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Making Sense of the Psalms

Aesthetics and Embodied Experience in the Performance of Psalms

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Abstract

This article discusses the appropriation of psalms in contemporary Dutch and Flemish culture through their performances in ‘extra-ecclesial’ settings and the ways in which aesthetics and embodied experiences play a role in this appropriation. Drawing on postsecular theory, we describe how both religious and secular dimensions are manifest in the performance of psalms on the level of aesthetics. Our contribution is a detailed analysis of empirical research data regarding different sensory perceptions (bodily, auditory, visual, synaesthetic), which we have studied both in isolation and interrelation. We show that religious and secular dimensions become intertwined in the temporally and spatially organized stimulation of different senses. A balancing act takes place between synaesthetic immersion in a collective ritual, and a more distanced, unisensory involvement to maintain individual authenticity. In this balance, an immersive ritual experience can become fertile soil for interaction with the transcendent. We argue that a postsecular stance should entail the interrogation and contextualization of immanent/transcendent dichotomies.

Keywords

multisensory experience – postsecular – collective ritual-musical appropriation – individual authenticity – (choral) music – religious heritage

1 Introduction

Collective singing in a concert hall ... that's too much like church music for me ... In a church, I would sing at the top of my voice, it's easy to join in, but in a hall like that ... I would be afraid other people would think I was fervently displaying my faith, like evangelizing ... (interview with Roelof, concertgoer of *150 Psalms*, 15 May 2020)

interview with Roelof, concertgoer of *150 Psalms*, 15 May 2020

I appreciate the recitation of poetry in a church, because it's a space that appeals to something that's not cerebral or intellectual, but emotional. For most people, religion is something emotional, it's a context where poetry is meaningful. (interview with Gaea Schoeters, poet of *Poesia Divina*, 28 September 2019)

interview with Gaea Schoeters, poet of *Poesia Divina*, 28 September 2019

At some point you immerse yourself in it, you forget your surroundings, you stare at a single point above, or on the organ ... you just take off! ... Just looking at nothing, it's something euphoric, something religious. (interview with Erik, singer of the *Genemuiders bovenstem*, 20 September 2020)

interview with Erik, singer of the *Genemuiders bovenstem*, 20 September 2020

The psalms are on the move.¹ The role of psalm recitation at the heart of the Jewish and Christian traditions, means that psalms have long been (and still are) predominantly associated with these religious traditions (cf. Brettler 486;

1 The empirical research and data analysis for this paper were conducted by Henk Vogel, who also authored draft versions of this article. Mirella Klomp supervised the coding and analysis of the data. Draft and final versions of the article were discussed with Mirella Klomp and with Marcel Barnard. The research is part of the research project 'Sing after God a new song: the ritual-musical appropriation of Psalms in Dutch culture between 1990 and 2020' at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam, which is being conducted by Henk Vogel and supervised by Mirella Klomp and Marcel Barnard.

De Bruijn 11; Klaassens 464, 67; Schotanus and Koops 1127–128; Schuman 169; Vogel, Klomp and Barnard 23–26). Just like many other examples of ‘religious’ heritage, however, the psalms are currently being reinvented and reframed in ways that are neither exclusively religious nor secular (Klomp 51; Meyer “Recycling” 65, 82–83; Wijnia 81). In our research on contemporary psalm performances, we frequently observe the intermingling of religious and secular meaning especially on the level of sensory experience as the opening fragments serve to demonstrate.

‘Postsecular’ theorists have argued that the re-dimensioning and blurring of the religious and the secular are often particularly conspicuous in the realm of cultural heritage and the arts and, in particular, on the level of sensorial experience (Džalto ix; Gauthier 453; Hodkinson and Horstkotte 324; Meyer and Verrips 29; Spalinger 59, 71; Wijnia 13, 42). Religious and secular meanings can come together when, for instance, art ignites experiences of transcendence, spirituality, or enchantment despite its secular context in a museum or concert hall, and when secular values such as the freedom of individual rationality begin to determine religious practices in place of religious authority and doctrine (Wijnia 13, 27, 64–65, 81).

A ‘postsecular’ understanding means not simply understanding the reframing of ‘religious’ heritage as a process of secularization but engaging in critical reflection on the dichotomy between the religious and the secular (Braidotti et al. 4; Gauthier 453; Hodkinson and Horstkotte 318; Parmaksız 107; Wijnia 11). Such reflection does not entail a denial of secularization but, rather, acknowledges the complexities which result from the overlapping and blurring of meanings that can be religious, secular, sacred, and mundane all at the same time (King and Werner 3–4; Meyer “Introduction” 1). Thus, the prefix ‘post’ should not be taken to mean the return of religion at the expense of the secular, rather, it denotes a critical attitude towards secular normativity, religious normativity, and an uncritical binary conception of the two as mutually exclusive (Braidotti et al. 4; Hodkinson and Horstkotte 319; King and Werner 4; Klomp 134, 60, 97; Parmaksız 101–103, 07; Wijnia 9, 15, 80–81).² Theorists of the postsecular argue that such a critical attitude is often strikingly manifest on the level of aesthetics (that is: sensory experience, see below), rather than on the

2 Apart from its ambiguous prefix, the notion of the postsecular has been rightly criticized for its over-dependence on secular normativity (Gauthier 449), and for being overly Eurocentric (Braidotti et al. 1–2). Despite this, it can still help to point to a contemporary configuration of Dutch and Flemish society in which it is, or has become, very common to question the normativity of religion, the secular (e.g. science), and the opposition of the two.

level of abstract ideas alone (Gauthier 452–453; Wilke 345).³ Scholar of religion François Gauthier argues that the religious and the secular are primarily negotiated on the level of experience (in relation to their aesthetic attractiveness or effectiveness) and not on the level of believing or belonging, thereby eroding the borders suggested in secular thinking between religious, artistic, secular, and public spheres as is suggested by secular thinking (452–453; cf. Grieser and Johnston 22, 40; Hirschkind 633; Meyer and Verrips 29; Wijnia 20, 43, 80).

