Costumes and Tunes—Activity 15

Purpose   Concurrently or alternately—

To engage students in an endeavor to explore various **costumes** that would have been "in fashion" and to which the nonconforming thinkers in history would have most likely conformed in their own personal attire.

To have students research various prevalent **musical styles** that the nonconforming thinkers through the ages would probably have appreciated and embraced as entertainment.

To let students experience two **songs** sung today (both deriving out of a one historical context–Germany, 1500s), and to encourage their conjectures with respect to how the songs have made their respective ways to modern times.

Materials   Encyclopedias or other reference materials, particularly sections on "Costumes" and "Music"

Activity sheets: 1) historical context; 2) a Protestant hymn; 3) a freethinkers' anthem

Optional—clothing, as available for modifications; ornamentation to be gathered by students

Procedure

1. Assign groups to research the conventional type of dress worn (or musical instrumentation available) during the major era of historical interest. Prompt them to be aware of the social group to which the nonconforming thinker(s) belonged!

> *Note:* Whereas a nonconforming thinker would typically wear clothing in keeping with compatriots, there are some such individuals who also adopted unconventional attire.
>
> One interesting example is to be found among many mid-19th century women reformers (e.g., Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Wright). Once these women tried "Turkish trousers," they much preferred them to the long skirt fashion of the day (the blousing pants enabled easier movement.) But, wearing such a costume in public had serious social consequences. After a brief stint, Stanton abandoned the practice of wearing them (except within her own home), but Fanny Wright wore them in public for an extended period and bore up to the repercussions.

2. Students sketch costumes simulating the fashionable dress of the time (or describe the musical vogue of the period).

3. Students probe the two songs on the activity sheets for their historical and present-day meanings, making inferences to fit both the narrative information and the songs' wording.

Extension

1. Have a "fashion show" for students to model the various modes of conventional dress (and unconventional, too, if discovered) for the time period(s) of interest.

2. Have a "concert" or a "sing-along."

Two Tunes with a Long History

This activity features two short songs. Both are sung in present-day gatherings. One is a religious song that you will hear sung in many Protestant churches—as a hymn. The other one is also sung today, but it would probably not be heard in any churches. It is a freethinkers' anthem. Both melodies have their roots in turmoil of Germany in the early 16th century. Does history offer any clues to how these songs are used in modern times?

Martin Luther and the Peasants' Revolt

After his well-known act of rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church, Martin Luther moved to a part of Germany where he could be safe. There he maintained a busy life. He worked to build a competent educational system. He wrote extensively on church and religious matters. He produced numerous documents, including a liturgy, hymns, and two catechisms. Through his forceful writings and preaching, his beliefs spread.

In the early 1500s, the German peasants were much oppressed by landowners. They were encouraged by Luther's concept of the freedom of a Christian man, which they applied to economic and social spheres. In other words, they listened to what Luther had to say about thinking for themselves. Long ground down by the nobles, in 1524 they began revolting against the landowners.

In March 1525, the Swabian peasants drafted twelve Articles (demands). Relying on the Gospel, the peasants called for free election of the clergy, abolition of serfdom (unless it could be justified from the gospel), free use of the forests, permission to hunt and fish, and reduction of their burdens. Their document went through twenty-five printings.

At first, Luther recognized the justice of the peasants' complaints. But, when they turned to violence against established authority, he lashed out against them. He wrote a virulent pamphlet ("Against the Thievish and Murderous Hordes of Peasants"). It called on the princes to "knock down, strangle, and stab…and think nothing so venemous, pernicious, or Satanic as an insurgent."
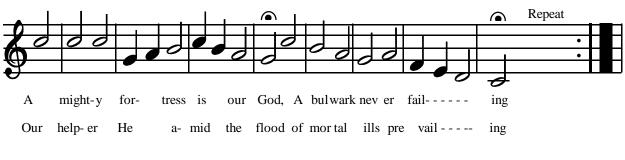
By 1526 the princes and nobles had crushed the revolt. The peasants were badly beaten and suppressed again. At the collapse of the revolt, all copies of the Twelve Articles made by the Swabian peasants were confiscated. Many thousands of peasant lives had been lost. The surviving peasants considered Luther a false prophet. Many of them returned to Catholicism or turned to more radical forms of the Reformation. Some became freethinkers.

Martin Luther wrote the hymn below as part of his effort to reform the Christian worship service. The translation from the German is by Frederick Hedge.
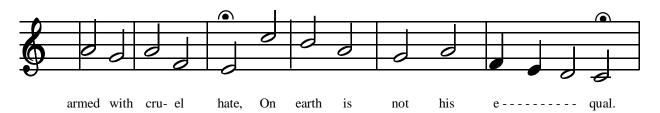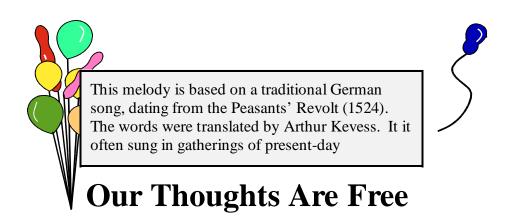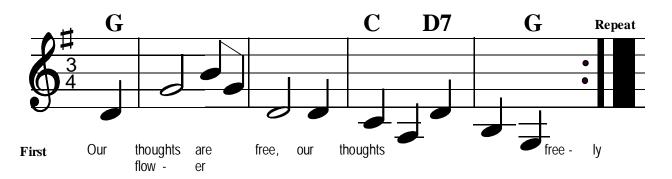
A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
by Martin Luther

A might-y for- tress is our God, A bulwark nev er fail- - - - - - ing

Our help- er He a- mid the flood of mor tal ills pre vail - - - - - ing

For still our an- cient foe Doth seek to work us woe: his craft and power are great, and

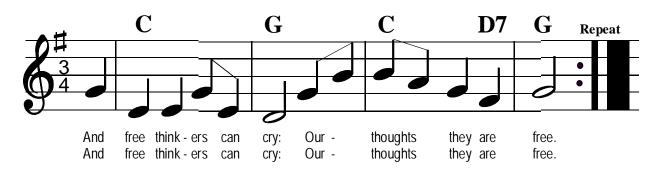armed with cru- el hate, On earth is not his e - - - - - - - - - - qual.

When Luther began his musical reforms, the German Church had already developed some musical traditions. For centuries, tropes and sequences (little hymns) had been sung in connection with the Amens, Kyries, and Alleluias. Familiar parts of the service (for example, the Ten Commandments and some Psalms) already employed the German language. German was regularly used as the language for the Credo (creed) and the Lord's Prayer. In addition to simple melodies, a congregation would have many folk tunes and semi-religious songs called Leisen. Most of these songs were

This melody is based on a traditional German song, dating from the Peasants' Revolt (1524). The words were translated by Arthur Kevess. It it often sung in gatherings of present-day

Our Thoughts Are Free

First Our thoughts are free, our thoughts free - ly
flow - er

No hun — ter can trap them, no schol — ar can map them

And free think - ers can cry: Our - thoughts they are free.
And free think - ers can cry: Our - thoughts they are free.

Second Stanza

I think what I please, and this gives me pleasure.
My conscience decrees, this right I must treasure.
My thoughts will not cater, to pope or dictator.
And freethinkers can cry: Our thoughts, they are free.
And freethinkers can cry: Our thoughts, they are free.