

Making Sense through Music

Perceptions of the Sacred at *Festival Musica Sacra Maastricht*

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This dissertation explores how musical performance offers a platform for perceptions of the sacred in contemporary western culture. Buildings like libraries and museums, and activities like engaging with art and music are often discussed in terms of replacing churches and religious practices. Yet, this dissertation departs from the question to what extent the equation between art and religion holds stake. Therefore, inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, I take a family resemblance approach to see whether artistic practices may fulfill religious functions, and religious practices may function in terms of art. One particular field was studied for multiple years: the annual Dutch arts festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. It exists since 1983 and offers a long weekend filled with a range of classical music, ranging from Gregorian chant to contemporary art music. In addition, non-western music is part of the program, as well as performances in other artistic disciplines such as theatre, dance, and film. The festival performances take place throughout the city of Maastricht, in historic buildings such as churches, chapels, the city hall, and the theatre. The festival was selected as research topic due to its strong engagement with the idea of the sacred. It offers a field in which the notions of art and religion both have a place: they meet, clash, or merge into something new.

Part I: Context, Method, and Theory

Chapter 1 begins with the observation that the perspective of the study of religion may be of relevance in exploring the function of art in contemporary culture. As Robert Bellah argued, it is impossible for humans to remain in ordinary, everyday life twenty-four seven. In order to remain capable of fulfilling our jobs and completing our duties, humans need to have experiences of non-ordinary realities that complement ordinary ones. In this project, I explore to what extent this non-ordinary layer may be found in engagement with artistic practices.

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Some more directly than others, works of art challenge the listener or viewer to establish and explore a relationship between the temporary realities of the artworks and everyday life. In these explorations, the attribution of meaning plays an important role. Meaning is always subject to valuation: some attributed meanings are of greater importance than others. These values are not fixed, but may be subject to change over time. Taking the study of religion as departure point, the meanings valued as ultimate or non-negotiable may be understood with the concept of the sacred. The practices through which these meanings and values are attributed may be studied with the concept of ritual. As observed by Émile Durkheim, objects, persons and ideas attributed with a sense of ultimate value receive a special status, are set-apart from the ordinary domain, and are protected from negative influences or contamination from the outside. In contemporary culture, art has such a special status. Yet, having received a set-apart status and taking place in set-apart spaces does not automatically imply that every work of art is regarded as sacred by every individual. Such a valuation eventually depends on how people relate to the artworks, how they perceive them, and what kind of meanings they attribute to them.

Chapter 2 offers a reflection on the research methodology. This project is developed around two fundamental components: the theoretical framework and the gathered data from the field, rooted in the assumption that theory informs the field and vice versa. The choice for ‘sacred’ and ‘ritual’ as main concepts demonstrates how this project takes the academic discipline of the study of religion as departure point. Yet the approach to the concepts of the sacred and ritual is a broad, interdisciplinary one. It draws from several disciplines in which the potential of the sacred has been revalued as a concept in understanding human behavior across times, places, and cultures.

While words can never fully capture the experience of music, description is at the heart of this project. In order to convey the meaningfulness and value of perceptions of performances, words are necessary. Musical experience is studied here at the level of interpretation, which was approached by means of ethnography. This research method consists of three, strongly interrelated aspects - participant observation, sensory ethnography, and the conduct of interviews. The increasing academic focus on the value of the complete sensory system for academic research coincides with an awareness of the complexity of putting experiences into words. My sensory knowledge as ethnographer is used as a tool in analyzing performances, as a departure point in approaching interviewees, and in analyzing the words they use to describe their experiences.

In order to gain access to the field of *Musica Sacra Maastricht*, the festival is approached by identifying three groups of participants – the program committee, audience members, and performers. Each of these groups requires specific strategies to enable data gathering. For three years I joined meetings of the program committee as participant observer. The audience members were part of a focus group and a selection was asked to keep festival diaries. These diaries

in turn functioned as departure point for interviews. Critics, whose reviews were analyzed, formed a sub-category within the audience group. Performers were invited for interviews as well. In the data processing, relevant fragments were selected based on theoretical lines of enquiry concerning the sacred and ritual. This resulted in a wide variety of fragments, which were coded and grouped to indicate overarching themes. These themes function as structure for the analytical chapters.

I represent each of the groups in all its diversity and variety. Every participant has strong individual opinions and it is impossible to approach the groups as coherent wholes. The analytical chapters do not consist of thick descriptions of particular concerts. Rather, it is my intention to say something about how the performed music works for those involved. As far as the analyses have a reductionist character, it is not to state something about these particular research participants, but about how music and its performance may function as possible platforms of the sacred.