We have observed the organizers and performers of ‘high art’ classical music events deliberately experimenting with the religious dimensions of the performances they stage in concert halls, traditionally a secular location. And we have seen practitioners of a religious musical practice (descant singing in Genemuiden) organizing concerts outside of the Sunday liturgy and seeking recognition and support from the secular institutions that implement UNESCO intangible heritage policies on behalf of the Dutch government. Studying such changes along traditional institutional and doctrinal delineations of religion and the secular would miss the ways in which these practices contest such delineations (Gauthier 449–450; Grieser and Johnston 4–7; King and Werner 7; Klomp 146; Meyer “Religion as Mediation” [28]). In a societal context marked by plurality, where (individual) experience seems to have gained ascendance over adherence to (religious) authority and belief (cf. Balkenhol and Jaffe 9; Meyer “The Dynamics of Taking Offense” 364–365; Meyer “Religion as Mediation” [33]; Spalinger 59; Wijnia 30–31), we have set out to ask how religious and secular dimensions are manifest in the performance of psalms on the level of sensorial experience.⁴ In other words: *How can we understand the aesthetics of psalm performance in a postsecular context?* In answering this question, we have undertaken an in-depth examination of aesthetics, and through this we aim to contribute to further theorization of the postsecular.

The notion of aesthetics can serve as a lens that directs our attention to the sensory experience of the psalms performances that we have studied. Along-

3 As we will discuss, we define aesthetics as the sensorial, embodied interaction with, and interpretation of the world (cf. Grieser and Johnston 8; Meyer and Verrips 21).

4 According to scholar of religion Sally Promey, distinctions between religious and secular spheres on the basis of “nonsensory interior” belief are “neither as easily and firmly located nor as extreme as many who have claimed to be moderns have asserted” (Promey 12). In other words, sensorial experiences have always played a role in the construction of religion and the secular, which encourages us to study the aesthetics of psalm performances even more.

side the work of religious-studies scholar Birgit Meyer, we understand aesthetics to be a “sensory engagement with the world that synthesizes sensation and sense-making” (Meyer “How to Capture the ‘Wow’” 20; cf. Grieser and Johnston 8; Meyer and Verrips 21). Such a synthesis undermines an unproductive opposition between sensory and abstract knowledge (Grieser and Johnston 29), and serves, therefore, not as an “overall critique against text and belief, or questions of meaning” (Grieser and Johnston 2), but rather as a corrective extension to the “text-oriented focus in the study of religion” that considered objects and practices to be mere expressions of ideas (Meyer “Religion as Mediation” [21]; Grieser and Johnston 3–4). Thus, an analytic focus on aesthetics helps to keep sensation and meaning in close proximity, “integrating the role of the senses in sense-making” (Meyer “Religion as Mediation” [7]; cf. Bräunlein 390).

Recent understandings of aesthetics have emphasized its embodied nature and ways in which the different senses are entangled (Grieser; Meyer “Introduction” 6; Promey 10–11). This is of particular interest in a postsecular context, as transformations of religion and the secular (have) brought with them changes in the hierarchy of how different senses are distinguished, evaluated, and cultivated (Grieser and Johnston 15, 18–19; Meyer “Religion as Mediation” [21]).⁵

Thus in our study of the aesthetics of psalm performance, we analyze the role of the senses—both separately and in relation to one another—in the meanings people attribute to the particular performances they participate in. In embarking upon this endeavor, we come up against the challenge of writing about the realm of sensorial experience on the basis of narratives and observation (see below). Although this is an indirect, verbal way of “thinking through and reconstructing the observed and analysed,” we agree with Grieser and Johnston that “thinking about a dance does not need to be danced, and studying religions/s does not require one to re-enact them.” Descriptive language can still be:

a valuable way of gaining both a closeness to religion as aesthetic practice (acknowledging the intensity and the qualities of aesthetic effects), and a position of distance, going beyond reproduction and appreciation

5 Grieser and Johnston use the notion of “aesthetic profiles” to describe the ways in which the different senses are distinguished, grouped, valued, and privileged in specific traditions (19). The idea is similar to Meyer’s “aesthetic regimes” (“The Dynamics of Taking Offense” 364).

of aesthetic forms and providing a systematic frame for comparing and analysing the single case in light of more general questions.

Grieser and Johnston 21⁶

In the findings section which will follow our description of our methodology, we seek to provide just such a systematic frame through our discussion of the ways in which different sensorial experiences of contemporary psalm performances are connected with sense-making.

2 Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between 2018 and 2020, in which we utilized a number of different methods for data gathering and analysis. We studied the performance of psalms in four different settings: the concert series *Psalm 151*, the festival of *150 Psalms*, a series of poetry events entitled *Poesia Divina*, and the liturgical tradition of *Genemuider bovenstem* (Genemuiden descant singing).

Psalm 151 took place at the initiative of composer Boudewijn Tarenskeen, who invited eight prominent literary authors to write a new psalm, which he then set to music. These pieces were then performed by the professional choir Cappella Amsterdam. We undertook participant observation during two rehearsals and two concert performances of this composition in 2018.⁷ *150 Psalms* was a large choral music festival encompassing performances from the renowned Nederlands Kamerkoor, Det Norske Solistkor, the Tallis Scholars, and the Wall Street Trinity Choir.⁸ We carried out participant observation over the course of three rehearsal days with the Nederlands Kamerkoor in Utrecht in 2020. *Poesia Divina* is a 5-year project involving 45 well-known poets who write and recite new psalms within the context of festival *Musica Divina* in the Kempen area in Flanders. We attended performances of this event in 2019.⁹ The *Genemuider bovenstem* is a tradition associated with the Dutch town of Gen-

6 Barnard, Klomp, Sonnenberg, Belderbos and Van Andel distinguish four different levels within research data relating to liturgical phenomena. Our data can be located on the first level ("perceptions by the researcher") and, to a greater extent, on the second level ("reconstructions of (...) perceptions of a phenomenon") (Barnard et al. 38).

7 A later performance can be watched online: <https://www.cultuur247.nl/boudewijn-tarenskeen-psalm-151/>.

8 See the project website: <https://150psalms.com/program-utrecht/>.

9 See the website of the 2020 edition: <https://musica-divina.be/en/programme/poesia-divina-live-2020>.

emuiden (although the tradition is not limited to a single place) in which an extra, higher melody is sung above the Genevan psalm melodies sung by (Reformed) congregations.¹⁰ *Genemuiden bovenstem* has been placed in the inventory of intangible heritage by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage, which implements UNESCO policies on behalf of the Dutch government.¹¹ Due to the pandemic situation, there were no performances of *Genemuiden bovenstem* that we could attend; however, the first author experienced this tradition twice, some years ago. In our interviews, we showed participants a YouTube video of *bovenstem* singing, and we talked extensively about the live experience. The interview with singers Erik, Arjen, and Lammert (fictitious names) took place in the Grote Kerk of Genemuiden, and we sang the descant together in the space where it is traditionally sung every Sunday.

