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# Joseph & Jesus

## Bible-based Musicals and Contemporary Passions staged in the Public Domain: an Exploration of a Research Perspective

*Mirella Klomp*

### 1. Introduction

Joseph, the biblical master interpreter of dreams, and his coat of many colors loomed large in Dutch society between 2008 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> The immediate cause for his presence was a Dutch musical production that had its opening performance in the Utrecht City Theater in December 2008. This musical was a translated version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's famous musical *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat*. Just like other musicals produced by Stage Entertainment, an international theater productions company of media tycoon Joop van den Ende, *Joseph* was well-merchandised. The launch of the musical was preceded by an American Idol-like series of television shows that was to yield the leading actor who was going to play Joseph. Once the musical production got running, billboards showed up in the streets, Joseph-websites were launched and web communities arose where fans got together (virtually). When the curtain dropped, this bible-based musical had animated the Dutch public domain for almost two years.

Another biblical narrative in musical form that is also frequently performed on the concert stage is *The Passion*, the story of the suffering and death of Christ. These performances in concert halls in Dutch late modern society occur during the period of Lent as well as in the off-season, and draw good crowds.<sup>2</sup> In 2008 and 2009, at least four performances of modern Passion compositions in concert halls took place in the Netherlands: the Holland Festival 2008 scheduled Golijov's *La Pasión según San Marcos* (2000) in Carré, and Tsoupaki's *Lucas Passion* (2008) in Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ. In 2009, Cappella Amsterdam performed Tarenskeen's *Mattheus Passie* (2006) in Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ – a composition

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Prof.dr. Rokus de Groot for his comments on my presentation of this research project at an earlier stage (Expert meeting 'Music on the move', Tilburg University, March 24, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> In this article I confine myself to contemporary 'classical' Passions as performed in the concert hall; for the sake of restriction I here leave other Passions (such as those from the Contemporary Christian Music scene, or popular open-air events such as 'The Passion' in Gouda in April 2011) out of consideration.

which won the composer the *Matthijs Vermeulenprijs* later on that year.<sup>3</sup> Around Easter 2009, MacMillan's *St John Passion* (2007) dethroned the traditional annual performance of one of Bach's Passions in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw.

Bible-based musicals and contemporary Passion performances as brought to the stage in theaters and concert halls may be seen as contemporary manifestations of religion. Over the last few years, most scholars have come to agree that a certain understanding of the secularization thesis – at least in Dutch culture – no longer holds water: on a macro-level, the influence of institutionalized religion has indeed considerably diminished over the last decennia, but the intellectual legacy of Christianity and Christian religious meaning-making are still part of our culture. Rather, Christian religion and ritual practice today are taking on new and different shapes. They have not disappeared in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society, nor are they limited to the margins of culture or the private world of the believers. It is just that they no longer primarily become manifest in institutions: if anything, they continuously manifest themselves in the public domain. They take shape in our culture principally through the creative actualization of religious forms and ritual practices. For this reason, the Music, Ritual and Religiosity research group in Tilburg investigates music performances in contemporary culture: we try to track down current, coherent manifestations of religious meaning-making in music performances.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I focus on *Joseph, the musical* as well as on contemporary performances of the Passion in concert halls. I will here draw an outline of the field as I see it now. I will start with an historical overview of the musical forms, which is described at some length. Then I indicate the concepts with which I will be looking at the field. The precise content of these concepts is still partly unclear: since I will be engaging in ethnography to investigate these musical forms, I am not departing from any kind of elaborated theory.

## 2. Large Christian musical forms as cultural phenomena

Bible-based musicals such as *Joseph*, and the late modern Passion compositions mentioned above, may be seen as examples of large musical forms that originate from Christian religion, but that today are part of our music culture. Contemporary composers, concert platforms, orchestras, producers and music industries regularly revive musical expressions originating in the Christian religion. Large musical forms that once arose in the domain of ecclesiastical liturgy or devotional ritual – think of Requiems, Passions, Masses, *Stabat Mater*, and so on – are now being performed in 'secular' settings.

<sup>3</sup> The *Matthijs Vermeulenprijs* is an annual award for the most important Dutch composition.

<sup>4</sup> Prof.dr. Martin Hoondert is the chair holder leading this research group.

## 2.1. Oratorio

Both forms, bible-based musicals and Passions, derive from the same root: the Christian oratorio. When the Passion of Christ forms the subject of an oratorio, such a composition is simply called a Passion. As we shall see, Bible-based musical theater is a more transformed form of oratorio. Put briefly, an oratorio can be defined as ‘an extended musical setting of a sacred text made up of dramatic, narrative and contemplative elements’.<sup>5</sup> It is ‘a sacred drama set to music, whose appearance at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century coincides with the invention of opera and whose aesthetics and conventions closely parallel that genre’.<sup>6</sup> Oratorios are generally performed by vocal soloists singing individual character roles, a *chorus* (choir) (perhaps the most distinctive feature of the genre) for both commentary and character portrayal, and accompanying instruments ranging from *continuo* alone to a large orchestra. The plots are mostly adapted Bible stories and hagiographies. The history of the oratorio was long considered to go back to the meetings that took place in prayer halls (oratories, which were often constructed in the space above the nave of a Roman church).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the oratorio came to include the new musical genre, which mainly functioned as edifying entertainment and was intended to attract people to the spiritual exercises. By the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, two closely related types of oratorios had developed: the *oratorio volgare* and the *oratorio latino*. From a musical perspective, these are not separate genres, but from a literary standpoint the two forms differ. The lyrics of the first type are in Italian, they are poetic and the themes are based on the *Old* and *New Testaments*, and on hagiography. These works were performed without scenery or action. If a sermon occurred in an oratory, it would be placed between its two sections.<sup>7</sup> The lyrics of the second type of oratorio largely consist of Latin prose. Motets with narrative and dramatic texts might be considered early antecedents of the *oratorio latino*, and the origin of this musical form was even directly traced to motets that were used as substitutes for parts of the liturgy.

