pursued with the publication, are apparent in the preface and in the notes to the songs. Through the songs, the entire congregation including the children should have the central insights of Protestant teaching "sung into their hearts", and a low-cost guide to prayer and the praise of God should be made available to everyone. The lyrics of her songs follow

the order of the church year. In this way, she was a good "mother of the church", reacting to the needs of the congregation for good new songs and the continued observance of the Catholic church year, which had initially been abolished in Strasbourg in 1524/25. A second edition of these hymnals did not materialize. The Zell-expert Elsie Anne McKee suggests that Katharina's theological openness and unconventional behavior stood in the way of a second edition. For example, in 1564, the year of her own death, Katharina buried Anabaptist women, who the Protestant pastor had refused to bury. She also had further connections to circles of Anabaptists and other marginalized theologians such as Caspar Schwenckfeld.

Especially noteworthy is the hymnal published by the Countess Sophia Christiana von Brandenburg-Kulmbach (1667-1737) at the beginning of the 18th century. The hymnal is titled "The Faith-Ringing and Heaven-Climbing Music of the Heart". It contains 1052 songs, mostly by new authors, both male and female, but also includes the most popular songs by Luther. Countess Sophia included previously unpublished songs by women of the aristocracy, especially songs by Countess Ludämilie Elisabeth von Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, who had died in 1672. Ludämilie Elisabeth was the unmarried sister-in-law of Countess Ämilie Juliane von Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt. Their 86 surviving songs were printed almost in their entirety in the hymnal. They thus created a sort of women's hymnal.

Professional music-making was at that time generally the reserve of men. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated that there were full-time female musicians at courts of the nobility or as organists in churches. Wandering female singers and instrumentalists are also known to have existed well into the 18th century. Professional female musicians often came from families of musicians, where their talents in singing or playing an instrument were promoted. The first professional female singers for the new musical genre of opera came from Italy.

### **Musical education in schools**

The musical education of girls in schools is generally limited to the singing of songs in unison. In contrast, boys were trained in Latin schools even prior to the Reformation to sing polyphonically and also learned music theory. Only privileged girls from the aristocracy and women in religious orders also learned the art of multi-voice choral

singing. Both groups of women learned this type of singing in either the convent or convent schools. In the elementary schools in Protestant territories, it was a normal part of instruction to practice and sing well-known hymns as well as other songs needed for liturgical contexts. At the beginning, both male and female pupils learned to read using primers, the bible and the hymnal. Both in school and in confirmation classes, songs and biblical passages were memorized in addition to the catechism itself.

Some teachers facilitated this memorization by setting the biblical texts to music. Magdalena Heymair or Haymerin / Haymarin (1560-1590) was one of the first teachers to develop her own teaching materials and wrote five books containing biblical songs, which she had printed. She also authored other songs for the education of girls. Between 1566 and 1578 she wrote several books, in which she set the Epistles and other biblical texts to music. Up to six editions of these books appeared in a very short time span. In her song writing, she placed the emphasis on women of the Bible and emphasized the important role played by women in the New Testament and especially in the book of Acts.

Her pedagogical principle was similar to that of Katharina Zell, who also regarded song as the "best way to mediate Biblical texts" (372). Therefore, Magdalena wrote the most important texts to be taught in rhyme, and put the lyrics to catchy melodies. She also structured the subject matter of the other elementary subjects in stanzas. That made it easier for children to memorize and also served the purpose of Christian edification.

After she had become famous through her publications, she served starting in 1585 as governess and teacher for the widow Judith Reuber, neé von Friedensheim in Kaschau, today known as Košice in eastern Slovakia. 200 years later, Magdalena Hymair was still known as an outstanding educator and song writer.

## **Summary**

Courts of the nobility and convents were the principle places where women living in the early modern period were able to learn and be musically creative. The wives of many of the Protestant reformers participated in both worlds and many had previously lived in convents prior to their marriages.

During the Reformation, more emphasis was placed on the universal education of girls, which also gave them access to musical education.

The popularity of religious songs, hymns and songs sung in unison grew enormously during the Reformation. The female song writers managed to creatively combine traditional elements with their new insights and thus created a new genre of song. Women participated as poets, composers, publishers, musicians and teachers in the dissemination of this treasury of songs.

Finally, there are a few questions we can consider in this context:

What are the musical traditions of the women in our congregations and churches? Which influences promote new writing and compositions? Are there specific places for women to create music? What ideas do women communicate with their songs? What accents do women set as composers and performers of church music? What do the current hymns written by women preach?

In this year of "The Reformation and Music", there are various events being held all over Germany that specifically call to attention the current musical engagement of women. Examples of this include the forum on female singing being held in Cloister Eberbach and the workshops for female church musicians being held at the Erlangen Congress "Music in the Church and Community."

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