

IRILIS INSTITUTE FOR
RITUAL AND
LITURGICAL
STUDIES

Yearbook

for Ritual and Liturgical
Studies

Volume 33 | 2017

INSTITUTE FOR RITUAL AND LITURGICAL STUDIES, AMSTERDAM

CENTRE FOR RELIGION AND HERITAGE, GRONINGEN

Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies

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Editor Joyce Rondaij MA

ISSN 2589-3998

Design Yvonne Mathijsen

DOI 10.21827/5a2e41ccedc3e

‘My Soul Doth Magnify’

The Appropriation of the Anglican Choral Evensong in the Dutch Context

Hanna Rijken

1 Introduction and summary

In this thesis we noticed that there is a popular practice of choral evensong in the Netherlands, outside the context of the Anglican Church. The evensongs are held in monumental churches; boys choirs and mixed choirs dress up in cathedral vestments and perform a complete liturgy with English preces and responses, palms, canticles, an anthem and hymns; the churches are full of people, sometimes participants have to pay money for an entrance ticket. This popular (semi-)ecclesial performance is interesting in a so-called secularized country such as the Netherlands. The research into the choral evensong in the Netherlands took place against the backgrounds of tendencies of so-called secularization and de-churching. The important question is: why is the choral evensong so popular? For what reasons do choirs start to sing choral evensong and why do people attend the choral evensong? This thesis provided insight into the field of choral evensong in the Netherlands.

The main research problem was the paradox described above: the popularity of the choral evensong in a supposedly de-churching country. Research into the field of the choral evensong appeared to be helpful to gain insight into this particular research problem. The central research question in this thesis was: how is the Anglican choral evensong appropriated in the Netherlands? The central concepts of this thesis were ‘appropriation’ and ‘transformation of religiosity’.

Chapter 1 “The Anglican Virus” described from a historiographical perspective how the ‘Anglican Virus’ found its way into the Low Countries before 1980. Was it really a new phenomenon, emerging in the 1980s, or has there already been an interest in Anglican music in the Netherlands before that time? We nuanced the idea that the interest in English church music was something new around 1980. We noticed that besides the German influence on church music in the Netherlands, there had also been an Anglo-oriented line in protestant churches in the Netherlands. This line has been underestimated and received too little attention in the historiography of protestant church music in the Netherlands. Its beginnings go back to the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

* H. Rijken: ‘My Soul Doth Magnify’. *The Appropriation of the Anglican Choral Evensong in the Dutch Context*. Date of defense: December 12, 2017, Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Supervisor: prof. dr. M. Barnard, co-supervisor: dr. J. M. Hoondert. E-mail: hannarijken@hotmail.com.

In the twentieth century the term Anglican disease was used both in a positive way, as a description for a ‘fall in love’ for Anglican music, and in a negative way, to indicate that Anglican music is not healthy. We discerned two periods in the introduction of Anglican church music and liturgy in the Netherlands. The first period extended up to the Second World War, the second period covered the time after that. We noticed that individuals played an important part in the introduction of Anglican music. We focused on these persons and described them as ‘cultural brokers’. By doing this we redressed the balance between the German and Anglophile story somewhat.

In order to explore the appropriation of the choral evensong in the Netherlands after 1980, ethnographic research was carried out: participant observation at choral evensongs, analysis of program booklets or orders of service and websites, as well as interviews with key informants. As an analytical tool we used four perspectives to describe the appropriation of the choral evensong and especially the striking characteristics. We worked out each perspective in an article. The four perspectives that were eventually developed were: language (chapter 2), spatial practice (chapter 3), dress (chapter 4) and ritual musical experience (chapter 5). I will now recapitulate the content of these chapters.

Chapter 2 “O Lord, Save the Queen – ... or the King?” explored the use of the English language for worship in the Netherlands as non-vernacular. We investigated which qualities participants attribute to the English language in evensongs in the Netherlands. The language in the choral evensong we understood as ‘ritual language’. We used four of the five features which Roy Rappaport in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* formulated of ritual as features of the ritual language in the evensong: encoded (by others than the performers), formal, performative and invariable. We added a fifth feature, aesthetics. Based on the analysis of the fieldwork we could formulate the main conclusion that the English language is used because of the perceived beauty of its sound, the contrasting experience of using a non-vernacular and the evocation of an experience of sacrality. The non-native aspect of the English language as encoded, non-vernacular and archaic language enhances the feeling of ritual, mystery and sacrality. We noticed a considerable contrast with the language used in Sunday morning services of mainly reformed protestant churches: non-vernacular instead of vernacular, traditional (archaic) language instead of modern translations, encoded language instead of pre-dominantly self-chosen words, restricted language instead of mainly unrestricted, sung liturgical language instead of spoken liturgical language. Furthermore, instead of a focus on comprehensibility of words and approachability, we notice in the evensongs a hankering after beauty of sound and a longing for mystery.

