

Tarenskeen's *LUTHER* Allowing for New Forms of Sacrality

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1. Introduction

The annual arts festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht* saw the world premiere of Boudewijn Tarenskeen's *LUTHER* on September 22nd, 2013.¹ This festival has the aim of exploring the notion of the sacred through the performance of religious and secular music. With this performance, the Dutch composer Tarenskeen (1952) created a contemporary interpretation of the traditional musical format of the oratorio. It deals with the spiritual transformation of Martin Luther (1483-1546).² Tarenskeen portrays the German church reformer as a man with on the one hand many doubts and feelings of despair, and on the other hand revolutionary ideas. The composer furthermore introduces a translator, who functions as a connecting element between Luther and the audience. With his performance, Tarenskeen offers a challenge to the sacrality that surrounds both the persona of Luther and the musical format of the oratorio.

The approach of this performance seems reflective of a trend regarding the treatment of religious stories, figures, and rituals in contemporary culture. The last decade has seen many cultural projects that present new interpretations of religious subject matter, and consequentially new contexts of accessibility to centuries-old histories. Despite these being part of a collective cultural history, knowledge of religious figures like Luther can no longer be taken for granted in secularized Dutch society. While Christian traditions are strongly rooted in western culture, public knowledge of the specifics of these traditions, if existing at all, resides predominantly at the surface.

Examples of this trend in Dutch culture can for instance be found in the domains of literature and popular music. Author Guus Kuijer (1942) is rewriting

¹ This article is written in the context of a larger PhD project on the construction of sacrality through music, for which fieldwork is conducted at *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. The PhD research is carried out by Lieke Wijnia at Tilburg University. The authors' contributions to this article were as follows: Wijnia initiated this article and wrote the first draft. Klomp delivered feedback, after which Wijnia wrote the second draft. They finalized the article together. With regards to the data, Wijnia gathered and analyzed the data from the program committee, the three audience members, and the critics. Together Klomp and Wijnia interviewed composer Boudewijn Tarenskeen and actor Titus Muizelaar, and analyzed this transcription.

² To distinguish between the performance and the historical figure, this article uses different typographies: *LUTHER* refers to Tarenskeen's oratorio, whereas Luther refers to Martin Luther.

Bible books under the title of the *Bible for non-believers*.³ The target audience for these books consists of people who did not receive a Christian education while growing up. In literary language Kuijer wants to present his interpretation of Bible stories in an accessible way. The annual popular musical event *The Passion* has become a large media event, shaped and organized by the Dutch Christian broadcasting companies EO and RKK. By means of famous actors, singers and popular Dutch songs the story of the passion of Christ is staged and retold in the streets of a particular city. During the live show, a procession carries a brightly lit cross to the square where the event takes place. The event airs live and prime time on national television on Maundy Thursday and the event attracts increasingly more visitors annually. The fourth edition in the city of Groningen in 2014 culminated in the figures of 20.000 visitors and 3.5 million television viewers.⁴

These kinds of projects that reinterpret and represent religious figures, stories, and rituals for a contemporary audience are not merely a Dutch thing. For instance, the popular take on *The Passion* is a British concept, which was first performed in Manchester in 2006. In 2013 UK artist Michael Landy (1963) undertook a project that resonates with this trend. During his residency project at the National Gallery in London the many saints that are featured in the paintings of the museum collection struck him. Despite their omnipresence, he realized how little younger generations know about them. Therefore he created seven large-scale sculpture installations, with which the visitors could interact and simultaneously learn about the biographies of the represented saints. He dubbed this project *Saints Alive*. And, philosopher Alain de Botton (1969) gained world-fame with his positively minded philosophies about how to live an improved and fulfilled life. In his bestseller *Religion for atheists* he explores the relevance of institutional religious rituals and traditions for secular minded people.⁵