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters that constitute the theoretical framework. It concerns the theoretical relationship between the concept of the sacred and music performance. The concept of the sacred emerged in the discipline of the study of religion and has been topic of heated debate. Disagreements were rooted in two fundamentally different approaches, in the terminology of David Chidester and Edward Linenthal: on the one hand, the substantive approach that evolved around the question whether the sacred is something, a power that manifests itself and has a presence independent of other factors, containing a mysterious and predominantly experiential quality; and on the other hand, the situational approach that regards the sacred as a concept used to describe the highest and collectively most cherished values within a particular semantic system and the variety of practices upholding these valuations and the system in general. While the substantive, theological approach to the sacred has given the term a moot character in the study of religion, recent years have seen a reclaim for the potential of the situational sacred within disciplines like sociology and cultural studies. My project is an exponent of this reclaim and it is grounded in the conviction that the concept of the sacred carries great theoretical potential for understanding the relationship between artistic practices and valuation processes in contemporary culture.

A range of situational approaches is of interest. Jay Demerath's typology identifies the characteristics of experiences deemed sacred, based on social context and the intentions and effects for the experiences. Matthew Evans has created a typology to identify the implications of the different ways in which the term 'sacred' is used. He related usage to whether it concerned an individual or a collective context, and whether it related to natural or supernatural realms. While the typology is a useful instrument to identify subject matter deemed suitable to be studied from the perspective of the sacred, Ann Taves has created an analytical tool for exploring the question why things, persons, and events

may be experienced as and called sacred. She formulated four building blocks that people mix and match in generating things they view as sacred: setting things apart, non-ordinary powers, non-ordinary worlds, and processes of valuation. Finally, Veikko Anttonen, Roy Rappaport, and Gordon Lynch viewed the sacred as a feature of discourse and form of communication. This approach reiterates how sacrality is not an intrinsic characteristic, but the result of human behavior. Building on these theoretical approaches, I propose the following working definition: the sacred is a marker of ultimate, non-negotiable value used as a sense-making strategy that relates perceptions of ordinary and non-ordinary character.

While the theorization of the sacred has seen a large conceptual and disciplinary expansion, research on the relationship between the sacred and music is mostly dominated by studies of the genre sacred music and, almost self-evidently, focuses on the relationship between religion and music. Yet, the theoretical expansion allows for a broader look. If the sacred is a form of communication, music can be studied as one such communicative form. If there is such a thing as sacred-making activities, attending concerts or festivals may be regarded as such. I approach music as a cultural phenomenon in the context of its performance, as a material, present event. During this event, musicological aspects concerning concept and composition surely play a role, but the main focus rests in how people (from different participatory positions) engage with the performances during the Maastricht festival.

Chapter 4 explores the participation in the festival from the theoretical perspective of ritual. While the sacred is the clear departure point in the family resemblance between art and religion, the concept of ritual turned out to be an inevitable relative. Many scholars, especially in the wake of the Durkheimian tradition, concur on how ritual practices result in perceptions of the sacred. Both the formats of a musical concert and a festival are highly ritualized events. Just like the sacred, the concept of ritual is a highly debated topic. These debates primarily emerged from the question how to use the notion of ritual in the context of research. It may be the subject of definition, like the prominent ones proposed by Victor Turner, Jonathan Smith, or Roy Rappaport. However, it may also be approached from a more descriptive point of view, as advocated by Ronald Grimes with his heuristic device of ritual modes. Such an instrument allows identifying and exploring different layers of which ritual behavior possibly consists. This is an approach deemed suitable to study the many layers of musical performance, as it reflects how so many participants experience a performance in so many different ways. Rather than identifying it as ritual, this project has the aim of scrutinizing musical performance for its ritual dimensions.

In line with a definition provided by Paul Post, I explore the ritual dimensions of *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. These dimensions concern: 1) it is a situation of contrast to the everyday, 2) it is a context that requires particular rule-governed

behavior to which participants ascribe, 3) the festival endorses a temporary collective formed by the participants, while their individualities simultaneously remain of crucial importance; and 4) it is an occasion that takes place due to a particular orientation on meaning (in this case, musical meaning). Furthermore, several scholars have addressed the relationship between art and ritual. Christopher Small claimed that ritual is the mother of all arts, as all artistic forms owe to ritual. Catherine Bell stated how artistic performances explicitly model the world in a condensed, comprehensive totality, which the real world never seems to be.