Chapter 3 “Turning East. Turning Exit? Turning to the Music!” investigated the spatial dimension of choral evensong in the Netherlands: the spatial practice, the buildings, the dispositions and the use of the space. We compared the spatial practice in Dutch churches with the use of space in the cathedrals and colleges in the United Kingdom. The main question in this chapter was: what are the consequenc-

es of the spatial practices in the Anglican choral evensong in the Netherlands regarding (religious) meaning attribution? We described a wide range of dispositions used in the choral evensongs in the Netherlands, for instance the choir as focal point on the East side of the church, or the choir as focal point on the West side of the church. We investigated which meanings participants attributed to the spatial practices in the evensongs. From the interviews with the participants we could formulate three qualities: the monumental church building, the sound (acoustics) and the movement in the space (procession). Our main conclusion in this chapter is that in (most) Dutch choral evensongs three formats come together: an Anglican choral evensong, a Dutch reformed service and a choral concert. These formats are merged into a new format: a musical ritual with, in most cases, the choir as focal point. Reflecting on the fieldwork we mentioned three theoretical notions regarding spatial practice: (1) a ‘reconquering sacred space’, (2) a ‘cathedralization’ in reformed worship and (3), in comparison with evensongs in England, a ‘transformation’ of the spatial practice. We further investigated the notions of framing, new sacramentality and longing for transcendency.

Chapter 4 “Dress in Choral Evensongs in the Dutch Context” investigated which kind of dress is worn in choral evensongs in the Netherlands and which meanings participants attributed to the dress. As an analytic tool we used the concepts of denotational and connotational meaning. By a denotational meaning we meant the dictionary definition of a garment; a connotational meaning may be described as what the garment makes a person think or feel, or the associations that the garment evokes for someone. Analyzing the interviews we came across three categories of meanings and functions that participants attribute to dress in the choral evensong. The first category was the reference to ‘England as a model’ (‘copy behavior’ as a singer called it). By wearing Anglican (Anglican-like) dress, choirs indicate to belong to the high-quality sound group of English cathedral choirs. At the same moment, by changing the Anglican ‘dress code’ choirs emphasized their individuality and unicity, independent of church traditions. The second category was the marking of identity: choirs copy the dress from the English tradition, but add some elements to mark their own identity. Besides the marking of identity, also aspects of unicity, uniformity, group identity and gender-marking play a part. The third category was metamorphosis and transcendence. Choir members refer to unarticulated transcendental experiences by wearing ritual liturgical dress. On the one hand we noticed a ‘cathedralization’ or ‘ceremonialization’ of the dress of the choral singers, and on the other hand we noticed a de-institutionalization, for instance in the dress of the minister, if present.

The main conclusion of this chapter was that the data of the fieldwork reveal that dress in choral evensongs in the Netherlands points to changing religiosity on two different levels. Firstly, we noticed a mix of concert practices and Anglican-like rituals which the interviewees refer to as a new religiosity. Secondly, we noticed a transformation of the way religion is expressed or ritualized in the context of

reformed churches in the Netherlands. We observed a longing for other forms of worship with attention to ceremonies with vestments.

Chapter 5 “Angel Voices Ever Singing” focused especially on the musical experience of participants in the evensong and the metaphors they use to describe their experiences. It was interesting that participants often described their experiences in religious metaphors, like paradise or heaven. We derived six main categories of metaphors from the analysis of the fieldwork: (1) eschatological, (2) aesthetical, (3) sensorial, (4) transcendental, (5) emotional and (6) connection. We noticed that the categories were closely connected. The participants mixed them in describing their musical experience. We divided the categories of the fieldwork into two main clusters of categories: on the one hand ‘religious’ (eschatological) and on the other hand ‘aesthetical’ (aesthetical, sensorial and emotional) with ‘connection’ in between. The results of the fieldwork point to a close relationship between religious and aesthetical experiences. It seems that participants in the choral evensong, both believers, ex-believers and non-believers, attend this new emerging ritual because they look for ‘something’ higher, another reality. This experience of transcendence seems to be evoked by the so called perfect beauty of the music.

2 The appropriation of the choral evensong

To answer the research question, ‘how is the Anglican choral evensong appropriated in the Netherlands?’, we will first focus on the ritual appropriation, which refers to the structure and performance of the evensong. After this we will elaborate on the meanings given by participants. In the next section we will relate the elements which are part of the appropriation to the dynamics of religion and religiosity, the contemporary society and new forms of sacrality.

