Comfort in Luther and Bach
A Study of the Comforting Value of Martin Luther’s Church Songs and Interpretation of Comfort in the Choral Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach

Lydia Vroegindeweij

1 Introduction

This dissertation examined the concept of comfort as defined by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and expressed in his songs from 1524/1525. Exactly 200 years later Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) wrote his cycle of choral cantatas during his second year in Leipzig. It is remarkable that many of the songs used in this cycle are by Luther or his contemporaries, whereas many new songs on this theme were written in the Baroque era (circa 1650-1720). This led to the question whether there was a difference in approaching comfort in songs from Luther’s time and in later songs, from the second half of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century. Moreover, this raised the question how Bach expressed Luther’s theology of comfort in his works.

In order to make informed statements on these issues, it was necessary to study the theme of comfort in Luther’s theology, as found in his writings, sermons and letters (Chapter 1). Based on this, it was analyzed how comfort is expressed in the song repertoire from the early days of the Reformation (Chapter 2). Next, the use and appreciation of these songs at the early 18th century, also marking the start of the theological subdiscipline of hymnology, is examined (Chapter 3). Writings of the first hymnologists on the value of church songs and their detailed interpretation of the meaning of every song in hymnbook commentaries proved to be useful sources for gaining new insight into the cantata texts and the way in which Bach expressed comfort in his choral cantatas (chapter 4). This research concludes with a case study, analysing Luther’s psalm song Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir from the translation of Psalm 130 by Luther up to Bach’s chorale cantata bearing the same title (chapter 5).

2 Research questions

In existing research on Luther’s work, his songs have only been studied to a limited extent for their functional meaning in pastoral care, and more specifically for the argumentation chosen to offer comfort in various situations of pastoral distress. The fact that many of these songs were written relatively soon after each other made it relevant to examine the content of this part of Luther’s oeuvre as a
whole, not only to evaluate their comforting significance in the early days of the Reformation, but also in centuries after Luther.

Comfort has not previously been examined as an independent theme in Bach’s cantatas. In earlier theological research into Bach’s work, the treatment of death in particular has received a great deal of attention, since death was an important theme in the Baroque period and comfort is strongly linked to it from the Lutheran *ars moriendi*. Luther’s pastoral approach of comfort, however, also focused on other situations in which fear and distress led to a need for a comforting perspective, such as illness, poverty and doubt in faith.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Luther’s songs were still widely sung, although a large collection of new songs had emerged. The central question in this dissertation is therefore how the comforting message from the early days of the Reformation was appreciated and interpreted by Bach in his choral cantatas: did he follow Luther’s teachings on comfort or did he use influences of later theologians with other visions? In the literature hardly any attention was paid to this. Therefore, the following questions were raised: (1) How was comfort part of Luther’s newly designed doctrine of justification at the beginning of the 16th century and what arguments did Luther formulate to comfort others with it?; (2) How did Luther express these arguments in his hymns, which enabled believers to take ownership of the comforting message and share it with others?; (3) What changes did Luther’s comforting arguments undergo in the Baroque period and what were the consequences for the use of Luther’s songs in Bach’s chorale cantatas?; (4) How did Bach give musical expression to comfort and how was Luther’s theory of comfort reflected in his music?

3 Research design

The research started with a multi-layered analysis to see how comfort was expressed in Luther’s works. This involved looking at literal uses of the word *Trost* (comfort or consolation), supplemented by semantic meanings and Luther’s comforting texts for different situations and pastoral needs. The results were applied in an analysis of Luther’s songs. The words and combinations found were then used to select cantatas by Bach in which a similar vocabulary is used. In the selected cantatas, the way in which the comforting arguments were used in text and music was further examined. This selection of cantatas also drew attention to a striking difference between the large number of new songs written in the Baroque era and the fact that Bach’s chorale cantatas focused on many old songs. The relationship between the comforting argumentation in Luther’s songs and in Bach’s choral cantatas has therefore been examined with the aid of hymnological publications and hymnbook commentaries from the early 18th century.
4 Luther

The first two chapters examined Luther’s understanding of comfort in his writings and the way he applied it in his songs.