Through the course of this research, we interviewed participants with different roles in each of the performances, including composers, poets, singers, speakers, musicians, organizers, and concertgoers, and we gathered other textual materials, such as newspaper articles (reviews). All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and textual material was coded using Atlas.ti software. We used evaluation coding for themes relating to sense-making (e.g. 'beautiful,' 'boring,' 'moving') and provisional coding for the sensorial experiences (e.g. 'sound,' 'vision,' etc.). We also analyzed the co-occurrence of these sensorial experiences with sense-making. During analysis, it became clear that some experiences were so highly multisensorial that we needed an additional category of 'synaesthetic perception.' This category came to include the perception of time and of space, which, earlier in the analysis, had existed as separate categories, but appeared to comprise data fragments which could be grouped together under the categories of bodily perception, auditory perception, visual perception and, in particular, synaesthetic perception.¹²

3 Findings: Perceiving Psalms

We want to present our findings according to four dimensions of sensory experience: bodily perception, sonic perception, visual perception, and synaesthetic perception. This final category relates to sensory perceptions in which

10 See one of the many examples on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/2SckJZ3idLo>.

11 See the intangible heritage website: <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/bovenstemzingen>.

12 Grieser and Johnston, however, list the sense of time and space alongside the traditional senses of seeing, smell, touch, hearing, and proprioception (16).

different senses merge so as to become indistinguishable, and which, therefore, cannot be categorized separately as, for example, sonic or visual perceptions. Multisensoriality is the main and most prominent characteristic of such sensory experiences.¹³

3.1 *Bodily Perception*

The first category, bodily perception, involves the ways in which respondents perceived the performance of psalms through their bodies. Examples of this include moving and singing along, (changing) posture, the perception of temperature, crying, goosebumps, and the sensation of being surrounded by other bodies. All such experiences contribute to the bodily perception of psalms as collective, intense, emotional, sincere, recognizable, and religious.

Firstly, respondents described how they perceive psalm performance as a bodily collective experience. They speak about being physically together in the space of a church or concert hall and of joining in a shared bodily practice. At the festival of *150 Psalms*, such togetherness was experienced in “walking from concert to concert, going through the program together” (interview with Tido Visser, 8 May 2019) and, for singers, through immersion in the physical sensation of singing together: “Sometimes, when all the voices intertwine, and everything comes together, you lose track of the boundaries between yourself and others” (interview with Dora, 28 January 2020). Concertgoer Johan missed out on this experience, asking: “Why are we only allowed to experience it so individually? Why not create connection by singing together?” (interview, 21 May 2019). By contrast, the elements of individuality that respondents experienced in the performance of *Psalms 151* resulted from the way in which the individual singers, before the start of the concert, would move around the concert space and chat with people from the audience and with each other. In *Genemuider bovenstem*, the physical act of sitting closely together and singing together in groups (of men) can enhance the perception of the psalm performance as something collective in nature. Respondents prefer it when the descant is produced by male bodies (vocal chords). In these performances it is, therefore, not the case that each and every body has equal access to the intimacy of singing descants together.¹⁴

Secondly, the bodily experience of psalm performance is ‘intense,’ and especially so in the activity of singing together. *Genemuider bovenstem* performances are singalong events where all can join in by sounding the hymn tune or the descant, an activity which respondents described as physically intense. This

13 We use the words ‘multisensorial’ and ‘synaesthetic’ interchangeably.

14 As such, practicing *Genemuider bovenstem* is an example of the bodily performance of

intensity is lacking when they do not sing along, or when they listen to recordings. Reported experiences include “shaking on [my] legs” (interview with Lamert, 20 August 2020), a feeling like “falling into a big bag and totally going with it” (interview with Erik) and “goosebumps and shivers” (interview with Arend Booij, 20 August 2020). Singers, and especially descant singers, prepare themselves by sitting upright, tilting their heads back a bit, and trying to give the experience their full attention. In *150 Psalms* and *Psalm 151*, physical intensity was experienced differently. In both cases, the performers were singers (Nederlands Kamerkoor and Cappella Amsterdam) who, by profession, need to perform the music as perfectly as possible. Camila (a singer at *150 Psalms*) emphasized that “for us, it’s tough ... We have to adapt very quickly ... we need to be very, very concentrated ... all the time” and, since it is “so very intense, in so many ways, we really need to be very healthy, in our minds and bodies” (interview, 28 January 2020). Such physical intensity was absent in the narratives of most concertgoers, with the exception of Rob (*Psalm 151*): “Ah those sounds ... I feel I am getting warm, even now, when I think of it again!” (interview, 6 December 2018).

Thirdly, the performance of psalms is an emotional, bodily experience: crying, or having goosebumps, for instance. Different respondents shared the memories they had of crying when they heard *Genemuider bovenstem*, narrating their experiences as illustrations of the format’s direct, intuitive, emotional power. We can compare this with Visser’s (director of Nederlands Kamerkoor and *150 Psalms*) record of

a concert about suffering, a program with painful notes. People huddle together. Two are holding hands. The man next to me wipes a tear. The psalms speak right to the heart.¹⁵

Respondents from *Psalm 151* and *Poesia Divina* did not speak in these terms about their emotional experiences. When they did talk about their emotions, their bodily reactions remained more out of the picture, as these events relied less on a collective state of ‘flow’ (see the synaesthetic perception section).

Fourthly, the performance of psalms is bodily perceived as “sincere.” Experiences of tears and shivers are perceived as truthful or honest. Such sincerity was

masculinity, as is well illustrated by singer Erik’s characterization of descant singers: “We’re a group! ... Men among men. Drinking some beer, eating some snacks to celebrate wedding anniversaries. That kind of nonsense” (interview, 20 August 2020).

15 Travel blog by Tido Visser, when *150 Psalms* toured to New York. See: <https://www.nederlandskamerkoor.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Verslag-Tido-150-Psalms.pdf> (last accessed 18 November 2021).

highly valued by respondents from *Genemuider bovenstem*, which they often described as ‘truly coming from the heart.’¹⁶ Here, ‘heart’ is used as a metaphor, but a corporeal one nonetheless, like ‘(lower) belly’ or ‘chest.’ Singer Erik asserts that you need to be physically healthy in order to sing sincerely, and not simply “technically right”:

When you're not so fit, when you don't feel totally healthy, maybe you're able to sing, technically. But the notes you sing aren't as beautiful as when you truly experience the texts emotionally, when you truly believe what you sing!

interview

The act of singing also evokes questions of whether it is done sincerely, or what ‘sincerity’ means for professional singers (*150 Psalms*, *Psalm 151*), who often emphasize that their sincere performance lies not in agreement with the (religious) textual content of the psalms but in performing the music to the best of their ability.