In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the musical style of the oratorio spread from Rome to the rest of Italy and to Spain as well, and, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the Roman Catholic courts of central Europe, such as that of Vienna.<sup>8</sup> The development of the oratorio closely follows that of opera. In Protestant Germany, a more or less clearly defined genre called the *oratorium* only began to be recognized and accepted in German concert life and Lutheran church services round about the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Among the early oratorio antecedents in Germany are the Lutheran *historia*, ‘a musical setting of a scriptural story, intended for performance in church’, the Passion being the earliest

<sup>5</sup> H.E. SMITHER: ‘Oratorio’, in *The new grove dictionary of music and musicians* 18 (New York 2001<sup>2</sup>) 503-524, p. 503.

<sup>6</sup> J. SWAIN: *Historical dictionary of sacred music* (Lanham MD 2006) 154.

<sup>7</sup> SMITHER: ‘Oratorio’ 506.

<sup>8</sup> SMITHER: ‘Oratorio’ 511.

and most important subject.<sup>9</sup> It is said that in German-speaking countries, performances of sacred drama with Biblical *librettos* often provoked controversy when performed in theaters.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1730's – and this is particularly interesting in connection with musical theater – Georg Friedrich Händel invented the dramatic oratorio. In a sense, this functioned as an opera substitute, because Händel abandoned Italian opera for oratorio, but meanwhile continued to use opera theaters and, at least for a while, opera singers. Händel thus managed to make his own personal blend of Italian operatic conventions, the English language and cathedral choir tradition and thus – together with his international reputation – set a new and quite consistent model for oratorio composition that has been recognizable until the present.<sup>11</sup>

The history of this musical genre thus shows that the oratorio is a large musical form from the Christian tradition with a longstanding tradition of creative, sometimes even explorative appropriation of musical, textual and performance elements, both inside and around the church. It is important to realize that contemporary performances of oratorios are part of this oratorio tradition, but in late modern society take place in a considerably different context.

## 2.2. Contemporary Passion compositions

The history of the oratorio dates back to around 1550, but the form has a distant antecedent in the performance of the Passion narrative, which is much older.<sup>12</sup> It originates from the recitation of specific Bible passages on the life, suffering and death of Christ. These recitations particularly occurred during Holy Week. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, these Lessons resounded within the liturgy. Characteristic is the division of the texts in indirect and direct speech: the lecture is a narrative and at times alternates with quotations.

The meaning of the Passion performance, the Passion narrative (and in a wider sense also of Jesus, or even the Christian faith) has changed over time and differed depending on the contexts of the performances. The pilgrim Etheria (also known as Aegeria) in the 4<sup>th</sup> century reports that during Holy Week in Jerusalem the reading of the Passion plays a significant part in liturgy. This practice was meant to call to remembrance what happened to Christ (an act of *memoria*), and was participated in with strong commitment. Around the same time (in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries) in the West, the Passion has another meaning. To St Augustin, for instance, reading the Passion is more than remembering: it is mainly *doctrina* and *contemplatio*, which requires solemn reading and solemn

<sup>9</sup> SMITHER: 'Oratorio' 512.

<sup>10</sup> SWAIN: *Historical dictionary of sacred music* 155.

<sup>11</sup> SWAIN: *Historical dictionary of sacred music* 155.

<sup>12</sup> For historical material up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in this section I am indebted to K. VON FISCHER: *Die Passion. Musik zwischen Kunst und Kirche* (Kassel 1997).

celebration.<sup>13</sup> This brings about a kind of ‘objectified performance’: the text is recited with an intonation, and becomes a simple recitative that is not intended to invoke compassion, but proclaims a God-willed suffering, intended to reconcile and liberate the people.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christ’s suffering on the cross is given more emphasis. Other than doctrine, the Passion now also becomes *compassio*. This development in theology and devotion musically results in a more dramatic Passion performance: the sung Passion increasingly takes on the form of a theatrical performance by several people, and – from the year 1470 onwards, in Germany, England, Italy and Spain – polyphony is applied.<sup>14</sup> Thus the Passion performances of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and particularly those of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in relation to a more intensive religious piety of the people, who longed to see and hear more (and more intensively), increasingly become *imitatio* of and sometimes even *identificatio* with the suffering of Christ: a desire for the actualization of the Passion and making it a reality.<sup>15</sup> The oratorio of the Passion comes into being: a large choral work, consisting of newly composed recitatives (sometimes akin to Gregorian motives), of inserted chorales and non-biblical texts (arias and *ariosi*) and an extensive opening and final part. The development of the Passion oratorio is related to the growing Pietism, which strongly focuses on the individual and their relation to Christ. This becomes most obvious in the inserted, non-biblical texts: expressive arias containing strong personal responses to the biblical story. The Passion stands for compassion with an eye to one’s own, individual redemption. Most famous pietistic examples of Passion compositions are of course J.S. Bach’s St John Passion and St Matthew Passion, which were explicitly meant to be performed in liturgical settings. In 1766, the Lutheran church of Leipzig decided that the Passion narrative should be read in the liturgy, alternated by the congregational singing of