4.1 Comfort in Luther’s work

How Luther defined the concept of comfort and how he related it to various contexts in which there is a need for comfort, is discussed in Chapter 1. Luther’s writings repeatedly show that he derived comfort directly from his doctrine of justification, in which only faith in Christ and trust in God are sufficient to experience the grace, promised in the Bible, as a comforting prospect. The main task of the pastor was to show the consolandus the way to the Bible as a source of comfort, possibly assisted by external signs such as the sacraments, after which the Holy Spirit could nourish the faith internally. At the same time, Luther’s texts showed that there is no universal recipe for the way in which the pastor can offer this comfort. The variations in wording and emphasis that Luther used in his Bible explanations showed that he always knew how to choose his arguments in an empathetic manner, in accordance with the cause of the need for comfort and the personal situation of the consolandus.

Although reasons for the need of comfort could be very diverse – the index of keywords in Luther’s Hauspostille in the 1702 edition counts more than 30 different reasons – it was possible to distinguish two main streams, namely (1) comfort for those who are concerned about the fate of the soul after life and (2) comfort for those who suffer during life. Since in Luther’s doctrine of justification faith (Rechtfertigung) offered true consolation in both cases, comfort was always aimed at strengthening this faith. Luther’s writings showed that weak believers especially should be taught how to believe, and that believers whose faith has only been weakened by suffering should be helped to recall their comforting faith in Christ.

4.2 Comfort in songs

The texts of Luther’s songs, most of which originated in 1523/24, can be considered an independent part of his theological oeuvre, suitable for sharing his insights with the (illiterate) community. They were intentionally designed in a language that could be understood and sung by churchgoers without theological training. Chapter 2 contains an examination of the comforting argumentation Luther used in the text of his songs, based on three questions: (1) what is the situation in which the human being finds himself; (2) with what words is comfort experienced, offered or received; (3) how is the achieved end result described?

The analysis showed that only the use of the word Trost (or words derived from it) provides too limited a basis to explain the consoling function of a song. A semantic broadening to include etymologically related concepts and the theological meaning Luther gave to them in other texts offered more
insight into the way the doctrine of justification appears in Luther’s songs. In many hymns, the theme of comfort could be recognized easily by considering the description of the situation in which the person finds himself, followed by the offer of consolation and methods of giving comfort, ending with the situation when one is comforted and often completed with a call to thanksgiving to God. However, there were also clear differences between the songs, as Luther was influenced in his writing by events in his community or by the moment of use of a song (e.g. in the liturgy, in faith education, at home).

It also became clear that Luther, just as in his letters, paid attention in his songs to different needs between consolandi, and that conclusions can be drawn from this about his ‘recipes’ for comforting and being comforted in different situations. For example, there are songs in which the argument is mainly formulated for weak believers with fears for their salvation after death and other songs for those who suffer during life. Clear examples of the latter are Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott and Erhalt uns Herr, bei deinem Wort. How comfort was offered to weak believers was researched in the case study of the song Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir.

5 The development of hymnology

In Chapter 3 the connection between Luther’s and Bach’s time was made, describing the development of new hymns in the Baroque era and its consequences for the choice of hymns in Orthodox Lutheran worship. On the basis of hymnological sources, such as hymnbook commentaries, the significance of the old songs for comfort in Bach’s time is examined, as well as the relationship to the composition of his cycle of forty chorale cantatas in 1724/25.

Existing research into the theological content of the chorale cantatas has mostly focused on the works from Bach’s theological library, often examining sermons on the Biblical pericopes for the Sunday in question. What has remained underexposed in relevant literature up to now is the importance of hymnological sources from the beginning of the 18th century. These provided insight into the profiling of various religious movements and the role of hymns as expressions of their identity. In Bach’s time, the content of the songs of Luther and his contemporaries was criticized from various sides: Lutheran pietists criticized the poor accessibility of the songs for simple believers (not theologically trained), while Calvinists and Roman Catholics copied Luther’s songs in their collections, but modified the text. For Calvinists, the Lutheran doctrine of the two natures of Christ was a point of conflict, while for Roman Catholics it was the way the role of good works and sacraments was sung. The fierce discussions in, among others, the periodical Unschuldige Nachrichten von alten und neuen theologischen Sachen (from 1701 onwards published by Valentin Ernst Löscher), showed how orthodox Lutheran theologians defended the song heritage from Luther’s time. Authoritative Lutheran hymnologists from this period are Johann Christoph Olearius from Arnstadt, Georg Heinrich Götze from Lübeck and Johann Martin Schamel from Naumburg. On the other hand they met critics with their complaints about the old hymns; although Luther’s language was clear and compact, by the beginning of the
18th century it was not always well understood and some words or expressions required explanation. Many hymnbook commentaries were published in which the ambiguities per song were clarified, but also a stand was taken against the criticism or adaptation of songs by other religious movements. Frequent references to Bible texts served to prove the correct teachings of the old songs. Another difficulty was the fact that the themes in songs by Luther and his contemporaries no longer accurately reflected people’s personal faith. The horrors of war, disease and poverty of the 17th century and the changing society with a developing middle class led to different needs. New songs gave voice to many specific personal needs, which people experienced as their crosses or punishments from God. Penitence became an important theme in the songs of the Baroque, as did the longing, expressed in mystical poetry, for union with Christ after death. Orthodox Lutheran theologians, however, were of the opinion that these themes impeded a clear view of consolation through faith, as offered by the old songs. Proper clarification should warn the faithful against misconceptions about penance or an excessive desire for mystical texts in new songs, which could mislead believers seeking comfort.