Fifthly, respondents described how they recognize familiar psalms with their bodies. Singers, in particular, talked about psalms being in their “muscle” memory, and singing them (almost) without the need to think. Singers who grew up in *Genemuiden* heard the psalms every Sunday in church and can “naturally sing along” (Erik, interview), and these singers are proud of having learned this by imitation instead of studying from sheet music, as is often the case for descant choirs from elsewhere. *Genemuider bovenstem* respondents are convinced that learning the parts from sheet music is less “natural” and “too rehearsed” (Erik, interview). In a similar manner, Dora (a singer at *150 Psalms*) describes (almost) subconsciously performing music that is familiar and which has

become part of your muscle memory ... it's not a conscious action, it's just something you do ... and when you start to think about what you're doing actually, you've lost it!

interview

At the festival of *150 Psalms*, a large number of different compositions spanning a wide range of different musical styles had to be performed, most of which

16 The practice of *Genemuider bovenstem* descant singing is particularly popular in the strictly Reformed subculture in the Netherlands, which is characterized by emphases on conservative Reformed Calvinist values, on believers' personal conversions, and, most important in this context, their authentic faith experiences (Stoffels 122–145).

were not very familiar for the singers. This is also the case for *Psalms 151*, as Stefan comments: “we’re still so busy singing the right notes, that I’m not yet lifted up by singing” (fieldnotes 1, 25 November 2018).

Finally, the performance of psalms can be bodily perceived as religious. This appears to be something precarious, something that respondents are hesitant about. Depending on the spatial context, respondents desire to embody a certain ‘religiosity.’ For example: concertgoers at *150 Psalms*, even when they were regular churchgoers and choral singers themselves, were glad that they did not have to sing along in the concert hall, as Roelof’s quote at the opening of this article illustrates. Similarly, Tido Visser (director of the Nederlands Kamerkoor and of the festival) was cautious that collective singing could become too “churchy” (interview). In *Poesia Divina*, which in 2019 took place in a church, some of the performing poets reflected on whether, and how, their performance style (gestures, posture) should be in some way ‘religious.’ For Bart Stouten, writing, and reciting poetry facilitates an embodied connection with the transcendent:

Religion is about connecting the earthly with the transcendent ... our bodies and our limited memories aren’t capable of getting in touch with it, at least not completely. But with poetry, you can. So writing poetry is a religious activity, certainly when you use the form of a psalm.

interview, 28 September 2019

For Gaea Schoeters, another poet, an explicitly embodied religiosity can even be the only possible way to write and perform a psalm:

The only form of religion that I, from my atheist worldview, can relate to, is the mystic ... The relation between the erotic or even sexual, and becoming one with yourself in a religious ecstasy. For me, that’s a logical connection, a natural one, as this psalm seemed to write itself.

interview, 28 September 2019

It seems that these poets who participated in *Poesia Divina* are not afraid that performing and embodying religiosity might become ‘too churchy.’ The perception of singers is comparable in this respect. Generally, they experience singing as a ‘spiritual’ activity. For Iris (*Psalms 151*), singing in a concert is always spiritual, regardless of the repertoire, “because of the intensity of singing together, shared by the audience” (fieldnotes 1). As Erik’s quotation at the start of this article has already illustrated, *Genemuiders bovenstem* respondents often describe their intense bodily experiences as “something religious.” He adds that such inten-

sity is a delicate issue, especially when somebody sings the descant at “not so appropriate” moments (during a more solemn, sober verse, for example) and others hesitate to ‘correct’ the singer, because “you shouldn’t take people out of their religious trance, so there’s a tension” (interview).

Throughout the six categories which we have described, it becomes clear that respondents often describe their bodily perception of psalm performance as something that is beyond rational deliberation. They notice that their bodies sing, cry, shake, shiver, or remain silent, sometimes (almost) unintentionally. Such experiences make this a precarious subject for respondents, and especially so when it comes to ‘religious’ aspects of performance. Some respondents consider collective bodily action (singing, moving) a danger to the critical attitude they cultivate as individuals. They want to keep to themselves whether, or how, they ‘believe’ what the psalms texts proclaim (regarding God, for instance). Some respondents, in contrast, enjoy sharing their convictions by singing along. For others, the ‘irrationality’ of physical performance is necessary for performing challenging music (so that they can rely on their ‘muscle memory’), or a chance for connecting with others without rational agreement regarding the meaning of the psalms being performed.

3.2 *Auditory Perception*

The perception of sound is a frequent theme in discussions of psalm performance aesthetics. In all four of the locations under study the psalms are experienced as musical events. Also in *Poesia Divina*, the musicality of poetry recitation (rhythm, repetition, intonation, etc.) is a recurring theme. Respondents described their perception of the sounds of psalm performance as collective, intense, emotional, recognizable, sincere or beautiful, in a manner similar to the discussion of bodily perceptions which was the theme of the previous section. However, as the current section will show, sound appears to evoke these meanings somewhat differently.

First, the sounds of psalm performance are often perceived to be ‘collective,’ particular in the case of *Genemuiders bovenstem* and *150 Psalms*, where the singers seek to cultivate a sound which is homogeneous in timbre and pitch. Choral singer James (*150 Psalms*) described the collective sensation when a chord is perfectly in tune:

It’s that vibration that is shared, when everybody is ... when it comes together ... it becomes euphoric, it’s like a drug! ... It rings, it rings! ... It’s just sound, and coming together, and doing it together.

interview with James, 29 January 2020

It is a defining characteristic of *Genemuider bovenstem* that the psalms are sung by large groups at rather high volume. As Yvonne (non-descant singer, *Genemuider bovenstem*) describes it: “When I hear it, it’s a feeling of togetherness, of being together!” (interview, 13 November 2020). The perceived individuality of *Psalm 151* stands out in contrast to this vision of sonic homogeneity. The sound of the singers and accordionists is characterized as heterogeneous in nature, with each person having their own individual tone and role.