While a festival offers a situation contrasting the everyday life, it does not mean that it has no connection to this everyday life. The rule-governed behavior, the different identities, and the orientation on meaning during the festival are aspects intricately connected to the participants' everyday realities. Artistic and ritual practices may not have the same formal features or similarities in appearance or structure, yet they may function similarly for those engaging with them. To study the ritual dimensions of the music performed at *Musica Sacra Maastricht* means to study the effects of participants' engagement in these performances, effects that realize a connection between the perceived non-ordinary character of the performance and the ordinary character of everyday life.

Part II: Data Analyses

The three chapters in the second part of the dissertation explore the construction and performance of perceptions of the sacred by three differently involved groups in the festival. **Chapter 5** focuses on the program committee. The gathered data is structured and analyzed by means of the themes identity, quality, diplomacy, and selection. These themes represent how the committee relates to the notion of the sacred. By means of the festival the program committee wants to offer an exploration of the diverse and plural character of the sacred. It is seen as a notion that is continuously constructed and performed. At the same time, to them it is an ever present, powerful construct on which humans have no complete control. This duality of it being actively performed and constructed plus an ever-present uncontrollable power characterizes the discussions during the committee meetings and the resulting festival program. The artistic performances are seen as means to reflect on, and representative of, the intangible and inexplicable character of the sacred.

In their perceptions of the sacred the committee members use the notions of religion and secularity when talking about types of sacrality. Most of the selected music has a level of complexity that required a particular dedication in order to be fully grasped. Popular or purely aesthetic artistic expressions are not regarded to be able to communicate something about the sacred. The festival is not merely about confirming the already known or believed, but has a strong sense of discovery and experiment. Seemingly, sacrality in music is best ex-

plored in confrontation with the unknown and unexpected. As sounds in musical compositions only gain meaning by means of attributions of the composer, performer, and festival organizer and listener, the contexts in which the committee puts particular performances is very carefully considered and debated. The primary layers of musical meaning are found in the biographies of the composers, the sources of inspiration and subject matter of the compositions, and the occasions the compositions were written for. In turn these aspects are assessed on their levels of religious or secular sacrality and their suitability for the annual theme. By means of this last step, the committee provides the composition and the composer with a new context and layer of meaning.

For the program committee, music and space related to institutional religion is per definition regarded as sacred. Masses or liturgical chants are characterized as rituals with connotations of the sacred. This is an indicator of the committee linking ritual and the sacred. The notion of the religious sacred has a fundamental presence in the program committee's thinking. This fundament has a particular sacrality of its own and its presence unsurprisingly causes the persistent idea in the public domain about the festival being a religious music festival. Additionally, the committee put in all efforts to present their ideas on the diversity of the secular sacred. This results in programming a wide array of topics and music styles. As their perceived strict one-on-one relationship, the religious sacred has a more dominant presence in the committee's decision-making process than the secular sacred. While all committee members feel the urgency of incorporating approaches to the secular sacred, it requires more focused effort on their behalf.

Chapter 6 deals with the data gathered from the audience members. The data is analyzed and structured by means of four themes: musical performance, place, religion, and experience. These themes represent how the respondents related their engagement with the festival to the notion of the sacred. Across these four features appears a persistent contrast between old and new: in the music, in the concert locations, and in the performers. Different strategies of aesthetic appreciation are used between the old and the new. This is closely linked to how respondents relate to the familiar and unfamiliar, on the levels of the music, locations, performers, and performance settings. Interviewees use the idea of feeling at home just as much as the notion of surprise or adventure. Most respondents attend the festival with the hope, and some even with the expectation, of becoming overwhelmed in one way or another. These overwhelming musical experiences may take two forms. On the one hand, there is the feeling of being carried away, an experience of ecstasy and exaltation. On the other hand, there is the experience of being extremely present in the world created through the performance.

In their description of musical experiences, respondents primarily use binary oppositions: sound or storyline, looking or listening, paying attention or being carried away. However, when applying further analysis, the adopted listening

modes during a performance do not necessarily demand a choice for either the one or the other opposite. Instead, both oppositions are often incorporated in the description of one experience. Also, the interviewees often first refer to what the experience was definitely not, before trying to describe what it may have been. This dynamic, of referring to the opposite rather than to what it actually was, seems to result from the intangible character of music. Approaching it in this manner helps people to pinpoint what had occurred.

Looking at the musical experiences taking place in a context associated with institutional religion, a distinction in types of experience seems required. The difference may be indicated by using the terminology of ‘religious experiences’ and ‘experiences of religion’. The first type consists of experiences that affirm, reassure, or relate to beliefs regarding a supernatural entity or deity, while the second type covers experiences in which the notion of religion has a presence, but the experiences as such are not necessarily deemed religious. At the very least, the presented data on the experiences of the respondents shed light on the variety in which the notion of religion may be experienced in musical performance, and how this variety sees influences from both religious and secular domains.