<sup>13</sup> St Augustin in sermon 218 writes: “*Passio Domini et Salvatoris nostri Iesu Christi (...) sollemniter legitur sollemniter celebratur.*” Text from H.R. DROBNER: *Augustinus von Hippo. Predigten zum Österlichen Triduum (Sermones 218-229/D). Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen* (= Patrologia 16) (Frankfurt am Main 2006) 124.

<sup>14</sup> Different roles already start occurring in the 10th/11th centuries, with the development of several *lectio* tones in Gregorian chant: one for the *chronista* (the narrator, reciting in indirect speech using the middle register of his voice, thus expressing moderation and objectivity); one for *Christus* (this part is sung in direct speech and a lower voice symbolizing humility), and one for the *turbæ/synagoga* (the crowd, performing in a high voice, thus symbolizing the rage of the people).

<sup>15</sup> With the application of polyphony, the Passion performance generally emerges in one of its two main types: as a responsorial Passion (unison recitatives alternating with polyphonic passages used for groups of people) or as a through-composed Passion (where both direct speech and indirect speech are performed polyphonically). The latter type occurs in three different shapes, the most important of which is a summarizing composition of parts taken from all four gospels (not seldom including the ‘seven last words from the cross’). This shape is called a *summa passionis* and is usually performed outside the official liturgy, for instance in pious gatherings of fraternities.

Passion chorales. Soon other cities followed. (The Roman Catholic Church retained the age-old tradition of a Latin-sung responsorial Passion.) Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy in 1829 was responsible for the rediscovery of Bach's St Matthew Passion. This Passion, shortened and cut to half of its original length, was transferred to a new context: its performance was a charity concert in the concert hall of the Berlin Sing-Akademie.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to attach a general meaning to Passion compositions in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Their performances are very popular – Passion performances in concert halls prove to be full-fledged cultural phenomena – although the number of newly composed Passions in this period is relatively small.<sup>16</sup> The difficulty of attaching a general meaning is related to at least two things. First, these compositions more and more follow from the personal motivation or engagement of their composers, varying from social or political situations to their being commissioned to write a composition. It is no longer obvious that Passion composers (or performers, or concertgoers) are Christians. Second, in relation to this, Passion compositions of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries not seldom pose fundamental questions – 'Is it at all possible to compose a Passion today?'<sup>17</sup> – that influence the transformation of this large Christian musical form. This is also the case, for instance, in Boudewijn Tarenskeen's *Mattheus Passie. Een lezing voor negentien zangers*. The performance of his Passion was staged on a podium with chairs positioned behind dissecting tables. Solists performed the Passion sitting down and 'read' from their scores that were laid on the tables in front of them. In the second part, the choir – without the soloists – summarize the entire Passion as presented in the first part. Tarenskeen in an interview explains:

I wanted to write an epilogue: all significant moments from the first part are swept together into a pile in the second part. They literally return, at breakneck speed. It

<sup>16</sup> Johan Snel in *De Bijbel cultureel* mentions three causes: 1) modern passion music often has a religious (and from the perspective of the arts: restrictive) character, undoubtedly also because the kernel doctrines of the Christian belief are brought into the discussion; 2) for this reason, Passion music remains related to Easter and therefore depends on a limited space in the agenda; 3) the fascination for Bach's Passions is unique, and this notably limited the room for new compositions. Johan Snel in M. BARNARD & G. VAN DER HAAR (red.): *De Bijbel cultureel. De Bijbel in de kunsten van de twintigste eeuw* (Zoetermeer 2010) 530. Whether Snel is right remains to be seen: future empirical research might prove his assumptions wrong, or relativize them. As for the popularity of the Passion performances: the concerts I mentioned at the beginning of this article were all well-attended. Golijov's passion drew a full house in Carré with 1455 concert-goers; Tsou-paki's brought in a full house in the Muziekgebouw with 755 concert-goers and this Passion concert was ranked 5th among the top-10 most favorable performances of the 2008 Holland Festival, as voted by the public; Tarenskeen's attracted 465 listeners. Information obtained through e-mail from the marketing departments of Holland Festival and Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ on January 10, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> FISCHER: *Die Passion* 132.

is actually a kind of preview after the event. Is it possible to express doubt in music? Can a non-believer write a St Matthew Passion? These questions explicitly get attention in the second part.<sup>18</sup>

Tarenskeen thus plays with the Western-European Christian and musical heritage, calling several things into question, including the role of the composer. Other composers do so as well. In 2005, Egon Kracht reached beyond the traditional *New Testament* gospels, composing a St Judas Passion; in 1985 Mauricio Kagel wrote a *Sankt Bach Passion*, changing the suffering subject into J. S. Bach.<sup>19</sup> All these musical, textual and performance-related adaptations demonstrate how the Passion in contemporary performances in the public domain is being transformed. The meanings of contemporary Passions can probably best be assessed by a search for the religious qualities of each single contemporary Passion (all the more considering the variety of meaning-makers involved; I will return to this below). To understand the meaning of contemporary Passion performances qualitative empirical research is required that takes both the performance and the meaning-makers into account.