Second, the sound of psalm performance is perceived as intense. In *Genemuider bovenstem*, this concerns an intense loudness, “a hurricane of sound,” as descant singer Lars describes his experience (interview, 13 November 2020). For women, who do not usually sing the descant part, the loud descant can be disturbing, as Agatha told us: “Sometimes, it’s too intense, and then it distracts me from singing the hymn tune” (interview, 11 November 2020). In the other locations under investigation, sound is often perceived as intense because of its complexity. Singer Dora (*150 Psalms*) described her experience as follows: “When the music is so complex, you can do nothing but listen. There’s no mental space for other things” (interview). Heleen (a concertgoer at *Psalm 151*) found the same experience in the music of Boudewijn Tarenskeen, which was not only dissonant, but also rhythmically and spatially turbulent, as sounds are produced from different sides within the concert space. In *Poesia Divina*, which was performed in a small space with a small number of visitors, attendees found intensity in the softness of sounds and in the silence.

Third, sound is often perceived to be emotional, and respondents reported how sound moves or repulses them. Respondents from *Genemuider bovenstem* spoke about “the emotional moment of sounding praise” (Lammert, interview). The respondents from *Genemuider bovenstem* appreciated these emotions, but concertgoers Rob and Heleen both regretted how the music of *Psalm 151* had affected them. Heleen confessed:

I want to be moved, and the dissonances to be solved ... the resolution of dissonances give me joy and balance in life ... Life can be so hard, so I would like to feel some balance [but the dissonances in the performance remained unsolved, HV].

interview, 6 December 2018

Fourth, respondents described their perception of sound in the performance of psalms as something which could be recognized. In *Poesia Divina*, some of the poets deployed recognizable phrases. Gaea Schoeters, for example, uses

classic forms of address, like in the biblical psalms, and then, every good Catholic echoes along: “Praise, praise be to you”, or like the Lord’s Prayer, which everybody knows. You create a recognizable frame for people.

interview

In *Genemuider bovenstem*, this kind of recognizable frame is strongly present, as the descant singing is (largely) an oral tradition of singing, learned by ear and through imitation. The descant and its standard organ accompaniment have become extremely familiar for these singers, so they immediately recognize it when an organist does something different, as singer Erik recalls:

Once, we had a concert elsewhere, with an organist we didn’t know. We just started singing our descant, but the organist threw some dissonances in to butcher us, and so the descant perished slowly during that verse ...

interview

150 Psalms, a two-day festival with a wide variety of choral music, included a mix of familiar and unknown sounds, sometimes even within a single composition. Newspaper reviewer Westerlaken described how in Mohammed Fairouz’ *Psalm 14*, “you don’t only hear the Middle East, you also hear jazz, pop, and classical music.”¹⁷ The music of *Psalm 151* was not so familiar for the concertgoers. For some, this was an unsettling experience, as they “had no starting points, no clues” (Rob, interview) and “missed a recognizable theme in the music” (Heleen, interview). Others were positively surprised by the music’s strangeness.

Fifth, respondents talked about their perception of sound in terms of sincerity, meaning that they characterized sounds as truthful, modest, authentic. For the professional singers who took part in *150 Psalms* and *Psalm 151*, sincere sound depends largely on technical quality and on how well the singing is executed (intonation, diction, style, etc.). In *Genemuider bovenstem*, sound is perceived as sincere when respondents can hear the emotional engagement of performers and “you feel, they really put their emotions into it” (Lars, interview). In *Psalm 151*, the sincerity of sound lies in its heterogeneity: each performer produced a distinguishable, individual sound. Composer Tarenskeen tried to deconstruct the traditional choir with its homogeneous-as-possible sound and standard repertoire with religious (in his view, dogmatic, oppressive) texts. The

17 See: www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/psalm-14-lijkt-voor-deze-tijd-geschreven-te-zijn-meent-deze-componist~b6727fa3/ (last accessed 18 November 2021).

heterogeneous sound of his *Psalm 151* was recognized by concertgoers as reflecting the sincere—that is the autonomous and independent—intentions and involvement of the individual performers on stage. In *Poesia Divina*, sonic sincerity has to do with the sobriety and bareness of the performances. In the words of organizing director Jelle Dierickx: “It was pure, no show. Just eight poets reciting, and that was it” (interview, 22 September 2020).

Lastly, respondents mentioned that they perceived the sound of psalm performance to be ‘beautiful.’ In *Genemuiders bovenstem*, the beauty of sound was a prominent theme. All respondents agreed that the descant sounds more beautiful when sung by men, instead of by “shrill and shriekingly high women’s voices,” to use the words of Agatha (interview). However, this beauty can get lost when singers are too engaged in the performance, as singer Lars explains: “Sometimes, emotion overrules beauty ... when they sing too loud” (interview). In *Psalm 151*, respondents offered disparate responses when it comes to the beauty of sound. Concertgoer Heleen “missed the harmony of beautiful sounds” (interview), while Tessa was astounded by their beauty, especially in the composition’s opening:

It was so beautiful! I found it beautiful, how it started with those primal sounds. In many spiritual traditions, creation started with sound. I found it really beautiful, and so appropriate!

interview, 13 December 2018

In *150 Psalms* and *Poesia Divina*, the sounds were appreciated for their diversity (choral traditions, recited poems), which in itself is characterized as ‘beautiful’ without further reflection. Only a few respondents regretted that the concert hall for *150 Psalms* lacked the reverberation of a large church, which would amplify the psalms set to music by Bach and earlier polyphonists beautifully.¹⁸

The auditory perception of psalm performance results in more heterogeneous meaning-making than is the case with bodily perception. While bodily perception is more homogeneously described as unreflective participation (see the previous section), sound perception appears to leave more room for individual, more distanced reflection. One example is the performance of unfamiliar psalms. Singers for whom a psalm is (still) unfamiliar, and who are still at the stage of rehearsing it, are not (yet) “on top of the music,” as singer Stefan (*Psalm 151*) worded it (fieldnotes 1). For listeners, on the other hand, it is easier

18 See for instance a newspaper review by Guido van Oorschot in *De Volkskrant*: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/het-koor-van-150-psalms-verzuimt-uit-zijn-cocon-te-breken-b3c31ff2/> (last accessed 18 November 2021).

to appreciate unfamiliar sounds, and to reflect individually on what they appreciate about them. However, there appears to be agreement that homogeneous sounds are more ‘collective’ than the ‘individualistic’, heterogeneous sound of *Psalm 151*.