2.1 Ritual appropriation

Concerning the ritual appropriation of choral evensong in the Netherlands outside the Anglican context, we formulated three notions: (1) England as a model, (2) a ‘cathedralization’ of reformed worship, and (3) a transformation of the Anglican choral evensong.

Firstly, we noticed that England, and especially the perfect beauty in choral evensongs in cathedrals, abbeys, minsters and colleges in England, functions as a model in the Netherlands. Cultural brokers had experienced perfect beauty in England. They were touched and wanted to introduce the tradition of choral evensong to the Netherlands. The strong focus on England is interesting, because in the first chapter we noticed that in the historiography of church music in the Netherlands it was German church music in particular that was the model. We noticed ‘England as a model’ also in the use of the English language in the choral evensong: English hymns, psalms, preces and responses, canticles and also English lessons. Even the prayer for the queen is sometimes taken over in the Netherlands.

However, the Netherlands have a king. ‘England as a model’ also holds for the choice of the choir’s dress, sometimes very literally. However, some choirs change the ‘dress code’ and the dress of the clergy is not copied. The interior of an English cathedral is copied by the introduction of portable choir stalls and wooden boards. Choirs in the Netherlands try to reach the high vocal level of the English choirs by starting vocal education for boys and girls voices.

Secondly, we noticed in the appropriation of the choral evensong a – what we call – ‘cathedralization’ of concerts and of reformed worship. By this we do not mean the rise of churches with a seat for the bishop, but evensongs in which rituals from Anglican cathedral liturgy are copied. The Anglican cathedral liturgy is even performed in small Dutch villages, or at least a cathedral-like performance of liturgy is aimed at. This cathedralization is interesting, because the cathedral liturgy contrasts with the Dutch reformed Sunday morning services. Most of the choral evensongs in the Netherlands are performed in (strictly) reformed contexts or protestant contexts. We noticed this cathedralization most clearly in the procession with the robed choir at the beginning of the choral evensong, but also in the choice for monumental (mostly Gothic or neo-Gothic) church buildings and new attention to the East, in for instance ‘Turning East’. We noticed the cathedralization also in the role of the choir: the choir has more or less, as a cathedral choir, a leading role in the choral evensong.

Thirdly, in the appropriation in the Netherlands we noticed a transformation of the Anglican choral evensong. Concerning the language, we mentioned that sometimes additional sentences, such as for instance an *adjutorium*, are added to the prescribed language of the choral evensong. We also noticed a transformation of Anglican choral evensong in the spatial practice: in most reformed church buildings there are no choir stalls, no kneeling banks, and there is no organ in the east. There is no altar (and no sanctuary lamp), now the choir stands in the center. Sometimes choirs change the ‘dress code’ of the Anglican church, and the clergy is asked to dress casually. In most choral evensongs in the Netherlands there is no Creed and there are more hymns. In Protestantism in the Netherlands there are no choir schools with daily rehearsals for children’s voices to sing daily choral evensongs. There are thus many differences in the ritual performance of the choral evensong in comparison with evensongs in cathedrals and colleges in England.

2.2 Appropriation as process of meaning attribution

In order to answer the question about the appropriation as meaning-giving process, we will now explain which liturgical-ritual qualities participants attribute to the choral evensong. Recapitulating the results of the fieldwork analyzed in the articles we noticed six returning elements: aesthetics, sacrality, rituality, transcendence, contrast experience and connection. We will elaborate on these elements.

In nearly all chapters beauty was mentioned. Participants described the beauty of the sound of the English language. Sometimes a teacher of English is asked to read the lessons because of his beautiful pronunciation. Besides that, participants hold in high esteem the beauty of a monumental church

building with perfect acoustics, the high vocal quality and beauty of the music. They also explain that the beauty of the ritual performance is important. This beauty seems to yield a transcendental experience.

Sacrality was mentioned as another quality: the sacred language, the sacred space with rituals such as processions, the dress and the music. The archaic English language was described as a sacred language by some of the interviewees, evocating an experience of sacrality. According to the interviewees wearing choral robes contributes to a sacred feeling as well. In chapter 4 we wrote about ‘reconquering sacred space’. We noticed that participants prefer the monumental church building (rather ‘*domus dei*’ than ‘*domus ecclesiae*’). Interviewees explained that the silence in the church building is a quality, as part of the sacrality. In some choral evensongs in reformed contexts we noticed a new attention to the East as sacred direction.