All these projects look for new and innovative ways of approaching and reinterpreting religious stories, figures, and rituals. Their presence in western heritage, which is largely taken for granted, is re-evaluated in artistic and accessible ways. This reinterpretation not only deals with the subject matter, but also with the status of sacrality these stories, figures, and rituals have obtained throughout time. The new artistic ways of representation can either challenge or reinforce this sacred character. Kuijer found a new way of representation in demystifying biblical language and telling Bible stories in a contemporary fashion. The organizers of *The Passion* looked in the direction of popular music, city marketing, and celebrity and event culture. Landy found inspiration in kinetic art forms to ensure his sculptures received a participatory character. De Botton

³ G. KUIJER: *De Bijbel voor ongelovigen*. Deel 1. *Genesis* (Amsterdam 2012); Deel 2. *De uittocht en de intocht* (Amsterdam 2013); Deel 3. *Saul, David, Samuel en Ruth* (Amsterdam 2014).

⁴ L. FIJEN: 'Nieuwe bijgestelde cijfers van The Passion, 3.558.000 kijkers, met aandeel van 44.9! Dankbaar en trots!' Tweet on April 23, 2014.

⁵ A. DE BOTTON: *Religion for atheists* (London 2012).

looked beyond institutional boundaries and explores religions on their humanistic value. For *LUTHER*, composer Tarenskeen sought a way to present his interpretation of the history and biography of Luther. He shaped this by means of a contemporary approach to the musical format of the oratorio, in which art music and theatre play important roles. These artistic forms became tools in the reinterpreting and staging of Luther's story in a challenging way for a contemporary audience.

This article explores the ways in which Tarenskeen staged his representation of Luther's history and how this was perceived in the context of the festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. It attempts to shed light on how this project, through its particular takes on the musical format of the oratorio and religious history, informs the notion of the sacred in contemporary culture. The performance is studied as a possible platform for sacrality, which in turn will be explored by means of looking at four differently involved groups: the composer, the festival organization, audience members, and critics. Together these groups constitute the production and reception sides of the performance and their involvement in the performance is therefore seen as possible contributions to the construction of a sense of the sacred. First, the performance of *LUTHER* and the context offered by *Musica Sacra Maastricht* are described (2). Second, several theoretical approaches to the notion of sacrality are outlined and their relevance for analyzing *LUTHER* is explained (3). Third, the data gathered by means of participant observation and semi-structured interviews from different involved groups in this performance is presented (4). Finally, it is analyzed how the theory on the sacred and the practice of the performance inform each other (5) and how this sheds light on the notion of sacrality in contemporary culture (6).

2. *LUTHER* at *Musica Sacra Maastricht*

In his interpretation, Tarenskeen presented Luther as a person with both strong convictions and immense internal doubts.⁶ In the first part of the performance Luther sang a selection of Theses in a kind of muttering and stammering, followed by a translation of an interpreter. A choir, positioned behind the audience, responded by singing hymns and psalms. In the second part, after an organ intermezzo, Luther sang his Theses with a clear and convinced singing voice. The translator again offered translations of these Theses. Luther ended with a so-called madness aria and an aria of Psalm 22, which expressed Luther's final feelings of despair and questioning his own devotion. During the performance, the translator increasingly gained a position of authority and superiority over Luther, turning his initial translations eventually into personal interpretations. In an epilogue after the second part, the translator directly addressed the

⁶ Parts of the performance were filmed and used for the production's trailer, that is accessible via www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG8bRoe6aIQ (last accessed May 24, 2014).

audience in a monologue in which he questioned the role of religious authority in contemporary society. During this monologue the choir walked from the back of the church over to the church choir. At the very end, the choir represented the festival audience that was evaluating the performance. This was hardly audible as the singers went to the far back of the choir, but the text was printed in the program booklets.⁷

Tarenskeen called this performance an oratorio, by which he indicates that he strongly relates to the traditional implications of this musical format. In a previous article, we outlined the development of this tradition as follows.⁸

[T]he oratorio is a large musical form from the Christian tradition with a long-standing tradition of creative, sometimes even explorative appropriation of musical, textual and performance elements, both inside and outside 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.

According to *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, the definition of an oratorio is as follows:⁹

An extended musical setting of a sacred text made up of dramatic, narrative and contemplative elements. Except for a greater emphasis on the chorus throughout much of its history, the musical forms and styles of the oratorio tend to approximate to those of opera in any given period, and the normal manner of performance is that of a concert (without scenery, costumes or action). The oratorio was most extensively cultivated in the 17th and 18th centuries but has continued to be a significant genre.

