

# Time to Say Goodbye?

## A Study on Music, Ritual and Death in the Netherlands

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### 1 Introduction

'Time to say goodbye' by Andrea Bocelli and 'Afscheid nemen bestaat niet' (Saying Goodbye Does Not Exist) by Marco Borsato are frequently played during contemporary funeral rituals in the Netherlands. The title of the first song seems to indicate that mourners at funerals say goodbye, while the latter asserts that saying goodbye does not exist.

In this research, funeral music is used as a lens to study how people in the Netherlands nowadays deal with death. Funeral music is understood as music, both live and recorded, that is actually played during funerals. This means that the music is not necessarily, and often is not, composed specifically for the use during funerals. Any music can become funeral music once it is played during funerals.

#### 1.1 Death mentalities

The concept of death mentalities informs a major part of this study. Death mentalities are understood as both death-related practices and ideas that inform and come from these practices. From a historical perspective, Ariès studied death mentalities from the Middle Ages until halfway into the 20th century. He approached death mentalities by studying rituals surrounding the deathbed, developments at cemeteries and representations of death and dying in artistic expressions. More recently, Jacobsen and Walter both proposed characterizations of contemporary death mentalities. Jacobsen proposes the characterization of 'spectacular death' in which he stresses the mediation, commercialization and re-ritualization of death, next to the palliative care revolution and the rising specialization of death. Walter used the lens of everyday life in Britain and social media, and proposed the characterization of 'pervasive dead' in which bonds with the dead continue. What I take from Ariès's work, and from the studies by Walter and Jacobsen, is the approach: studying practices to find out more about the ways people deal with death. However, there are also differences. My research has a very specific, narrow lens: the lens of funeral music. Moreover, empirical data are retrieved on a small scale, in the Netherlands and within a certain period of time. In this way, I identified qualities of death mentalities as they occur currently in the Netherlands. Generalization was not my aim. My characterizations concern death mentalities on the level of funeral music in the Netherlands and the cultural changes that can be traced via this lens.

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## 1.2 Research question and methodology

The main research question in this research is: “Through the lens of music during contemporary funeral rituals in the Netherlands, how is death dealt with?” The lens of funeral music focusses on the following three aspects of music: the development of funeral music in the 20th century; the function of music during contemporary funeral rituals; and the meanings attributed to this music by next of kin. To answer my research question, I use a mixed-methods approach. To find out more about the 20th century development of funeral music, I analyzed newspaper reports from the first half of the 20th century, and gathered data via a survey amongst Dutch crematoria. Empirical data on contemporary funerals are retrieved by observations of funerals (n = 44; for pragmatic reasons, these observations are conducted in crematoria) and interviews with staff of system integrator companies (companies that build audio-visual equipment for crematoria, n = 2), staff of crematoria (n = 9), musicians (n = 6), ritual celebrants and other speakers at funerals (n = 7) and next of kin (n = 5).

## 2 Characteristics of funerary culture in the Netherlands

To understand contemporary funeral music and, more broadly, contemporary funerary culture in the Netherlands, I first elaborate on the 20th-century history of funerary culture.

Some of the most important changes in the 20th century are those with regard to cremation in the Netherlands. In 1913, the first crematorium in the Netherlands was opened, and the second crematorium was not opened until 1954. A year later, in 1955, when the cremation rate had already risen to 2% of the deceased, cremation became officially legalized by law.

From the end of the 19th century until halfway into the 20th century, Dutch society was divided into three social groups of Protestants, Roman Catholics and socialists. These so-called ‘pillars’ held a strong influence on people’s lives. Even though initially the push for cremation had emerged mainly in the socialist pillar, and cremation was forbidden in the Roman Catholic pillar, throughout the years the idea of cremation spread across the pillars. Halfway into the 20th century, when the Roman Catholic Church allowed cremation and the pillars started to lose their influence on people’s lives, the cremation rate and the number of crematoria in the Netherlands rapidly increased. In 1988, there were 32 crematoria in the Netherlands, covering a cremation percentage of 40%. In 2020, the cremation rate was 66%, spread over approximately 100 crematoria.

Contemporary funerals in the Netherlands are often characterized as ‘personalized funerals’, in which the life and identity of the deceased is key. A funeral consists of eulogies, music, pictures and, often, also a ritual with flowers or candles. The funeral is prepared by the nearest family members in consultation with the funeral director and possibly a ritual coach, funeral speaker or representative of a church. As the family, who pays the bill, decides which funeral elements will be part of the funeral

and who will give the eulogy, the family has a strong influence on how the funeral looks and how (the life of) the deceased is represented.

Even though every funeral is unique, recurring elements in contemporary funeral rituals show that there is a template in which this unique personalization takes shape.

### 3 The interplay between music facilities, musical repertoires and funeral rituals, 1914–present

After this introduction on changes in funerary culture in general, I zoom in on changes in funeral music from the beginning of the 20th century until present day. I use the concepts of mediatization and algorithmic culture. Mediatization concerns the long-term and interrelatedness of changes in the relationships between media, culture and society, while the concept of algorithmic culture concerns the ways algorithms and computational processes are part of cultural processes and vice versa. The benefit of introducing the concept of algorithmic culture within mediatization research is that the explicit focus on algorithms deepens the understanding of how algorithms have become part of mediatization processes.