An attributed quality which is also of importance for the participants in choral evensongs is rituality. People described the ritual quality of using a non-vernacular language, which enhances the feeling of mystery instead of intelligibility. But also the use of encoded language is described as a quality. Interviewees explained that the rituality in the performance is very important, for instance the procession at the beginning of the choral evensong and also the ritual music.

In all chapters we noticed a hankering for experiences of transcendence. The transcendental experience is evoked by the ritual language, spatial practices as the ‘Turning East’, the use of cathedral robes, and by the beauty of the music. Interviewees explain that there is one on-going flow in the choral evensong, which brings about a transcendental experience. Sometimes participants described unarticulated transcendental experiences, referring to ‘something higher’ or ‘something deeper’.

Closely related to this is the contrast experience, in the language, spatial practices, dress and musical experience. Participants describe a contrast experience with the usual Sunday morning services. They criticize the reformed emphasis on spoken words, the use of daily language and non-encoded language and the noisy atmosphere in protestant Sunday morning services, the fact that people are chattering loudly before the service and sometimes also during organ playing. In contrast to this there is silence in the choral evensong, more ‘*domus dei*’. According to the interviewees the high vocal quality in the choral evensong contrasts with the music in most Sunday morning services. These contrast experiences are closely related to experiences of transcendence.

The last chapter also mentions connection as an important quality in the choral evensong. People describe a connection between believers of the entire church (from strictly reformed to Roman Catholic), a connection between believers, ex-believers and non-believers and between ‘heaven’ and earth. Music as a bridge seems to play an important part in this connection.

3 Reflection

In this research we looked through the lens of appropriation of the choral evensong at the dynamics of religion and religiosity in our contemporary society. What does the appropriation of the choral evensong tell us about these dynamics? An important conclusion of our research is that in (most) Dutch choral evensongs three formats (or: cultural systems, or three influences) come together: an Anglican choral evensong, a Dutch reformed service and a choral concert. These formats are merged into a new format: ‘a (Dutch) choral evensong ritual’. This ritual is very popular, many choirs sing the choral evensong and many people (believers and non-believers) attend the choral evensong. The choral evensong rituals are sometimes organized as a worship, as a worship and concert at the same time, or as a concert. We can explain these different realizations by means of the merging systems. However, the rituals are multi-layered. Concert evensong most of the time strictly followed the order of Anglican choral evensong and in an evensong organized as reformed worship the role of the choir was sometimes more concertant, for instance in the disposition. The performance of the evensongs moves between three different systems: the reformed worship in the Netherlands, the Anglican choral evensong and the choral concert.

From an Anglican point of view the evensong rituals are more concertant and deritualized. From a reformed point of view, in contrast to reformed services, the evensong rituals are cathedralized, ritualized and musicalized services (with attention to monumental church buildings, Anglican cathedral music and the introduction of some Anglican rituals). From the concert point of view the evensong rituals are ritualized choral concerts with processions, prayers and lessons. Each choral evensong moves between these three formats.

Now that we understand the different formats to which the Dutch choral evensong ritual belongs and moves between, we can go with more detail into what this appropriation of the choral evensong tells us about dynamics of religiosity in our contemporary society. In the research we noticed a hankering for aesthetics in relation to sacrality in Dutch society. Choirs start to perform choral evensong in monumental buildings with a procession, cathedral robes and sacred music. Many people, believers and non-believers, attend the choral evensongs and describe transcendental experiences, which go beyond the ‘here and now’ of the performance. Reflecting on these experiences, we made use of Paul Post’s heuristic and hermeneutic tool of ritual-sacral fields. The success of the choral evensong may be the possibility to appropriate the music-ritual form in at least three distinguished but closely related fields: religion, arts/culture and leisure.

The popularity of the choral evensong is partly explained by the multiple ritual-sacred fields, which make clear how the choral evensong is experienced and appropriated. But more is needed to understand why the choral evensong, with its typical combination of tradition, church-like perfor-

mance and artful music, is so popular. The key to answering this question is, in our opinion, the concept of ‘re-enchantment’. In the discussion we reflected on this concept.

In the research, we noticed a hankering for beauty and sacrality, both in the Dutch society of non-believers who attend the choral evensong and in the context of (strictly) reformed believers. In the reformed context we observed another approach to sacrality: not via the reformed minister (authority), the spoken word and the explanation, but via the experience of the flow of a fixed traditional liturgical order in which perfect beauty, sound, rituality, musicality, movement and silence play an important part. The popularity of the choral evensong points to a changing religiosity, both in Dutch society as a whole and specifically in the reformed contexts, with a turn to aesthetics (perfect beauty) and sacrality (holiness).