In line with this, the data shows a remarkable dominance of religious terminology in both characterizing musical experiences and talking about the sacred. Particular kinds of experiences seem only to be able to be explained by means of terminology affiliated with religious discourse. While experiences are not characterized to be religious, the related terminology suited best in describing them. Even when respondents firmly distance themselves from any religious denomination, they still use terminology, such as ‘heavenly’ or ‘godly’. Not because the experiences should be characterized as being religious, for instance as being implicitly religious, but rather because no other discourse suffices. While institutional religions and their rituals have become part of a larger spectrum of meaning-making activities dealing with the non-ordinary, the terminology to describe the range of activities does not seem to have made the shift accordingly. This poses a challenge in finding vocabulary that suffices to discuss the character of activities dealing with intangible and immaterial matters such as music.

Chapter 7 deals with the data gathered from the performers, a group including composers, musicians, artists, and actors. This data is analyzed and structured by means of three themes: music making, genre, and meaning. Across these themes, for every interviewee the notion of musical integrity is crucial, they all want to produce and perform music they feel comfortable with and they can take responsibility for. This integrity often takes shape by defining oneself through relating to others within a particular musical tradition. The pattern seems to consist of first knowing what one is not or does not want, to then consequentially explore what one actually can or wants to be. Furthermore, this integrity is shaped by the performers’ relationship with the audience. The inter-

viewees are continuously aware they are writing and performing for an audience. Yet, many of the performers expect their audiences to work for their engagement with the music. To them, music is not only about offering a good time. The performers hope that their audiences engage themselves with the music beyond the aspect of pleasure, and to some extent also expect this - especially when it comes to the audience of a niche festival like *Musica Sacra Maastricht*.

Most interviewees are concerned with the reason for their choice of professional engagement with music. Their reasons for making music might not always be manifested up front, but all of them have a particular drive and affection towards their profession. Some very explicitly state they would not know what else to do, others formulate more substantial reasons. Many of them are concerned with the importance and social relevance of having music performed. Some are very outspoken in their ideas of why music matters: to offer a counter balance against the mainstream, mass mediated, and ephemeral dimensions in contemporary culture.

In the interviewees' vocabulary, the genre sacred music and all its implications has a prominent presence. Even when they have more nuanced or elaborate ideas about what they regard as sacred, they still simultaneously refer to the prevalent conviction of sacred music being religious, predominantly Christian, music. I would argue that the consequence of this assumed self-evident nature of the term sacred music entails a loss of the term's relevance. In equating sacred music with religious music, the term 'religion' is thought of as an all-encompassing term to characterize and qualify a particular kind of music. By choosing religion as a defining feature, rather than as a starting point or a contextual point, no other questions are asked about the nature of the music; as if for them the term religion is all encompassing. Let alone that it will be questioned whether it is beneficent to have such an assumed defining qualifier at all. In addition to the assumed religious character of the music under the term sacred music, particular assumptions exist about the kind of music that would be performed during the festival. Next to the expectation it concerned music used in the context of religious rituals and liturgy, there is the assumption that it would be classical or, more precise, western art music. The performers regard popular music as exemplary of this mainstream, mass-mediated, ephemeral culture, which is thought to be incapable of conveying any sacred dimension.

A final prevalent feature in the data gathered from the performers is the notion of boundaries and constraints. When it comes to the relation between the sacred and music, almost automatically a set space is assumed, within which they could operate. This space demands special treatment, respect, and awe; rules and regulations are implied. The performers continuously relate to these boundaries and their implied rules, exploring a range of options and possibilities in both the practices of composing and performing. They have an awareness of crossing lines, the implications this may have, and the range they allow themselves to work within. In addition to the individual performers, this sense

of boundary and exploration is also attributed to the activities within the festival. The festival program is characterized in terms of diversity in content, but consistency in identity. The approach to the sacred as used by the program committee seems to have a crucial role in this. The notion of religion is seen as a departure point - in the genre implications of the name, in the annual theme, in the majority of the concert locations - and from there, the exploration of the boundaries develops. The performers who are familiar with the festival recognize this as one of its characteristic features, and see it as a beneficent context for their music to be performed in. Relating to a set context implies an opportunity to more efficiently, and often also more adventurously, position oneself as a performer.