3.3 *Visual Perception*

The third category is the visual perception of psalm performance. The performance of psalms is visually perceived to be collective, sincere, emotional, and recognizable. Although these understandings occurred already in the previous sections, this section will show that visual perception has its own particularities.

Firstly, it appears that the experience of collectivity is connected to seeing other persons during the performance of psalms. Respondents mentioned the way in which eye contact enhances their feeling of being together. In the churches used for *Genemuider bovenstem* and *Psalm 151* (Nieuwe Kerk, The Hague), this was aided by the concentric positioning of pews (see above) and the light from large windows. In the concert hall for *150 Psalms*, the spotlights and light-colored decor drew the visual attention of the audience to the stage, since they were seated in a darker surrounding area arranged in ascending rows. This reduced a sense of visual collectivity. Initiator and director Tido Visser sought to enhance a more individual experience using a sober visual setup, without “any moving visuals behind the choirs ... so it would be just you and the music” (interview). Singers from *Genemuider bovenstem* navigate between a focus on their collective and on their individual experience with their eyes. At some moments, they make eye contact, in order to “be a group,” “it cheers you up” (Erik, interview). At other moments,

you immerse yourself in it, you forget your surroundings, you stare at a single point, above, or on the organ ... you just go! ... Just looking at nothing.

Erik, interview

Secondly, it appears that seeing others’ (facial, gesticular) expressivity can contribute to the perception of a psalm performance as ‘sincere.’ Respondents assume, for instance, that (other) singers’ vivid body movements and facial expressions demonstrate their honest engagement. In the words of José, a concertgoer at *Psalm 151*: “You could see the true engagement and joy of the singers!” (6 December 2018). For others, visual perception of the sincerity of a performance lies in a limitation on ‘showy’ elements, such as (more) spectacular lightning or video projections that might distract from the ‘bare power’ of the

psalms. Jelle Dierickx (director of *Poesia Divina*) explains: “That’s why we make videos that are very sober. No nonsense. A black background and just one little lamp” (interview).

Thirdly, respondents are moved by what they see, especially when it comes to *150 Psalms* and *Genemuider bovenstem*. They see other people crying, for example, and are moved by that display. Singer Lammert (*Genemuider bovenstem*) is moved when “you can see people’s emotions ... when they hear it for the first time, you see that emotion coming through” (interview).

Finally, the performance of psalms is visually ‘recognizable.’ Respondents can see if a performance is a ‘traditional’ or ‘common’ performance of psalms. In this respect, the performances of *Genemuider bovenstem* and *150 Psalms* are distinctive. In *Genemuider bovenstem*, descant singers have a distinct performance style, as we described in the section about bodily perception (sitting upright, tilting the head). The professional singers who participated in *150 Psalms* wore clothes which would be conventional for a choir performing in a Western classical music context, while the performers of *Psalm 151* wore clothes in different colors and styles, which surprised concertgoers in connection with a performance of psalms.

Thus, visual perception is often a way for respondents to make ‘more sense’ of what they perceive with the rest of their bodies. By looking at others and by making eye contact, the ‘collective’ experience they also experience in sound and body, is (deliberately) enhanced. Gazing (away) helps them to intensify the ‘individuality’ of their experience. In this manner, seeing (and closing the eyes) can be a deliberate act in negotiating between the collective and individual aspects of sensory experience, more so than hearing. The visual also plays an important part in whether or how respondents perceive a performance as ‘sincere.’ The tears of (other) listeners, the active body language of performers, and the soberly lit stages and videos convince them that the performance of psalms is not ‘just a show.’

3.4 *Synaesthetic Perception*

Sometimes, the respondents talked about sensorial experiences of performed psalms that have a significant multisensorial component. Different senses overlap and can sometimes become hard to distinguish. Synaesthetic perception is intense, sometimes even too intense, resulting in overwhelming experiences. It appears that time and space both play an important role in directing the attention and in preventing synaesthetic experiences from becoming too overwhelming.

As would be expected, since synaesthetic perception is essentially multisensorial, respondents often find synaesthetic experience to be intense in

nature. Poet Mark van Tongele (*Poesia Divina*) describes such intense experiences as “an intuitive awareness of another shared and larger experiential world ... The ongoing metamorphosis of one image into the other, of images into sound, of sound into colours” (interview in *Poëziekrant*). Other respondents describe synaesthetic experiences as an awareness of something that is invisible or unmeasurable. Jelle Dierickx (*Poesia Divina*) spoke about an intense “silent energy” (interview) when people come together to meditatively listen to psalms, and singer Erik (*Genemuider bovenstem*) suggested:

You're not totally aware of what is going on, but you can feel it, I am sure. You feel: something is happening, there is more between heaven and earth. Something is happening, when somebody moves and disconnects from all that surrounds him, and is totally absorbed in his faith. You can feel that, I am sure!

interview

This kind of trance-like, all-encompassing synaesthetic experience seemed particularly common in conversation with singers.

In some cases, synaesthetic experiences can become too intense, and this was especially common for the respondents who were present at *Psalm 151*. Concertgoer Heleen explained that

it was something for multitaskers, which I am not, not at all! So I decided to read the text only afterwards, at home. And I had to make choices: I wanted to listen to the accordionists. It really required a lot of attention.

interview

Other concertgoers agreed that such an intense multisensorial experience confused or overwhelmed them, noting that “it was all loose bit, small fragments” (José, interview) and that, afterwards, “nothing of the music has stayed with me” (Heleen, interview). Nevertheless, José enjoyed the inventiveness of the musical composition, the singers’ expressive physical performance, and their dress.

3.4.1 Time Matters

In synaesthetic experience, it seems to be important that individuals have sufficient time to fathom what is going on. When there is insufficient time to process the experience, respondents sometimes found their synaesthetic experiences too complex, too fragmentary, or overwhelming. The organizers of all four psalm performances are aware that synaesthetic experiences can easily

become too intense and seek out ways of organizing the multisensorial load through careful time management. By offering more time between concerts in order to process intense experiences (festival *150 Psalms*), through shortening events and ‘lightening’ their intensity (*Psalm 151* and *Poesia Divina*), and through the steady repetition of a practice (*Genemuiders bovenstem*), they seek to stimulate a synaesthetic experience that respondents perceive as rich rather than (too) disturbing.