The 20th century history of funeral music can be divided into three periods. In the first period from 1914 to 1960, the advent of a socialist musical repertoire reflected how socialist groups, one of the pillars in Dutch society, affected the Dutch funerary landscape. From 1960 to 1990, in a period of fixed and sober rituals, crematoria had selected combinations of three pieces of music. Next of kin did not need to think of the funeral music in detail, as a preference for, for example, music by Johann Sebastian Bach already decided the choice for the corresponding preselected combination. The use of these combinations went hand in hand with the use of the cassette tape, which facilitated the reproduction of preselected combinations of music in the tight time schedule in crematoria. From 1990 to the present, music is no longer connected to the pillars or derived from preselected combinations but has become one of the constitutive elements of the personalized funeral. This is partly facilitated by highly advanced audio-visual systems. The development of these systems is not only based on technological developments and the demands of crematoria but also on the wishes of next of kin. Moreover, the system functions as an invisible infrastructure in the crematorium, in which various media technologies deeply infiltrate funeral practices.

Remarkable changes with regard to both music facilities and musical repertoires are found in the advent and use of online music recommendation systems. Nowadays, next of kin search for ‘funeral music’ on recommendation systems such as Spotify. Even though many consider Spotify’s suggestions for funeral music as ‘a source of inspiration’, it is intriguing to realize that by searching for funeral music on Spotify, computational, automated algorithms have become part of the process of selecting funeral music. In this way, algorithms enter the ritual design of funerals, and, as such, funerals become part of an algorithmic culture. This leaves untouched that meanings of ‘algorithmically selected music’

are attributed only after the selection of the funeral music. However, it does show that algorithms have become an accepted part of the ways in which people construct the funeral for their beloved deceased; even though many consider these to be contradictory, algorithmic culture and the move towards more personalized funerals are going hand in hand.

## 4 Music asylums: About functions of funeral music

Based on the observation of 44 funeral rituals, several functions of funeral music are discerned: marking the start or end of the funeral, providing background music, extending spoken words and actions, dealing with emotions, ‘merely’ alternating with other funeral elements, and presenting identities. I argue that these functions of music during contemporary funerals in the Netherlands are facilitated and constructed by the refurbishing quality of music: music acts upon the environment in which it sounds and adds something positive to the environment. For example, when music sounds that reminds next of kin of the deceased, the music becomes coupled with the identity of the deceased and as such is able to present identities.

In quantitative sense, ‘presenting identities’ is the biggest function found in the analysis. Listening to music that was important to the deceased, or to music that reminds next of kin in other ways of the deceased, plays an important role in the personalization of contemporary funeral rituals. In a way, music is used to express the identity of the deceased. An important note should be made on this. During lifetime, the deceased has constructed a musical identity. This ongoing construction had taken place within specific socio-cultural contexts, in relation to, for example, friends, family, radio stations or music recommendation systems. The musical identity of the deceased as presented during a funeral involves identity transformation: it is the musical identity of the deceased as presented by next of kin. The process of (musical) identity construction by the deceased himself has come to an end and this identity can only find shape in the musical identity as presented by next of kin. In other words, the musical identity is no longer being constructed by the deceased in his/her socio-cultural context but is constructed by the socio-cultural context of which the funeral and the loss of the person had become part. During observations and interviews, this is often phrased as “this is who he was” and “this is how we want to remember him”: music signals not only who the deceased was but also how the next of kin (want to) remember him.

### 4.1 Musical eulogy

During contemporary funeral rituals, people who gather at the funeral all listen to the same music, irrespective of their own musical preferences. I propose to describe this phenomenon as a musical eulogy, as a way of paying respects and paying tribute to the deceased. In the musical eulogy, accuracy is vital. Contrary to the spoken eulogy, this accuracy is not to be found in the lyrical content as lyrics are

not written for the funeral of a specific person, and in most cases not even specifically for use during funerals in general. Still, funeral participants might still be able to ‘recognize’ the deceased in the musical eulogy as funeral music often corresponds to the musical preferences of the deceased or is related to the deceased in another way.

## 5 Funeral music between heaven and earth

In addition to the function of funeral music, I also studied the meanings attributed to funeral music, especially with regard to music that contains lyrics of which the words ‘heaven’ or ‘angel’ is part, and with regard to *Ave Maria*. In an age in which funerals in the Netherlands are characterized as secularized, one might expect a varied musical repertoire that has nothing to do with institutionalized religion. In reality, in rankings of popular funeral music, *Ave Maria* is often ranked in the top three, and the words ‘heaven’ and ‘angel’ frequently occur in the titles and lyrics of popular funeral music.