### 2.3. Bible-based musical theater

Describing a ‘musical’ as a large Christian musical form, may not seem very self-evident. *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat* can be seen as a concealed form of oratorio, more particularly a transformed form of dramatic oratorio.<sup>20</sup> It is an extended musical setting, the subject matter is the life of *Old Testament* patriarch Joseph, and this musical setting is made up of dramatic, narrative and contemplative elements. Over the last few decades, the musical has acquired a natural place in Dutch society: in music theaters, in primary schools and boarding schools, as well as in churches, the performance of a musical is a common phenomenon. In the professional music industry, musicals have proven to be a well-selling product: the musical business is a successful business and every single musical production seems popular.

As indicated, the musical has age-old roots in the oratorio tradition. The oratorio performances in their transformed form, recognizable as ‘musicals’,

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Tarenskeen in *Trouw*, February 26, 2009. Quotation translated by the author.

<sup>19</sup> KAGEL: “Perhaps not all composers believe in God, but they all believe in Bach.” Quotation taken from [www.bachleeft.nl/page/nieuwsdetail/19928#](http://www.bachleeft.nl/page/nieuwsdetail/19928#), translated by the author. Retrieved April 25, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Musical theater may also be regarded as a modern form of opera, instead of oratorio, mostly when one looks at the genre from the viewpoint of play. Since my focus is on the performance of music – of an either staged or non-staged concert piece – I choose to regard it a form of oratorio, since in this form, music is the point of departure. It is clear, however, that boundaries are not fixed and that both opera and oratorio regularly take on each other’s features.



emerges in the course of the nineteenth century in Britain and America. Artistic steps forward in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century lead to a real breakthrough in what may be called the Golden Age of (American) musical, the 1940s to 1960s.<sup>21</sup> In the Netherlands, despite a few attempts, a tradition of the musical genre had been absent until the performance of Annie M.G. Schmidt and Harry Bannink's *Heerlijk duurt het langst*, which opened in 1965. This musical – simply a comedy with songs – was a resounding success and made the musical an established Dutch genre.<sup>22</sup> The genre did not really endure though, because of the Dutch way of going about producing it: whereas in big American and English musicals the elements of play acting, song, music and dance were all given full attention, being simultaneously developed by an author, a composer, a choreographer and a stage manager, in the Netherlands play and music were subjugated to the text, as was customary in Dutch 'cabaret', which was the 'fertile' ground for almost all Dutch musicals. The Dutch musical scene completely missed the boat compared to the American and British development of the musical genre, which had grown from the alternation of play, song and dance to 'through-composed' productions with operatic pretensions.<sup>23</sup> It was only in 1987, when Theater Carré celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with the performance of the American dance musical *Cats* that the international musical was discovered here as a recipe for success. Joop van den Ende tested this recipe, translating and staging more foreign musicals, and refined it by producing – copying the British-American way of working simultaneously – and staging his own musicals, *Cyrano de Bergerac* being the first. Many other musicals followed, mostly those that had already proved popular abroad. Thus in the Netherlands, the current musical tradition consists of the transfer of what are mainly Broadway and West End musicals.

Several musical productions are explicitly based on biblical narratives, examples being *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971); *Children of Eden* (1986) and *Godspell* (1997). The musical *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat*, based on Genesis 37-50, in 1967 was created by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. It was a short musical – lasting only 15 minutes – written for a performance at the preparatory school Colet Court, Hammersmith (London) in March 1968. Being very successful, the performance was repeated in Central Hall, Westminster in May for 2500 attendants, and an expanded version (35 minutes) was performed in St Paul's Cathedral in November of that year. The first LP was released in 1969; going through various versions the musical grew into a real hit, and in 1982 the first official Broadway performance took place. In 1991, *Joseph* experienced a spectacular comeback in the London Palladium (a West End theatre), starring Jason Donovan, who hit the charts with the *Any dream will do*. In 1999,

<sup>21</sup> See [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical\\_theatre](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_theatre). Retrieved April 25, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> H. VAN GELDER: 'De bloeiperiode van de origineel Nederlandstalige musical', in L.P. GRIJP (red.): *Een muziekgeschiedenis der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam 2002<sup>2</sup>) 719.