Part III: Reflections

In the final part of the dissertation, **chapter 8** relates the data analyses to the theoretical framework pertaining to the sacred, ritual, music, and religion. This chapter is structured along three levels of interest. First, there is the level of practices: how the presence and actions of the different group members constitute the concerts and the festival. The second level is the discursive frame in which these practices take place. This frame is determined by first- (or: how respondents use a particular terminology in relation to their experiences in the field) and second-order (or: how respondents conceptualize this terminology) concerns with the notion of the sacred and its strong relation to the notion of religion. The third level of interest is the dynamic underlying the practices within this discursive frame. It results from looking at the field from a third-order (or: academic, theoretical) perspective, discerning a dynamic of how people establish a relationship between non-ordinary and ordinary perceptions of their reality through the performed music. The aim of this chapter is twofold. The three discerned levels of interest are deemed to provide an understanding of the dynamics within the field of *Musica Sacra Maastricht*, as well as to cast light on the relevance of the use of a broad theoretical approach to the sacred. The discussions of these levels work towards the identification of what I hold to be the most fundamental aspect of the sacred: the notion of time.

In the exploration of what is theoretically suitable to be studied with the concept of the sacred, particular experiences of time play a crucial role. A changed temporal experience may be seen to result in an internalization of, and identification with, aspects of the performed music. This process may have a lasting character after the performance is over, influencing future perceptions of reality, and resulting in strong valuations during and after the performance. The occurring internalization process results from a strategy of differentiation. This is reflected in the data, primarily in how the program committee discusses the festival's position in the Dutch cultural sector and how performers discuss their reasons for making music. From a self-identified periphery, in relation to the commercialized and mediatized music sector, the committee and the perform-

ers feel they offer a counter balance by means of the music they program and perform. The visitors also discuss this sense of counter-culture; in that they could hardly find the music they ascribe meaning to elsewhere than at *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. This process of differentiation leading to a form of identification and internalization reflects the approaches to the sacred as a category-boundary, its set-apartness, and the attribution of non-negotiable, ultimate value to only a limited set of things.

Through their involvement in the festival, the interviewees demonstrate a subscription to particular ideas about religion in relation to the activities of the festival. Music, locations, subject matter, and ritual acts related to institutional religions are mostly identified as having a sacred character. Despite their large presence at the festival, institutional religions do not necessarily have a confessional character, but are rather regarded for their artistic and historical character. This artistic turn adapts religion, its institutions, and rituals, and thereby creates new room for its presence and relevance in secularizing contexts.

The festival performances are able to realize the experience of a relationship between the ordinary and the non-ordinary. I argue that this relationship is primarily characterized by the notion of time. People need to take the decision to step out of their perception of everyday, routine time, and engage themselves with the temporary world as offered by the art. Art forms like music, dance, or theatre have their own temporal dimensions and they exist by the grace of performance. In the experience of such performances, these dimensions override the structural time dimensions of everyday routine. Participants may bring (parts of) their own everyday life into this temporary world and relate it to the non-ordinary character of the artwork. In this process of the ordinary and the non-ordinary informing each other, conditions are shaped for perceptions of the sacred. In order to establish a situation in which these two dimensions inform each other, a change in the perception of time has to have occurred. It is a stepping out of ordinary time, into the time frame as offered or invited to by the work of art and its performance. While other factors like place and actions should be regarded as important features as well, the experience of a meaningful relocation in time is regarded as most decisive in the interviewees' described perceptions of the sacred.

While all three groups involved in the festival express great appreciation for the festival activities, the term 'sacred' retains a problematic and paradoxical position. The festival committee needs the notion of the sacred in order to produce a culturally and socially relevant festival. It enables them to select particular themes and program music that offer explorations of these themes. The different parties involved acknowledge this function and what it enables the program committee to do. Yet, they generally do not really appreciate the term 'sacred' and the institutional religious connotations, which the term predominantly has to them. Still, the committee needs it, in order to achieve the annual festival program, which the same respondents so greatly appreciate. The discursive implications of the term 'sacred' function as a catch 22; seemingly unsolvable

ble, and also reflective of how in academic contexts the concept of the sacred is viewed, in terms of the substantive and situational approaches.

Art does not per definition constitute perceptions of the sacred. Rather than subscribing to a fixed content, in late modern western society people long for performing and constructing perceptions of the sacred. Not one ideological voice is followed, but people seek forms and content that fit their own perceptions of reality. When related to the non-ordinary, the ordinary may feel better, improved, or even transformed. The contemporary world is fragmented and devoid of one dominant, prescribed ideological voice that provides answers to existential questions. Yet, this does not mean these questions should no longer be asked and explored. Even though concrete answers may not be found, the feelings of consolation and comfort these could provide are still longed for. For this longing and exploring in a context like the Netherlands, art may just be able to offer a most suitable platform.