When relating this definition to the eventual performance of *LUTHER*, it can be stated that Tarenskeen used a traditional notion of the oratorio as a departure point. *LUTHER* has an elaborate musical setting represented by the baritone, the choir, and the organ; the performance contains sacred text in the traditional sense, namely the Theses and Paradoxes of Luther, psalms, and hymns;

⁷ In addition to the musical arrangements by Tarenskeen, author Gerardjan Rijnders wrote the text for the significant epilogue. Baritone singer Michel Poels performed the role of Luther and actor Titus Muizelaar played the translator. The choir Cappella Amsterdam represented the roles of an art choir, an opportunistic crowd of people, the festival audience, and the world. Finally, organ player Gerrie Meijers performed the instrumental section.

⁸ M. KLOMP: 'Joseph & Jesus. Bible-based musicals and contemporary passions staged in the public domain: an exploration of a research perspective', in *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek / Yearbook for liturgical and ritual studies* 27 (2011) 49-65, p. 52.

⁹ 'Oratorio' in S. SADIE (ed.): *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians* (London 1998) 656.

and demonstrates dramatic and narrative elements in all the parts.¹⁰ Contemplation can be found in two elements. First, it relates to the intentions of the composer with the performance and his artistic approach. Features of contemplation were particularly notable in how the transformation of Luther was displayed and in the translator's monologue. The organ music underlined this. Furthermore, the notion of contemplation is to be found in the reception of the performance by the audience. With his intentionally challenging interpretation of the persona of Luther, Tarenskeen offered a thought-provoking experience for the audience.

Yet, the transformation does not only regard Luther: it also regards the oratorio itself. The oratorio in his view is 'a comatose genre': it has its own strengths, but is also boring, partly due to its hermetic structure.¹¹ Tarenskeen wanted to challenge the monumental form and found it fascinating to revitalize it.¹² His *LUTHER* therefore offers confusion to the audience and challenges their expectations: is this still an oratorio? As indicated above, the work is an oratorio, but may be considered a transformed one.

LUTHER is about a theologian instead of a biblical story. The texts that are sung by the Luther character in the performance are original texts by Luther. They are not translated into more accessible or easier language. The libretto is thus not a narrative, but a collection of religious Theses. And they begird a small human tragedy. And it has a crease: the composer describes his transforming the oratorio as breaking into the academic material of Luther and trying,¹³

[T]o find a sensitive spot, that does not make the monument reel, but causes a small crease. If one is open to see it, one can feel: there is a little fold, a crease. And the moment Luther is confronted with Erasmus' texts, in this musical work is such a crease.

There is a personal tragedy that becomes most apparent through Tarenskeen's main transformative tool: the insertion of the interpreter. An interpreter is completely alien to the genre. The accessibility component that characterizes the afore-mentioned projects is incorporated to a certain extent in the role of this interpreter. But his role is not only to clarify the content for a contemporary public; his role is also to challenge both the convictions of Luther and that of the audience. He translates Luther's stammering and song into Dutch. After Luther stopped singing, the interpreter turns actor and provides the audience

¹⁰ Tarenskeen took these texts from H. HAGOORT: *Wijsheid van het vlees. Over 97 onbekende stellingen van Maarten Luther* (Gouda 1992).

¹¹ Interview with the composer, 27-05-2014.

¹² In Tarenskeen's view Martin Luther is also a kind of monument; a figure that one is not supposed to touch (this is further elaborated below). In *LUTHER*, one might say, for the composer two monuments came together.

¹³ Interview with the composer, 27-05-2014.

with his personal interpretations of what Luther had sung before. So instead of a reworking or retelling, Tarenskeen offered a response to and interpretation of the original text. For the audience it was possible to follow all the storylines, of Luther, the interpreter, and the choir, because all their parts were printed in the program booklet. According to the composer, no visitor of an oratorio ever wants to know what exactly is being sung: as long as they get an impression of the themes that are on the table, they are all fine. The fact that the audience may have looked at or read along with the texts in their program booklets underlines the transformation of the oratorio and the sense of disillusionment Tarenskeen intended to evoke.