<sup>23</sup> VAN GELDER: 'De bloeiperiode' 721-722.

the musical was made into a movie, in 2007 the musical made another comeback in London's West End. This time, a TV show broadcast by the BBC preceded the musical, in which contestants competed to become the new West-End star worthy of the title role. In the Netherlands in 2008, one of the public networks broadcast a singing contest in which the viewers could vote for 'the real Joseph'. The musical – labeled by Stage Entertainment as a 'feel-good musical'<sup>24</sup> – from December 2008 to September 2009 makes a tour of several theaters in the country and from September 2009 to July 2010 is staged in the Utrecht Beatrix Theatre.<sup>25</sup> The importance of the musical production *Joseph*, according to Stage Entertainment, mainly lies in its liveliness and its recognizable topics. *Joseph* is 'a cheerful show', and it is hoped that the theatergoers leave the performance 'lighthearted and full of energy'. The musical has recognizable themes 'which everyone has to deal with in their lives': growing up, jealousy and forgiveness. All of this is brought 'with humor, which makes it a merry performance'.<sup>26</sup> Thus the biblical narrative of the life of Joseph is brought to the stage in a particular oratorio form, and – at least by its producers – is mainly presented as a lifelike story with themes relevant to any human being. The American musical however, and thus partially also the musicals performed in the Netherlands, 'can be characterized by its Janus face of teaching and entertainment'.<sup>27</sup> In this double objective, the roots of the musical in the oratorio tradition clearly become visible.

Before I go into a number of important concepts, I would like to touch on a few significant developments from oratorio to musical. In general, one can say that in the musical the oratorio form has undergone two considerable transformations: first, the music style used in musical tends to be popular. Second, as we have seen, the musical has become part – or better: a product – of a large music industry. One of the consequences of the latter is that musicals today are part of a complex whole of products and aspects, ranging from casting and

<sup>24</sup> Information derived from an e-mail questionnaire received from Stage Entertainment on January 13, 2011. Other categories are 'family musicals' like *The lion king*, and 'classical musicals' such as *Les misérables*.

<sup>25</sup> STAGE ENTERTAINMENT NEDERLAND: *Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat. Programma 08/09/10* (= Official musical brochure) (Mijdrecht 2008) 6.

<sup>26</sup> J. van den Ende & E. van Lambaart in STAGE ENTERTAINMENT NEDERLAND: *Joseph* 3. Quotation translated by the author. Joop van den Ende also mentions a number of other reasons why Stage Entertainment's musicals in general are important. First, the musical is an extraordinary performance presented for the attendants: it is for this purpose, the artistic team together with the actors, musicians, technicians and people backstage realized this achievement. Second, the musical has become an industry that offers employment to thousands of people. Third, the musical offers many chances to young talented persons.

<sup>27</sup> M. BAUCH: *The American musical. A literary study within the context of American drama and American theatre* (Marburg 2003) 1.

cultivating music careers, to broadcasting TV shows and marketing the musical (also see footnote 26).

### 3. Joseph and Jesus as current manifestations of ritual practice and religiosity

#### 3.1. Transfer and transformation

The above shows that the transfer of the oratorio from the ecclesiastical to the public domain, which goes hand in hand with transformations of its form, is a process that already set in a while ago: the performances of oratorios originally took place in the context of the church and the liturgy, but have slowly come to be transferred to the context of the concert hall. This already started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – think of Mendelssohn’s transfer of Bach’s *Matthäuspassion* to the concert hall, decades after the musically performed Passion had been removed from the liturgy – and is still going on today. Transfer in this case is taken in the most elementary sense of the word: the conveyance of something from one context to the other, or more particularly: the conveyance by, for instance, a composer and/or producing industry, of a large Christian musical form, from the ecclesiastical domain to the public domain.<sup>28</sup> The transfer of musical repertoire to another domain sometimes goes hand in hand with a transformation of the form. With the conveyance of the musical form to another context, this form becomes the subject of creative appropriation. Transformation here is taken as a complete or major change of content and/or form of the Passion.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Definition of transfer based on *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, where transfer is described as ‘to convey from one person, place, or situation to another’. See [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfer](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transfer). Retrieved April 25, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Definition of transformation based on *Merriam Webster Learners Dictionary*. See [www.learnersdictionary.com/search/transformation](http://www.learnersdictionary.com/search/transformation). Retrieved September 20, 2011. ‘Transfer’ is a concept used in various sectors and academic disciplines, used to refer to the transportation or transference of things. In the education sector, particularly in the disciplines of instructional psychology and of didactics, the concept of transfer has for years been a core concept in instructional psychology. When a student profits from previously acquired knowledge, this is a matter of transfer. Two types of transfer have recently come to be distinguished: the first is referred to as reproductive transfer (applying and using previously acquired knowledge), the second as productive (indicating that knowledge is not just applied, but elaborated and explored in a new context). These respective types could also be called ‘traditional transfer’ and ‘transformation’. See J.M.C. NELISSEN: ‘Recent onderzoek naar transfer’, in *Panama-Post. Reken-wiskunde-onderwijs: onderzoek, ontwikkeling, praktijk* 26/1 (2007) 24-31. In the case of large musical forms from the Christian tradition performed in the public domain, transfer and transformation may point to a ‘reproductive transfer’ in the sense used by Nelissen. To avoid misunderstandings of the concepts, I here would like to indicate that I do not use the concept ‘transformation’ in the sense of music having a transformative power (of-

‘Then what is new?’ one may ask, considering the fact that the process of transfer and transformation has already started centuries ago. The investigation of the current transfer and transformation of large musical forms today is particularly relevant because the process now seems to be taking place against an entirely different background: today in the Netherlands a minority of the population considers themselves Christians, and church attendance and church membership continue to decrease. Many people have left the church over the last few decades, and, as I have already mentioned above, the (profound influence of the) Christian religion becomes manifest primarily in our culture. To many people, the Christian tradition is very much part of our cultural heritage. This deeply affects the transformations of the musical form. It also deeply affects the meanings people attribute to religious oratorios performed on the concert stage – meanings which are now attributed from various frameworks (I will come back to these frameworks shortly).