In this respect, *150 Psalms* was rather successful. The different senses of visitors were stimulated separately and at different moments. During the concerts, the (rather static) positioning of audience and singers on an illuminated stage enhanced an attentive perception of the sounds and (sober) visuals. Between the concerts, festivalgoers could walk more freely in and around the building, engage in conversation, read texts displayed on walls and floors, and visit a photography exhibition. Here, they had more time and freedom to choose as individuals what to listen to, watch, sing or taste, and where to move. In *Psalm 151* and *Poesia Divina*, organizers sought to avoid overstimulation by limiting the length of events, although some respondents who attended *Psalm 151* would have preferred a somewhat longer performance with more slow passages (slower textual and musical changes) and more repetition. In *Genemuiders bovenstem*, repetition and (a slow) tempo are key to enhancing ‘pleasant’ synaesthetic experiences. Interview data shows that singing familiar psalms at a slower pace and steady rhythm (all notes having equal length), without too many (unexpected) visual ‘distractions,’ helps singers to get into a synaesthetic state of flow.

3.4.2 Space Matters

Space is the second important factor in shaping synaesthetic experiences. This encompasses the spatial organization of different rooms (e.g. the different areas in the concert hall for *150 Psalms*), of audience seating, pews, the stage, and the room’s acoustics. Such spatial organization directs the senses of attendees. On top of this, respondents’ synaesthetic experiences are directed by their expectations and by the knowledge they have of the space where the performance of psalms takes place, whether that be a church (used for liturgy), a former church, or a concert hall. It appears that respondents’ synaesthetic experiences of psalm performance are different in churches and in concert halls.

Generally, church spaces engender a synaesthetic experience of performances that is more ‘collective’ and ‘religious’ than in a concert hall. It is not just the characteristics of the space (lightning, spatial ordering, acoustics) which are important, but also the (historical) function of churches as meeting places

for church communities. Respondents associate church spaces with the performance of religious rituals by homogeneous collectives. This means that the heterogeneous (bodily, aurally, visually—see previous sections) performance of *Psalm 151* was interpreted by respondents as being in contrast with the space of a church. Respondents also feel more comfortable singing along in a church than in a concert hall where the spatial setup enables concertgoers to experience their own individual connections with the performance and where collective singing would suddenly make them aware of being surrounded by others. In churches, respondents often reflect on the religious connection between these spaces and the psalms. Composer Tarenskeen and some of the poets from *Poesia Divina* emphatically played with this connection. Gaea Schoeters felt encouraged by the church space to play with an address to God:

I played with the idea of a penitential psalm, and tried to put it in my sort of atheist context, one way or another, I found that logical: invoking a god, as we're reciting in a church, in his house, so to speak—but is there a god or isn't there?

interview

In *Genemuider bovenstem*, the 'religious' nature of psalms goes without saying, and they are rarely performed outside of church buildings. In the words of singer Lammert: "It's something you do in churches, and a church is [there] to spread faith. Psalms are by their nature a church thing" (interview).

Some respondents associated concert halls with a more rational or reflective mode of participation (sitting still, watching, and listening) and identified churches as "spaces that appeal to something that's not cerebral, intellectual, but rather something emotional" (*Poesia Divina* poet Gaea Schoeters, interview).

In conclusion, space is an important factor in how respondents make sense of the psalms. The connotations that a particular space has for them because of its (historical) function and its material characteristics, mean that respondents experience and embody the performance differently.

4 Critical Reflections on the Aesthetics of Psalms

Our analysis shows that the performance of psalms in the different cases under study is aesthetically diverse with each type of sensory perception having its own particularities. The categories 'collective,' 'religious,' and 'sincere,' for example, are connected to several modes of sensory perception (see above),

but for each type of perception this works slightly differently. We will discuss the aesthetic particularities of these three categories since they appear to be meaningful for our reflection on the aesthetics of performed psalms in a post-secular context.

Firstly, we observe that, in all four cases, there is a striving after a certain collective experience, at least on the part of the organizers. At the same time, organizers and participants in the performance (singers, listeners, etc.) want to maintain a certain level of individual autonomy. A collective ritual is required for individuals to experience psalm performances, but space is also required for individual participation, as Mirella Klomp has found in her study of the public ritual of *The Passion*, and Hanna Rijken, in her examination of Choral Even-song performances in the Netherlands (Klomp 62, 162; Rijken, Hoondert and Barnard 240). Our research adds to extant knowledge the insight that collective ritual and individual involvement are kept in balance in the management of different senses: by reducing the visual, for example, or by stimulating different senses at different moments and in different spaces.

The second particularity is a tension we can observe in relation to the 'religious' aesthetics of psalm performance. In all four cases, the religious connotations of the psalms (their embeddedness in Jewish and Christian traditions, and God as addressee in the texts) play a prominent role as an object of reflection which is aesthetically managed by organizers, performers, and visitors. In participants from all these groups, we observed an interest in religious aesthetics but also a hesitance when they suspect that these aesthetics (will) endanger individual authenticity by becoming too dogmatic, conservative, or homogenizing. *Genemuiders bovenstem*, for instance, is performed away from the Sunday liturgy of a local congregation. In the other three performance spaces, organizers and artists seek ways to reinvent traditional practices of music and poetry recital (which they feel are old-fashioned) by the introduction of aesthetics associated with religion: a festival of the Psalms based on a monastic ritual, recognizably 'churchy' sounds (choral polyphony, organ music, textual formulas), and the use of church spaces. At the same time, they avoid the performance becoming 'too religious,' by emphasizing aesthetic beauty (against dogmatic sobriety), heterogeneity (against oppressive homogeneity), playfulness (against rigidity), and intimacy (against impersonal remoteness). Thus, the dissolution of the individual into a homogeneously religious collectivity is avoided.¹⁹

19 Or, in Charles Taylor's vocabulary: the autonomy of the secular "buffered self" is not dissolved, as, in these collective rituals, the boundaries of the individual are maintained (cf. Taylor; Van der Braak 17, 56). This resonates with philosopher André van der Braak's sug-

This latter aspect relates to the third particularity: sincerity, which appears to be an important value in the performance of psalms. The activity of singing, in particular, appears to demand a ‘sincere’ engagement on the part of the performers. They only want to sing along when they are sure that they can do so truthfully or authentically, and listeners expect them to do so. When a performance is perceived as “sincere,” it is often also perceived as “natural,” with an absence of “showing-off” and pretense.²⁰ However, such a ‘natural performance’ requires training. Performing *Genemuider bovenstem* ‘naturally’ requires repetition and training, and professional singers (*150 Psalms*, *Psalm 151*) can only come over as natural after intense rehearsal.²¹ This suggests that participation which depends on authentic individual engagement cannot escape its own dependency on processes of socialization.