LUTHER premiered within the context of the annual arts festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. This festival started under the name of *Festival for Religious Music* in 1983. In 1988 this was changed into *Musica Sacra*, to afford programming beyond the restriction of religion and address the sacred in all musical domains. In 2002 another name change took place, with the addition of the city name of Maastricht. The full festival name is since then *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. The majority of the concerts takes place at locations throughout the historic city center. These locations vary, but all have cultural-historic connotations. The concert locations can be generally divided in two types, those linked to institutional religion (churches, convents, chapels) and those with a different cultural-historic relationship, such as a factory hall turned into cultural space, a museum, the theatre and the city hall.

The program covers a wide variety of classical music genres and styles, from Gregorian chant to contemporary art music. The majority of the programmed music is western, but it is always attempted to include non-western performances. In addition to concerts, the program also consists of theatre, dance, visual arts, and film events. In the last few years, the program committee has deliberately called the festival not a music festival, but an arts festival. Since 1991 the committee works with an annual theme, to provide a red thread for the programming. This theme is picked carefully and is a leading factor in the decision-making process. The theme is always a term or phrase that is either a reference to the Bible or to Christianity more generally. In addition to this reference, the theme also allows for non-religious or secular interpretations. The committee aims to use the theme as an instrument to program both religious and secular music in one festival. This way, the committee positions the festival between liturgical and secular ritual repertoires. It is possible for visitors to attribute meanings in both ways to the individual concerts they attend and the festival as a whole. The committee generally relates the festival to a trend of arts and music replacing religious rituals and liturgy in the lives of people.¹⁴ The question remains how this so-called replacement occurs, or whether it rather takes the form of a transformation (like Tarenskeen has transformed the oratorio), but this is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁴ Meeting program committee, 09-03-2012.

3. Theoretical approaches to the sacred

The distinction between religious and secular approaches to the sacred, which the festival aims to operate, is reflected in academic approaches to the notion of sacrality. The conceptualization of the sacred has seen a broadening from the field of theology and religious studies into that of sociology, cultural studies, and history. This has resulted in significant contributions to a broad approach that looks beyond the sacred as a divine presence or the core element that is present in all religions. It allows for an approach to the sacred as an actively constructed value within a particular meaning system, from which people in turn mix and match elements to their own convenience and liking.¹⁵

This broadened theoretical approach reflects the multiplicity of possible sacred platforms in the field. This widened scope has led to many attempts of structuring and categorizing the concept in an all-encompassing way. The typology seems to be a popular instrument in demonstrating and capturing the broad character of the sacred. Sociologist Matthew Evans created a typology based on the ways in which the term 'sacred' is used.¹⁶ This results in four categories derived from either individual or collective holders and from either natural or supernatural sources. Religious studies scholar N.J. Demerath suggested a typology that explores the variety of sacred experiences and their consequences.¹⁷ He reaches four categories of sacred experience based on whether those experiencing position themselves in marginal or institutional social positions and on whether the consequence of the experience is felt to be affirmative or compensatory. Liturgical and ritual studies scholar Paul Post created a heuristic instrument regarding so-called fields of the sacred, which can be used to explore and trace the variety of socio-cultural practices that can be characterized as sacred in contemporary society.¹⁸

¹⁵ The notions of 'bricolage' and 'syncretism' are of relevance here. These relate to the elective selection of elements from a different range of sources, the mixing and matching of different elements of different world views or thought systems. Within the field of liturgical and ritual studies this practice has been theorized by for instance Marcel Barnard and Paul Post. See M. BARNARD, J. CILLIERS & C. WEPENER: *Worship in the network culture. Fields and methods, concepts and metaphors* (= Liturgia Condenda 28) (Leuven 2014) 117-130; M. BARNARD: 'Bricolageliturgie. Liturgical studies revisited', in *Verbum et ecclesia* 29/1 (2008) 14-31; IDEM: *Liturgie voorbij de Liturgische Beweging* (Zoetermeer 2006) 33-76; P. POST: 'A symbolic bridge between faiths. Holy ground voor vloeibaar ritueel', in *Jaarboek voor liturgie-onderzoek* 23 (2007) 71-101.