### 3.2. Research question

The WRR report *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, (Believing in the public domain. Explorations of a double transformation) published in 2006, claims that religion has gone through a transformation and is (now) found (mainly) in the public domain.<sup>30</sup> It is against the backdrop of this claim that I would like to examine whether religious meanings are attributed to transferred and transformed forms of oratorio as performed in the public domain. The current research project may thus be seen as a way of operationalizing this claim. On the basis of the above, the following research question may now be formulated:

In what way could performances of transferred and transformed Christian oratorios – more in particular: contemporary Passions and bible-based musicals – be interpreted as current manifestations of religion and religiosity?

As I already indicated, qualitative empirical research is required to be able to describe and analyze, and thus understand the meaning of these contemporary music performances. I do not intend to do comparative research, and so I will not focus on the ‘original’ context and meaning of oratorio performances: my

ten also referred to as a ‘transporting’ power). Although music may certainly bring about changes, particularly within people involved in making or listening to music, and although this may be one of the meanings attributed to the music as it is performed, I do not intend to focus on the transformative aspect of music itself. Transformation, as I use the concept in this article, has music itself as its object. Musical forms are being transformed, as they are performed in a different context compared to the past. Transfer and transformation as I take them, should thus be kept closely together.

<sup>30</sup> W.B.H.J. VAN DE DONK, A.P. JONKERS, G.J. KRONJEE & R.J.J.M. PLUM (red.): *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (= WRR Verkenningen 13) (Amsterdam 2006) 14.

aim is to investigate the contemporary appropriation of this large musical form that originates from the Christian tradition. Therefore, I shall engage in ethnographic fieldwork. I will expand on this below, but first I will elucidate the concepts with which I will enter the field. These concepts may need to be sharpened in the course of the research project, but for this moment a general description will suffice.

### 3.3. Music and ritual practice

Point of departure for my investigations is the performance of two particular musical forms in the public domain. This focus on performance is very much in line with the approaches to music that are current in several disciplines: new musicology, performance studies and ritual studies, for instance, share the view that music is to be considered and investigated as an activity rather than as a 'thing'. Live music implies action: without performance, there is no music. In previous publications, I already advocated Christopher Small's claim that the musical activity should not be referred to with a noun, but with a verb: what we are doing when we are engaged in a music performance is more about 'musicking' than about 'music'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in my research I will depart from the actual performances of the music. Taking the performance as a starting point enables me to focus on the context as well. A music performance is located somewhere: it always takes place somewhere. And all the people present at the performance – as listeners, or performers, or whatever their role is – are participants in this musical practice. Those participants are the people who attribute meaning: they are the so-called 'meaning-makers'.

The emphasis on the performance of music links up with a current tendency in the investigation of religion. In an article on ritual-religious manifestations occurring in the public domain, Paul Post criticizes the public debate on religion, which in his view remains too abstract: the actual practices of the phenomenon of 'religion' are insufficiently addressed.<sup>32</sup> In their reasoning, Post claims, researchers should start with actual manifestations of religion in our culture and society. Ritual and religious practices, presences and presentations should get primacy: it is pre-eminently there – and not in general discussions on the subject – that religion becomes traceable. Located performances of Passions and bible-based musicals might thus be considered forms of located religion and religiosity. This is where the concept of 'ritual' comes in: these located performances are ritual practices. Ritual here is taken in the sense of 'a more or less repeatable sequence of elements of action, which, from a sheer functional

<sup>31</sup> C. SMALL: *Musicking. The meanings of performing and listening* (Middletown CT 1998). Also see M.C.M. KLOMP: *The sound of worship. Liturgical performance by Surinamese Lutherans and Ghanaian Methodists in Amsterdam* (= Liturgia Condenda 26) (Leuven 2011).

<sup>32</sup> P.G.J. POST: 'Heilige velden. Panorama van ritueel-religieuze presenties in het publieke domein', in *Tijdschrift voor religie, recht en beleid* 1/3 (2010) 70-91, p. 71.

dimension obtains a symbolic dimension through formalization, stylizing and situation in place and time'.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.4. Religiosity