These three particularities show that the traditional performance of psalms in (Western classical music and poetry) recitals and (Christian) liturgy are not able to meet the aesthetic demands of organizers, performers, and publics. For organizers such as Tido Visser, Merlijn Geurts (*150 Psalms*), Jelle Dierickx (*Poesia Divina*), and artists such as Boudewijn Tarenskeen (*Psalm 151*), the traditional ritual of a choral concert or poetry recital needs to be updated in order to remain relevant. In *Genemuider bovenstem*, relevance and the preservation of a liturgical practice is sought outside of the Sunday liturgy through its accreditation as ‘intangible heritage.’

But what are the aesthetic demands that organizers, performers, and publics place on the performance of psalms? It appears that psalms should be performed in such a way that they enhance the immersion of individuals in a collective ritual while also enabling the expression of individual feelings (cf. Taylor; Van der Braak 17). As Sebastian Schüller has shown, such immersion requires repetition, collective synchronization, slowness, the ability to observe other participants in the ritual, and, foremost, a delicate alternation of action and receptive experience on the part of participants (374–378, 384). Organiz-

gestion that “today, we live in an age of the emergence of a postmodern ‘liquid’ self”, which is autonomous and flexible at the same time (Van der Braak 159).

- 20 Thus, as the section on ‘bodily perception’ (see above) shows, the perception of the ‘sincere performance’ of psalms is emphatically embodied and (multi)sensorial, more than, as Hirschkind and Taylor suggest, in (secular) (late) modernity, where ‘sincerity’ would primarily be a nonsensory, interior (Hirschkind 639; Taylor; cf. Barnard, Cilliers and Wepener 212–213; Promey 12).
- 21 With the emphasis on ‘naturalness’ in *Genemuider bovenstem*, sincerity is akin to what anthropologist John Brahinsky writes about ‘cultivation’ in a Pentecostal context, where he observes a similar tendency to frame sincere performance as natural and spontaneous, and insincere performance as rehearsed and studied (Brahinsky 410–413).

ers and performers appear to be aware of this, and they structure the rhythm of action/receptive experience, the musical and ritual repetition and tempo, and the visual interaction between participants accordingly.²² They manage time and space so as to enhance synaesthetic immersion (cf. Brahinsky 412). Such multisensorial immersion appears to be able to engender experiences of the sacred or transcendent, as Lieke Wijnia, referring to Rina Arya, also has described in more general wordings (Wijnia 66–67; cf. Klomp 51; Grieser and Johnston 22).

Our analysis shows that religious or transcendent aesthetics do not completely leave the building when psalms are performed in ‘secular’ settings. It appears that, in the performance of psalms, aesthetics reminiscent of religious ritual are often sought after, albeit selectively, since a more distanced, unisensory appreciation of a performance, associated both with ‘secular’ neutrality and individuality, is valued at the same time (cf. Hirschkind 638). This is even the case in *Genemuiders bovenstem* concerts, which tend to focus on the music’s expressivity for individual visitors, instead of its (exclusive) embeddedness in the weekly liturgy of a local congregation. Our findings confirm and enrich existing (postsecular) thinking on contemporary ritual and aesthetics, namely the idea of ritual as an ‘authentic’ expression of the self-conscious individual in a highly pluralistic cultural environment (Barnard 192–193; Bell 241; Gauthier 451; Wilke 343). Our contribution is a detailed analysis and interpretation of the aesthetic balancing act between collective immersion and individual authenticity. When organizers and participants suspect that such immersion might diminish individual authenticity, they temper it by reducing multisensoriality or by distributing the stimulation of different senses across a wider temporal or spatial area.

Furthermore, we see that it is exactly the postsecular setup of the performance of psalms which enables interactions with the transcendent to take place, be it in an immersive trance-like singing experience, or in addressing God when reciting a new psalm. We see that, for organizers and performers, traditional recitals and liturgy fall short in this respect, as, apparently, both offer experiences that limit emotional, transcendent immersion by being too authoritative, impersonal, or dogmatic.²³ When aesthetics are taken seriously

22 Wijnia brought Arden Reed’s theory of ‘slow art’ to our attention. He suggests that this “came to satisfy our need for downtime” as “cultures sped up and sacred aesthetic practices waned” (Reed 11; in Wijnia 69).

23 Among others, Gauthier and Bakker Kellogg state that postsecular aesthetics are characterized by an emphasis on experience rather than belief (Bakker Kellogg 438; Gauthier 452).

as a multisensorial being-in-the-world, such (synaesthetic) perceptions of the invisible, immeasurable, and transcendent have to be respected as well, which is why Grieser and Johnston propose the need for “adequate epistemologies that neither try to prove, nor to explain away phenomena relevant to people” (22). Here we challenge Birgit Meyer’s rather clear distinction between the immanent and the transcendent, which appears to be just as contextual as the distinction between the religious and the secular (cf. “Religion as Mediation” [18]). Having a clear conception of what would universally count as immanent or transcendent is an example of what Umut Parmaksız calls “secularnormativity” (109–111). We agree with him that a postsecular stance should imply the interrogation of both religious and secular normativities, including those related to the distinction between the immanent and the transcendent. On the level of aesthetics, and synaesthetics in particular, such a distinction does not hold.

5 Conclusion

The psalm performances which we have described can be understood as experiments with religious rituality and secular individual freedom that challenge the mutual exclusivity of the religious and the secular on the level of aesthetics. Each of the four cases are characterized by their own “aesthetic profile” (cf. Grieser and Johnston 19), treading a line between (“religious”) collectivity and enchantment on the one hand and the (“secular”) valuation of individual integrity and distanced observation on the other. In order to arrive at this conclusion, it was necessary to analyze different sensory modalities both in isolation and in relation to one another. Studying them in isolation showed the peculiarities of the different senses, such as the ambivalent relation between collectivity and bodily perception, or the importance of the visual in perceiving a performance as “sincere.” Studying the senses in relation to one another showed how different senses were stimulated or destimulated in order to safeguard individual autonomy, and also how synaesthetic perception, and its careful temporal and spatial management, is needed for an immersive ritual experience to become fertile soil for enchantment and an interaction with the transcendent. This suggests that in a postsecular context, regardless of any absence of elaborate beliefs regarding the divine or “the beyond” (cf. Meyer “Religion as Mediation” [21]), interactions with the immanent and transcendent remain ‘casually’ present on the level of aesthetics.

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