¹⁶ M. EVANS: 'The sacred. Differentiating, clarifying and extending concepts', in *Review of religious research* 45/1 (September 2003) 32-47.

¹⁷ N.J. DEMERATH III: 'The variety of sacred experience. Finding the sacred in a secular grove', in *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 39/1 (March 2000) 1-11.

¹⁸ P. POST: *Voorbij het kerkgebouw. De speelruimte van een ander sacraal domein* (Heeswijk 2010).

All these theoretical approaches attempt to map the diversity of forms and practices that are associated with the idea of the sacred. But they all result in rather fixed categories or fields. Once a practice or experience is identified as fit within one of these categories, deeper levels of analysis have to be sought elsewhere. Religious studies scholar Ann Taves provides in this, by formulating an approach in which she identifies the most essential aspects of sacrality.¹⁹ In her so-called building blocks approach, she sees four fundamental aspects with which people construct their convictions on the sacred. These building blocks are activities of setting apart, the experience of non-ordinary powers, the belief in non-ordinary worlds, and processes of valuation as the four fundamental building blocks with which people mix and match their convictions on the sacred. Not every building block is used to an equal extent, but according to Taves the study of these four aspects offers a ground for comparison across cultures and times. Taves omits the pitfall of strict categorization and allows for wider exploration of the subject matter because of this return to the essence.

Despite the complexity of developing a theoretical concept that encompasses the varied topic of sacrality, a broad definition still seems to be the most effective way to address the numerous possibilities in which the sacred can be manifested. The approach that Veiko Anttonen formulates is of relevance here. In his description he incorporates the notions of non-negotiable value, practices, and the existence and possible encounter of different meaning-making systems.²⁰

The sacred is a special quality in individual and collective systems of meaning. (...) Sacrality is employed as a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions. (...) People participate in sacred-making activities and processes of signification according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious, national or ideological.

This description underlines the constructive character of sacrality, it is produced and perceived by individuals, and is highly dependent on the context in which this production and perception takes place. It seems to capture the most important elements out of all the theories presented above. The context that is explored in this article is the performance of Tarenskeen's *LUTHER*. Its reception and impact will be looked at in the next section, by means of data gathered from the composer, program committee of the festival, audience members, and critics.

¹⁹ A. TAVES: 'Building blocks of sacrality. A new basis for comparison across cultures and religions', in R.F. PALOUTZIAN & C.L. PARK (eds.): *Handbook of psychology of religion and spirituality* (New York 2013) 138-161.

²⁰ V. ANTTONEN: 'Sacred', in W. BRAUN & R.T. MCCUTCHEON: *Guide to the study of religion* (London / New York 2000) 280-281.

4. Production and reception of *LUTHER*

In the program booklet Tarenskeen wrote what he called a personal justification for undertaking this project about Luther. Being brought up as a Roman Catholic, Tarenskeen always learned to regard Luther as an enemy:²¹

The church was all theatre: singing, incense, candles, images and sculptures. And this is what I held on to: it is splendid, particularly when you are young. But then there was this lout throwing it all out: this should not be, and that should not be... Quite fundamentalist. I was highly disappointed that the man felt this way.

Later in life, having left the church, he realized Luther was an admirable person for standing up against an almighty institution and proclaiming his own convictions about how humans should relate to God. Composing the oratorio, Tarenskeen in a sense dealt with his former disappointment and rediscovered Luther – through his texts – as an intelligent, brave, and astute man.