In this study, I describe how the interpretation of heaven and angels in contemporary funeral music is related to religion both within and outside institutionalized settings and that they are used as metaphors referring to the afterlife of the deceased. The interviews show that the words ‘heaven’ and ‘angel’ provide a language that allows next of kin and funeral professionals to express where the deceased now are. ‘Angel’ expresses the idea that the deceased is somewhere, that there is some kind of afterlife. ‘Heaven’ expresses an idea of where the deceased is. This does not imply that there is a shared convention as to what angels are or where heaven is.

With regard to the interpretations of *Ave Maria* in contemporary funeral rituals, it becomes clear that these are related to Christianity (of the deceased and/or next of kin), to the religious identity of the deceased, to memories of the deceased or to the context of the funeral itself. During interviews, I often encountered the phenomenon when the deceased had considered him/herself a Christian and was a church member, while other family members did not identify themselves as Christian or were not members of a church. During the planning of the funeral, negotiations had taken place about which Christian rituals would be performed. These might have been, for example, a blessing or the Lord’s Prayer. According to many interviewees, however, elements such as a reading from the Bible or saying a prayer are – to use words of interviewees – ‘too religious’ and not meaningful to them. Music, however, especially *Ave Maria*, is often an acceptable form for religious expression. On other occasions, however, next of kin rather relate the song to the religious identity of the deceased instead of to Christianity. Here, *Ave Maria* that had played an important role in the Christian life of the deceased is not only related to religion but also, and even more, to the identity of the deceased – it is poised between Christianity and personalization.

The *Ave Maria* is also regarded as a building block for a funeral ritual. People often phrase that *Ave Maria* fits the context of the funeral or ‘just belongs there’. Without referring to any Christian



background or memories attached to this song, *Ave Maria* is considered to be a piece of music that ‘fits the context of the funeral’, often because people had heard the song before during other funerals.

## 6 Conclusion

The main conclusion of my dissertation is that music plays an important role in the personalization of contemporary funerals. This personalization, however, is not a goal in itself. Instead, it is part of the ways in which next of kin continue their bonds with the deceased.

### 6.1 Continuing bonds

The continuing bonds model emerged in psychology in the 20th century in response to earlier models of grief. Contrary to these earlier models, in the continuing bonds model, bonds with the deceased are not severed but sustained. Even though most of the publications in the field of continuing bonds focus on experiences of grief and loss over a shorter or longer period after the loss of a beloved person, this dissertation shows that in the ritual setting of a funeral, which in the Netherlands is performed only a few days after death, part of contemporary funeral music can be understood and interpreted from the perspective of continuing bonds. Moreover, this study also raises the question of what is meant by ‘the dead’ in stating that next of kin ‘continue bonds with the dead’. On the one hand, funeral music evokes memories of the lived life of the deceased, such as holidays or other special moments in the life of the deceased. On the other hand, however, funeral music expresses ideas about the afterlife of the deceased, especially by referring to heaven. So, the experience of continuing bonds via funeral music concerns both the deceased before death and after death. This invites further exploration of the concept of ‘the dead’ in continuing bonds theory.

To further understand the continuing bonds model, I use Davies’s theory of ‘words against death’, a form of positive rhetoric to formulate and express death, bereavement and afterlife beliefs. Bailey and Walter suggest not to speak of ‘words against death’, but of ‘funerals against death’ as their research has shown that not only linguistic dimensions, but also emotional and social dimensions are important in funeral rituals. In my dissertation, I show that meanings attributed to music that personalizes the funeral ritual are not related to the lyrics, but to the memories and emotions attached to the song. Therefore, I argue that the linguistic dimensions are not always as important as the emotional and social dimensions; they often turn out to be less important than the emotional and social dimensions.

With regard to the notion of ‘against death’, another aspect should be mentioned. The current study shows that dealing with death is not only about the dead, and how and where the dead now are, but also – and maybe even more – about the living and how the living deal with loss and their interpretation of where and how the dead are now. So, ‘against death’ is not about the dead but about the living and how they deal with the dead.

The strong presence of the continuing bonds model in this research brings me to a new characterization of contemporary death mentalities – the continuing bonds mentality. This characterization emphasizes the important place the continuing bonds model takes in the ways people in the Netherlands nowadays deal with death.

## 6.2 Recommendations

I conclude my dissertation by providing pathways for future research. In this summary, I briefly touch upon my recommendation to study whether and how a revised order of the funeral ritual affects both the ritual and the experience of continuing bonds.

This study has shown that music plays an important role in the personalization of funerals and that this personalization can be regarded as part of the ways in which next of kin continue bonds with the deceased. Therefore, it is intriguing that the funeral ritual in the ceremony room ends with a confrontation with the (coffin of the) dead body of a beloved one when people pass by the coffin and pay their final respects. Often, this is an emotional task. Does the emotionally loaded task of passing by the coffin not erase or at least weaken the celebration of life during the funeral? This raises questions about the order of the funeral. Why do we pass by the coffin at the end of the funeral? Would it be possible to first pass by the coffin to say goodbye to the physical body, and after that perform the funeral ritual with its comforting songs and words with which next of kin express continuing bonds? Phrased in terms of the two song titles from the opening of this summary, one could envision starting the funeral with ‘Time to say goodbye’, yet concluding with ‘*Afscheid nemen bestaat niet*’.