Describing performances of Passions and bible-based musicals as forms of located ritual and religious practices raises the question of whether and if so how, for example *Joseph, the musical* is related to religion. Such a question starts from a fixed idea of what religion is, and what it is not. I will shortly return to this matter in more detail, but here I would like to already mention the way in which our Tilburg Religion and Ritual Research Group approaches contemporary ritual and religious practices. Contemporary European culture, among other things, is fundamentally characterized by advancing processes of change and dynamics. This involves a re-invention and appropriation of identities, as well as a flourishing of phenomena and creativity. These proceeding transformations require a reassessment of scientific concepts, such as the concepts of religion, ritual and culture itself. As far as 'religion' is concerned, the research group opts for an open and situational description, using the typology of 'the sacred' as developed by Matthew Evans.<sup>34</sup> The sacred, according to Evans, may be broadly described as 'things set apart'. He distinguishes four types of things set apart: personal sacred and civic sacred (both related to 'the natural'), religious sacred and spiritual sacred (both related to 'the supernatural'). In my view – but the criticism is often heard – describing religiosity as 'things set apart' may be taken as comprising nearly everything. I question whether such a definition is really helpful for a proper understanding of the religious meanings attributed to music performance. However, Evans rightly shows that the concept of 'sacred' is used in a wide range of ways, and this enables us to trace a broad spectrum of religiosity. Bearing in mind this broad spectrum, I put the conceptualization of religiosity on hold for the moment: I will (using ethnography as a research method and investigating the 'religious' meaning-making of large musical forms) first seek to discover what 'religious' is meant to denote in the field, and later on in this project return to the conceptualization.<sup>35</sup>

This wide view on ritual and religious practices fits in with the idea that religion is changing: religion is not disappearing, nor is it back again.<sup>36</sup> It only be-

<sup>33</sup> POST: 'Heilige velden' 73. Quotation translated by the author.

<sup>34</sup> M. EVANS: 'The sacred. Differentiating, clarifying and extending concepts', in *Review of religious research* 45/1 (2003) 32-47. Also see POST: 'Heilige velden' 70-91. Compare G. JUCHTMANS: *Rituelen thuis: van christelijk tot basaal sacraal. Een exploratieve studie naar huisrituelen in de Tilburgse nieuwbouwwijk De Reesbof* (= Netherlands studies in ritual and liturgy 8) (Groningen/Tilburg 2008).

<sup>35</sup> I retain the word 'religious', because this adjective is linked to two nouns: religion (which I take in the sense of institutionalized religion) as well as religiosity (taken in a very broad sense).

<sup>36</sup> VAN DE DONK: *Geloven in het publieke domein*.

comes manifest in other, new or changing shapes, and not seldom in the public domain. To be able to even catch sight of these shapes, an open definition of the religion-related concepts is required. Surely, qualitative research should further elucidate and fill in the qualities of the sacred within the actual music performances under investigation: in what sense do our *loci* obtain religious meanings? But starting from an open description is helpful ‘to rethink religion on the basis of people’s real practices’.<sup>37</sup> It is only in this way that we will ever discern religiosity in other locations and shapes than before.

#### 4. Methodological approach: ritual-musical ethnography

The aim of this research project is to make clear in which ways a transfer and transformation of large musical forms from the Christian tradition take place. The project thus intends to explicate these musical forms as shapes of contemporary ritual and religious practices in our culture. Of course, Christian musical forms as such have already and for a long time been the subject of investigation.<sup>38</sup> The same holds for the religious dimensions of music in general.<sup>39</sup> How-

<sup>37</sup> M.D. STRINGER: *Contemporary western ethnography and the definition of religion* (= Continuum advances in religious studies 1) (London 2008) 28.

<sup>38</sup> Particularly on the large musical form called Passion, an incredible number of publications have been produced (not lastly due to the popularity of Passions composed by J.S. Bach; principally his *St Matthew Passion*). See for instance P. DIRKSEN (red.): *De gebeimen van de Matthäus-Passion. Ambacht en mystiek van een meesterwerk* (Amsterdam 2010); J. ROELAND: ‘Het religieuze sentiment van de Mattheuspassie’, in *Streven* 74/4 (2007) 300-306; M. VAN AMERONGEN: *Zijn bliksem, zijn donder. Over de Mattheuspassie van Johann Sebastian Bach* (Amsterdam 2007); I. HERMANN: ‘Musik, Text und Schmerz in Johann Sebastian Bachs Mattheuspassion’, in *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 36 (2006) 30-51; J. ROT: *Johann Sebastian Bach, Mattheuspassie* (Amsterdam 2006); H. OPDEBEECK: *De Matthäus. Kan Passie troosten?* (= SPES Cahier 5) (Antwerpen 2005); E. PLATEN: *Johann Sebastian Bach: die Matthäuspassion: Entstehung, Werkbeschreibung, Rezeption* (Kassel 1997).

<sup>39</sup> I here mention just a few: M. HOONDERT: ‘Muziek die er toe doet. Over de ervaring van muziek als betekenisvolle structuur’, in R. SCRUTON, V. MEELBERG & M. HOONDERT: *Meer dan ontspanning alleen. Over het belang van muziek* (Budel 2010) 65-79; M.J.M. HOONDERT, A. DE HEER & J.D. VAN LAAR (red.): *Elke muziek heeft haar bemel. De religieuze betekenis van muziek* (Damon 2009); H. ALMA & H. ZOCK: ‘De religieuze zeggingskracht van de opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*’, in *Gereformeerd theologisch tijdschrift* 100/3 (2000) 103-114; H. ALMA & H. ZOCK: ‘De uitwerking van een religieuze opera op een seculier publiek. Een empirisch onderzoek naar *Dialogues des Carmélites*’, in *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 57/1 (2003) 49-61; R. SYLVAN: *Traces of the Spirit. The religious dimensions of popular music* (New York 2002); J. KOENOT: *Voorbij de woorden. Essay over rock, cultuur en religie* (Averbode 1996); J. ARDUI: *Rocking’ in the free world. God, rock en de roep om bevrijding* (= unpublished PHD thesis Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) (Leuven 2006).

ever, we still do not know exactly what these religious meanings look like on the level of located musical practice, or how these meanings are related to the various aspects of the music performance. It is precisely for this reason that I will engage in ethnographic fieldwork: to discover what is actually happening when it comes to the religious meaning-making of large musical forms from the Christian tradition as performed in an apparently secular setting.

