

Tayside Organists' Society
Talk/ Demonstration by Tom Wilkinson
on Lutheran Chorales

St Andrew's Parish Church, Dundee, Glasite Hall

29 January 2019

Review by Ron Inglis

Lutheran chorales? 'Ein' feste Burg' immediately comes to mind but there are others. Dr Tom Wilkinson treated us to a most interesting explanation of the history of Lutheran chorales and the great influence they have had over the five hundred years to date on the singing of hymns in Western Christianity. He gave out a double-sided and a one-sided A4 sheet with images of various examples of chorale scores, including a manuscript one by Luther himself of 'Ein feste Burg' and another of the melody 'The Lamb of God' (Das Agnus Dei), also scores of 'Christ, Thou Lamb of God' (Christe, du Lamm Gottes) and 'Christ lay in the bonds of death' (Christ lag in Todesbanden).

Various excerpts of recordings were also used in the talk. Tom explained that among the people who organised hymn singing in the new 16th century Reformation churches, Luther was unusual in his approach to choosing melodies. Sometimes he used existing chorales that were familiar to all ordinary lay people in the German-speaking lands, for example, 'Christ lag in Todesbanden.' He was very concerned to encourage people to sing in church, something that congregations didn't do in the Roman Catholic masses, where choirs sang the music.

A progression can be seen in how chorale melodies were treated harmonically over the centuries. At first there was plainchant, then polyphonic harmonisation, then in the Baroque period use of basso continuo on organ or other instruments and after that the chordal method of harmonisation. The latter was introduced around 1720 by Rameau. An interesting point was made about Mendelssohn, who we all know was Jewish, that his family became Lutheran Protestant in 1822, when he was 13. Lastly Tom pointed out that in Mendelssohn's 'Reformation Symphony', the tune of 'Ein' feste Burg' is quoted.

Altogether a specialist talk, but a fascinating one.