Many theological discussions arose as to whether the old hymns from the early days of the Reformation should be retained in new hymnbooks, often initiated due to limited space. Reasons for this were not only a decreasing understanding of old words and poetic language among the congregation, but also the erosion of the original text by other faiths and parodies in popular culture, and confusion due to the reuse of melodies in texts with a completely different content. The long-standing concerns about the lack of reverence during worship and the carelessness in congregational singing were an additional motivation for the hymnologists to actively propagate their vision. Orthodox Lutheran theologians made many efforts to preserve the song heritage by paying attention to improved explanations of the songs in sermons and hymnbook commentaries. In addition, from 1717 onwards they drew attention to the approaching 200th anniversary of the original Luther hymns from 1524.

6 Bach

Publications by 18th century orthodox Lutheran hymnologists were used in Chapter 4 to research how Luther’s concept of comfort influenced the unknown author of the texts of selected chorale cantatas. Moreover, it was examined how Bach gave musical expression to the concept of comfort in his compositions.

6.1 Comfort in cantata texts

Although the word Trost occurs frequently in cantata texts (in 87 of 204 church cantatas), this fact was not sufficient to draw conclusions about comfort as a theme in Bach’s cantatas. Even when researched in combination with other relevant words derived from etymology or theology, a selection of these only showed a rough indication. A brief consideration of cantatas, which have many words in common
with Luther’s songs, showed that the theme of comfort is dealt with in various ways. For the chorale cantatas, the chosen interpretation of comfort can be clarified by studying the hymnological sources from the beginning of the 18th century. In particular, the detailed explanations of song stanzas by Johann Martin Schamel helped to explain why certain adaptations or additions were made to the cantata text. Also the references to Bible texts, made in hymnbook commentaries, lead to additional insights when considered in combination with Luther’s detailed commentary on these texts, collected in the Bible edition by Abraham Calovius (1612-1686). The chorale cantatas studied show that the comforting message of the songs was interpreted in the way orthodox hymnologists wished to emphasize it. Moreover, in a number of cases hymnological commentaries gave a new or additional perspective on the musical composition of certain cantata movements.

In many cantatas, the focus was on the weak believer, who suffered from fear for his soul’s salvation due to a sense of sin. Consolation was offered on the basis of the justification of the sinner by faith, with as comforting arguments (a) patience and surrender to God’s will and care and (b) focus on Christ, who with his suffering has overcome death for the sinner. If the word Glaube and the name of Jesus did not appear in a song text, these words were often added in the cantata text. The necessary, sincere penitence of the believer was given much attention by the hymnologists and also in the cantata texts studied.

6.2 Music by Bach

Musically speaking, Bach showed himself to be an exponent of his time by incorporating modern recitatives and arias in his chorale cantatas, thus implementing innovative elements from the world of opera that Erdmann Neumeister added to the existing cantata genre. In chorale cantatas, the song texts of the first and last strophe were always retained. The first strophe was given a characteristic opening chorus and the last strophe a sober four-part setting. In the sections between, Bach composed music with baroque expressions of emotion, often alternating with the comforting recognizability of lines or melody quotations from the early chorales. On the other hand, Bach also used old stylistic features with which he particularly honored the oldest Reformation song repertoire, such as the motet form at the opening of the cantatas on Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir (BWV 38) and Ach Gott, von Himmel sieh darein (BWV 2). Furthermore, in relation to comfort he used the circulatio (a conjunct melody that goes up then down then up again) to express a comforting embrace and the specific rhetorical device of the figura corta (three short notes (eighths or sixteenths) are combined in such a way that two of them give the length of the third) to symbolize assurance of faith. Duet arias are used by Bach to represent the effect of comfort as an evolving process. Bach also expressed aspects of comfort through his choice of accompanying instruments, such as trombones in penitential choruses and the oboe d’amore in supplicatory prayers. Each chorale cantata ended with a simple four-part setting
of the existing song melody, so that it would stick in the memory of the churchgoers, and with it the comforting conclusion of the song, often expressed in the last stanza.