The reason I wrote this piece, in addition to my fascination for the revolutionary figure of Luther, was to attempt within the enormous amount of linguistic material to create a particular warmth around the person; moments of secret doubt, or of public despair, of goose bumps, that have been omitted from history by his following.²²

LUTHER expresses Tarenskeen's transformed image of Luther. Still, the composer claims he does not regard this oratorio as a sacred piece. Whether a piece of music is sacred, in his opinion depends on the religious faith of the composer. Tarenskeen considers himself no longer a person of Christian faith, and his compositions – such as *LUTHER* and his *Mattheus Passie* ('St Matthew Passion', 2008), and another piece called *Klaagliedjes* ('Songs of Lament', 2013) – are precisely an attempt to take away the importance that is implied in the sacrality of pieces that deal with religious subject matter. For Tarenskeen, the physical space where the performance takes place is preferably a church. In a church building, these pieces extra challenge the seemingly self-evident importance: their performances gain a character of danger in confronting the religious with the secular. In a concert hall, the performance would become yet another concert: it is a safe space where one can stage anything, a place where everything has been done already. As much as the physical space, the context of the festival appears an important element contributing to the meaning of this oratorio according to the composer: '*Musica Sacra Maastricht* displays so many different ideas about what is sacred'. The festival, as a festival of sacred music, thus seemed the right place to stage *LUTHER* and its attempt to transform the oratorio and its sacrality.

²¹ Interview with the composer, 27-05-2014.

²² Program booklet *LUTHER*, *Musica Sacra Maastricht* (Maastricht 2013) 3.

Contrary to the composer, Titus Muizelaar, the actor who played the role of the interpreter, did not at all ascribe any special meaning to the thematic-religious choice behind *LUTHER*, its taking place in a church building or in the context of this festival. The main reason for him to take on that role is Tarenskeen whom he has known for decades. Muizelaar considers his work as an artist absolutely essential, and is therefore proud to take part in it. In Tarenskeen's approach, he finds common ground:

An actor writes his autobiography by playing. So I hold the opinion that an actor should very consciously consider what he or she is relating to. (...) The subject choice of Boudewijn always implies some sort of moral deliberation, but in his elaboration he totally refrains from morality: he is not judging, he is relating. His work is amoral. Abstractly formulated: to the sound relations of his life, I wish to relate. (...) It is rather a painting, a composition, literally, that musically expresses the multiplicity of perspectives in which he regards the theme.

It is particularly the absence of moral choices in Tarenskeen's work that speaks to Muizelaar. The way the composer relates to his subject themes is the way the actor wishes to relate to his own work as an artist. For this reason, he enjoyed committing himself to the performance of Tarenskeen's *LUTHER*. Tarenskeen shares this view on the absence of morality in his work. As he strongly links morality to institutional religion, he characterizes his way of approaching the subject matter as a profane or secular way. He employed this approach previously in his *Mattheus Passie* and will also do this in his next project regarding the figure of Saul. He praises the selection of Luther's texts that he used in the performance for their literary quality rather than for their religious significance. The same goes for the above-mentioned appreciation of the personality of Luther. For Tarenskeen Luther's personality is of greater importance than the way he is positioned and treated in religious traditions.

Tarenskeen already established a reputation for taking on traditional musical formats with a religious topic. In 2009 his take on the *Mattheus Passie* (also an oratorio) premiered and won the Matthijs Vermeulen Award, a Dutch composition award. Therefore the program committee was enthusiastic about having a world premiere of a new work by Tarenskeen in the 2013 festival. A performance about the person of Luther well suited the annual theme of 'Transformation and Conversion'.²³ To program a performance that seemed 'to evoke the conversion of Luther in an unconventional way' was what attracted the committee members most to this project.²⁴ This unconventional way was relat-

²³ In Dutch the theme reads: *Inkeer, Ommekeer, Bekering*. Because no proper English translation was found for all three terms, the committee decided to only use the English term of 'Transformation'. However, as the topic of 'Conversion' took up an important position in the festival program, the authors decided to add it to the description of the theme for the purposes of this article.