Now the loci I investigate are obviously very complex, both from the perspective of the transfer and transformation of the musical form, and from the perspective of the attribution of religious meanings to these forms. Before elaborating on how I intend to realize the aim of this project and approach the research problem methodologically, I will try to clarify this complexity.

- Concerning the musical forms, the *loci* of course show certain similarities. Both musical forms derive from the oratorio; both are textually bible-based and somehow relate to the Christian religion; both music performances take place in the setting of a concert; and both are subject of transfer and transformations. But although they originate from the same source, the performance settings or contexts of these musical forms are also bound to show differences, which also contribute to the aforementioned complexity. First, there is a difference in musical styles. Contemporary Passion performances are considered as being part of ‘classical music’, whereas the musical is a (mixture of) pop music style(s). Second, my hypothesis is that meaning-makers of a Passion concert are (more or less) aware of the religious subject matter of the piece performed, while I suppose that the meaning-makers of a bible-based musical will be less aware of the religious subject matter of the musical production. In other words, I expect to encounter differences in engagement with regard to the original musical form and/or context. These differences make the combination of both *loci* in one research project a challenging event.
- With respect to the religious meaning-making of music, three factors play a part at the same time (maybe more, but so far I have distinguished three). The first factor is that of the **variety of parties** that are involved in the religious meaning-making. Producers, composers, translators, singers, conductors, musicians, concertgoers, and reviewers all attribute meaning to the same performance, each from their own motives. To make the project workable, I will summarize these meaning-makers in three categories (creators, performers, and listeners), but this definitely is an oversimplification. The second factor relates to the religious meanings attributed to the music performance: these relate to the music (e.g., the musical form, the style, the instruments used, the sound volume), to the text (the subject, the biblical background of the narrative, the textual adaptations or citations, etc.) or the music performance (the location where the performance takes place, the time of the performance, the programming, the fluid community



- attending the concert, the interval in between, etc.), or a combination of two or three elements. Religious meanings attributed in the field are thus related to **various aspects** of the musical performance. The third factor regards the **variety of religious meanings** attributed to the performed Passions and musical. Considering the diminishing influence of institutionalized religion, religious meaning-making is no longer bound to traditional Christian doctrines; people may attribute a variety of religious meanings to the performance of a Passion. All three factors are intermingled, which makes the religious meaning-making of music a complex affair.
- Another complicating factor regards the close relation of meaning and emotion. The actual experience of music is the starting point for this research project, and it is on the basis of this experience that meanings are attributed to music. Now musical experience is very often referred to in emotional terms. Although in performed music emotional and religious experiences are often close to each other, these refer to two different categories: one psychological, the other religious. It is not unlikely that in interviews following the experience of a music performance, the category of emotions might very well precede the religious category. Therefore, when analyzing ethnographically acquired data, I shall have to distinguish concepts in subtlety and work multidisciplinary.

In previous work, I already argued the necessity of investigating the process of religious meaning-making in detail through ethnographic fieldwork.<sup>40</sup> The ethnographic method is well-suited to the idea of and research on music as an activity (instead of a ‘thing’). I will in this project make use of several sources, mapping two issues, both derived from Martin Stringer’s suitable distinction of research objects in his book *On the perception of worship* (1999). In this ethnography of Christian ritual, Stringer mentions three objects of ethnographic study: the ethnographer must be interested in ‘what a person says they should be doing’, ‘what they say they are doing’ and ‘what they are actually doing’ and must attempt to provide some kind of analysis that links these three things.<sup>41</sup> In my research, I will investigate, describe and analyze the second and third of Stringer’s distinctive objects, to get an insight into the meanings of the performed oratorios to their participants, and the actual qualities of the transfer and transformations. What people ‘say’ they are doing in our case is best discovered through semi-structured interviews on the music performance. What they are ‘actually doing’ (watching, listening, performing, responding to the performance, etc.) requires full participant observation.<sup>42</sup> In answering the research

<sup>40</sup> KLOMP: *The sound of worship*.

<sup>41</sup> M.D. STRINGER: *On the perception of worship. The ethnography of worship in four Christian congregations in Manchester* (Birmingham 1999) 50.

<sup>42</sup> Participant observation in the case of Joop van de Ende’s *Joseph, the musical* is no longer possible, since the curtain dropped in 2010. *Joseph* in this article served as an

question, so for the interpretation, both anthropological and cultural-theological perspectives will be included, departing from the idea that in order to understand manifestations of ritual and religious practices, concepts from both disciplines are required to be able to gain a full understanding of the issue at stake.

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example of the type bible-based musical: in due course another bible-based musical will be chosen as subject of investigation.