7 Case study

Chapter 5 contains a case study of the chorale Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir (Out of deep anguish I call to You), in which comfort for the weak believer was examined in Luther’s song and in the cantata of the same name by Bach (BWV 38). Various types of primary sources were used that have been examined in the previous chapters, in the first place texts from Luther’s oeuvre and texts by theologians after Luther. In particular, Heinrich Müller (1631-1675) and August Pfeiffer (1640-1698) were authors with whom Bach was familiar and who were also represented in his theological library. The same applies to the Luther Bible with commentary compiled by Abraham Calovius from Bach’s estate (which has been published in facsimile edition in 2017 with Bach’s own notes). A third category of sources were hymnbook commentaries by various hymnologists from the early 18th century, especially works by Johann Christoph Olearius (1668-1747) and Johann Martin Schamel (1668-1742).

In cantata Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir, composed for the 21th Sunday after Trinity, Bach interpreted Luther’s song in which a sense of sin and atonement are addressed, and which also expressed Luther’s recipe of comfort for weak believers. Several sermons on the Gospel reading for that Sunday, about the healing of the nobleman’s son (John 4:46-54), were dealing with doubt of faith (Anfechtung). However, these sermons could hardly explain the changes in the cantata text compared to the song. In the cantata the focus on weak believers is mainly expressed in the fourth and fifth movement. An important line from the cantata is the beginning of the fourth movement: “Ach! Daß mein Glaube noch so schwach”. This text, possibly derived from Heinrich Müller’s meditation Von der Schwachheit des Glauben, expressed to the weak believer how faith can grow, powerfully supported by Luther’s chorale melody. The aria in the fifth movement confirms this promise of comfort, helping faith to grow, musically expressed with an increasingly frequent use of the figura corta.

In the cantata text, influences from hymnological commentaries, in particular from Johann Martin Schamel’s Lieder-Commentarius, were clearly recognizable. His explanatory notes on the song and references to Bible passages offered information that was demonstrably incorporated in the cantata text and sometimes in the music (such as the relationship with Psalm 51 in the opening chorus). The Bible text referred to by Schamel did not always offer a clear explanation of the text, but Luther’s explanation in the Calovius Bible Commentary did. The combination of these two sources helped to gain more insight into the text and music of this choral cantata.
8 Conclusion and discussion

This study showed that hymnological discussions in the early 18th century influenced the way the song repertoire of the Reformation was handled, and most likely also the genesis of Bach’s chorale cantatas in the year in which the 200th anniversary of Luther’s songs was celebrated. Studying the contents of Bach’s cycle of chorale cantatas with hymnological sources from that period showed, first of all, that the songs chosen matched exactly the orthodox hymnologists’ task of preserving the old song repertoire. Moreover, many differences between the text of a song and that of the cantata in question can be explained on the basis of detailed explanations in hymnbook commentaries. In his chorale cantatas Bach was able on the one hand to meet the modern cultural needs of the citizens of Leipzig by alternating the old chorales with arias and recitatives in the libretti. On the other hand, the adaptation of song stanzas clarified outdated texts for churchgoers, emphasizing that according to Luther’s teaching, comfort is found only in justification through faith in Christ, as revealed in God’s word. The influence of modern song themes such as bridal mysticism or cross and penitence in some songs was intentionally reduced in the arrangements of song stanzas in arias and recitatives. The chosen songs for the chorale cantatas also corresponded to the interests of emphasizing the comforting doctrine of justification and strengthening the identity of Lutheran orthodoxy against the teachings of other movements, such as Lutheran Pietists, Roman Catholics and Calvinists.

On the basis of this study, it can be concluded that many of the original comforting arguments from Luther’s teachings and songs have been preserved in Bach’s chorale cantatas. In order to limit the scope of this study, eight chorale cantatas were chosen with texts closely matching Luther’s language when it comes to consolation. In my continuing research, the other cantatas from the 1724/1725 cycle will be examined too, using hymnological works by Schamel and other hymnologists and Calovius’ Bible-commentary. Future studies on Bach’s later chorale cantatas might reveal whether the strong hymnological influences were only related to the 200th anniversary of Luther’s songs, or whether Bach also wanted to serve the aims of the hymnologists later on, when he was completing his collection of chorale cantatas.