**Chapter 5**

**Protestant Church Music**

When churches across Europe splintered away from the Catholic Church during the Renaissance era, new forms of sacred music were created. One of the primary changes in the new churches was that the congregation was allowed to participate much more fully in the service. This principal extended to the music used, and in Protestant churches the congregation sang parts of the service along with the celebrant. This required more simplistic forms and melodies for amateur singers and it required that the music be in the vernacular language rather than in the Latin used in much Catholic church music.

The most commonly used form of sacred music in Protestant churches is the hymn. Also called chorales, these works are brief with easily singable melodies. They are in strophic form, meaning that there are multiple verses of text set to the same music. The hymn is usually accompanied by the organ to assist the congregation in singing. Often the organist plays through the hymn, or a variation of it, before the congregation begins to sing. These organ introductions are called chorale preludes and became increasingly elaborate during the Baroque era. They were initially used to teach the congregation the hymn-tune. Hymns are homophonic, usually in four parts that fit the four human voice ranges. They are usually rhythmically simple, with melodies that have narrow ranges. Most Protestant composers of the day wrote hymns, and even the great religious reformer Martin Luther composed hymns and chorales.

Another important vocal sacred form developed for the Protestant church service is the cantata. It differs from the hymn in many ways but perhaps most importantly in that it is not for the congregation to sing—it is performed by the choir of the church, who were often professional musicians and highly trained ensembles. The cantata was developed in the Baroque era as part of the Lutheran church service and its most important and prolific composer was Johann Sebastian Bach. It is elaborate, about thirty minutes long, and requires soloists, a choir, and an orchestra to perform. It more resembles the oratorio or opera than it does other sacred forms. Today we hear cantatas performed in the recital hall and the church. For the most part a cantata is a sacred piece of music, but some secular cantatas were also written. For example, the still popular *Coffee Cantata* by Johann Sebastian Bach was written about the coffee-drinking craze which hit Western Europe during his lifetime. But, the standard cantata is for the church. The text is taken from the Lutheran Bible and the work is like a miniopera or oratorio without sets, costumes or acting. There are specific characters within a cantata and the choir often reacts to arias sung by the soloists. Cantatas were written for performance on important dates in the church year and drew from Biblical text used at that time. Bach’s job in Leipzig, Germany required that he have specific music for each Sunday in the church year and the cantata was a form that he used to help him create this amount of music.

J. S. Bach was a Baroque era composer who lived from 1685 to 1750. A German composer from a musical family, he held positions in Eisenach, Arndstadt, Muhlhausen, Weimar, Cothen, and Leipzig. He worked as a court composer early in life and wrote a good deal of excellent secular instrumental music. But, his most important post was at St. Thomas Lutheran church in Leipzig, Germany, where he supervised the music for four churches. Here he wrote music for choirs, orchestras, and soloists for each Sunday of the church year and rehearsed and taught various choirs for the church. Today, we think of Bach as one of the three or four most influential composers to have ever lived. But, in his own lifetime he was little known outside Germany and was not thought of by the general public as a leading composer. Bach was a virtuosic organist who was highly skilled at improvisation. This skill greatly contributed to the many chorale preludes, fantasias, toccatas and other free-form pieces that he wrote for the organ. Bach had a large family and three of his sons were important and successful musicians in the early Classical era. The music of Bach is everywhere today and he wrote in all forms of his day except for opera. His music is usually polyphonic and imitative in nature and is the culmination of the Baroque imitative style.