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# WEEKEND BREAK

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Photo by Carol Smith

A stained glass window at Clatsop Community College's Performing Arts Center bears the first line of Martin Luther's most famous hymn.

## A MUSICAL REFORMATION

Martin Luther's 500-year influence goes beyond the theological



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Martin Luther posting his Ninety-five Theses in 1517

By **DENISE REED**  
 For *The Daily Astorian*

In the fall of 1517, a professor and Augustinian priest named Martin Luther prepared a list of 95 theological postulates intended for academic debate. This thrust the Catholic Church into a confrontation that led to the "reforming" of the church — an event that came to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

Now, 500 years later, Lutherans celebrate not only the reformation of church theology but how it impacted the arts, including music.

When Luther translated the sacred texts of the Bible into the vernacular, his native German, this sealed the Reformation's influence on both the church and music, enriching the late Medieval and Renaissance periods. And it continues to enrich the lives of worshipers and music lovers alike.

As a non-theologian, I can't comment on the religious impact of Luther's Ninety-five Theses, but, humbly, I can speak to the impact the Reformation's music had on choral music that came after.

Luther's conviction that music was a vehicle for evangelical proclamation gave birth to a new genre of church music: the German chorale, whose form generations of composers have used to write motets, cantatas, concertos and other pieces.



Denise Reed

His ideas inspired two of the most prolific and popular composers: Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel.

### The Lutheran chorale

Luther believed that art is part of a complete life. If life is to be well-rounded, it must be beautiful, as well as true and good. Without beauty, the act of worship, however sincere, is imperfect, incomplete.

According to Luther's theology of sound, music is not of human invention but a gift from God, and that it is present in the natural world, imbued in all creatures, even in the sound of the wind.

The human voice, though, was what captivated him most. The voice articulates words and the meanings behind them, and Luther believed the words of God have the

power to transform those who hear it spoken or sung. What a concept!

The chorale form comprises congregational hymns, written in the vernacular (German) whose content was meant to instruct the largely illiterate Medieval populace in the Bible's contents. The hymns functioned as worship songs declaring statements of Christian faith.

Luther himself wrote numerous hymns, and he penned motets developing the polyphonic forms that have become an essential part of modern music.

Bach, Handel and Mendelssohn used the chorale form in compositions beloved by many denominations and nationalities.

And though choral music began with sacred subject matter, it is loved by sacred and secular singers and audiences.

### 'Messiah' performance in Astoria

Handel's "Messiah" has become the most widely performed composition in every country. This year, countless choirs worldwide, including our own North Coast Chorale (which I conduct), will present the piece as a "sing-along" 4 p.m. Nov. 26 at Clatsop Community College's Performing Arts Center (located at Franklin and 16th streets).

The performance will benefit the food banks of Clatsop County, just as the profit from the first performance of "Messiah" in

1742 went to widows, orphans and debtors of 18th century England.

A stained glass window facing 16th Street at the Performing Arts Center uses the first line of Luther's most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." The window was a major focus of the Lutheran congregation that built the church during the Great Depression.

For many years, this window has been covered, concealed from passersby; you must come into the Performing Arts Center to see it, and the "Messiah" sing-along will give listeners an opportunity to do just that.

### Sacred song

As Lutherans the world over prepare to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation's origin, remember that the Lutheran chorale's sacred song has affected us all, performers and listeners.

And when you see the stained glass window at the Performing Arts Center, think of the profound effect this priest, monk, singer and composer had on the development of music.

Denise Reed is the conductor of the North Coast Chorale and a member of the Oregon Humanities Board of Directors. She teaches opera and music appreciation, along with world music and the histories of some of America's popular styles of music, at Clatsop and Tillamook Bay community colleges.