²⁴ Meeting program committee, 14-01-2013.

ed to previous experiences of the *Mattheus Passie* in which a sense of estrangement was regarded as most crucial element in this evocation. 'It is not about the credibility of Christ or the credibility of Peter. These are symbolic indications that become completely estranged in the atmosphere. It is really strong work'.²⁵ This unconventionality and estrangement fits the ideas of the committee on what kind of festival it wants it to be. Due to the many involved partners, the production process was slow and complicated, leaving some artistic decisions to be made in the days preceding the festival. The committee members encouraged the approach to Luther's biography with the elements of the internal doubts and the interpreting translator. They saw this fit for the annual theme, and while the musical quality of the baritone and the choir was appreciated, it eventually was felt that the theatrical approach was not the most effective way to stage these artistic visions. While the translator could in theory fulfill a challenging role, the direction and the epilogue were considered to be overshadowing the other elements in the performance.²⁶

The responses to the performance from audience members were quite strong and opposing to each other. The most frequently mentioned elements of the performance regard the storyline and the artistic approach to this storyline. One woman, Elly (1949), was terribly disappointed in that the promise of seeing the true story about Luther was not fulfilled. She was even ashamed that the performance took place in the church of her protestant congregation. At the other end of the spectrum, a man, Cees (1942), felt that this performance was deeply sacred. Brought up protestant but no longer practicing, he felt the dramatization and the way it was performed were very special. The sense of doubt and conviction with both Luther and the translator he found enormously touching. He already knew Tarenskeen's *Mattheus Passie* and had therefore expected Luther to be something out of the ordinary.

One particular element of the storyline stood out. In the epilogue, the translator turned storyteller states how the texts of Luther have become footnotes and that no one reads footnotes anymore. Elly felt like this was taking it one step too far and not appropriate to be performed under the name of *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. She said:²⁷

I was ashamed it took place in the St. John's Church, the protestant church. Luther was not a stutterer, they made him look like he was pathetic, and I'm sure he wasn't. He defended himself at the Confession of Augsburg. A stutterer would not have been able to defend himself. (...) And at the end, the translator said that God doesn't matter anymore, that it has become a footnote. Then I thought, no, this is not for me. (...) I liked that they did something with Luther, but not this. It was just too much.

²⁵ Meeting program committee, 14-01-2013.

²⁶ Meeting program committee, 23-09-2013.

²⁷ Interview with respondent, 04-10-2013.

On the contrary, Cees, who felt the performance to be deeply sacred, found a climax in this final passage. He said:²⁸

The climax came for me at the end, when the interpreter said, and I even wrote it down, the society and the church incorporated it and that is it. It has become a footnote. That was so profound, an explosion of insights, of wisdom. I thought, yes, that's true, we regard it as normal now, we continue as ever. Hence the footnote. Martin Luther King has become a footnote, Gandhi became a footnote, Jesus became a footnote. Who reads footnotes? Very special.

Another respondent, who wishes to stay anonymous but for the sake of clarity let us call her Ann, questioned the artistic approach to the subject matter. She stated after the performance,²⁹

I thought it was a nasty theatrical trick to all of a sudden give the translator his own voice. It was a big rupture in the whole piece. And also, the talking at the end [of the choir evaluating the performance] in the so-called foyer: that was also a trick. It makes me wonder, do you really take yourself seriously, if you cover yourself this way before hand?

While unappreciative of the theatrical approach to the oratorio, Ann felt the subject matter of the performance was suitable to be performed during a festival that deals with the notion of *musica sacra*.³⁰

For me sacrality has to do with a particular kind of music history, and a particular kind of experience that you don't have with other kinds of music. That is not necessarily religious music, often not at all, also in its origins. But sometimes it is. It invites to a particular kind of experience, a standing still with that what once was. And to really think about what we in Europe are doing with this heritage.

Critics make up a particular category of audience members, as they are obliged to rethink a performance, whether they have enjoyed it or not. *LUTHER* was reviewed in two national newspapers. Reviewer Kasper Jansen of *NRC Handelsblad* recalls how *Musica Sacra Maastricht* was 'once a very catholic festival' and that now 'even' the church reforms of Luther are programmed under the theme of 'Transformation and Conversion'. He calls the epilogue, in which the footnote remark is made, a passage of relativism in relation to the preceding passages of doubt, breakthrough, and heavy organ music.³¹ Biëlla Luttmmer writes for the website of newspaper *de Volkskrant* how after the *Mattheus Passie* Tarenskeen wanted to find yet again a new interpretation for a traditional genre with this oratorio. The stammering is seen as an effective instrument to demonstrate

²⁸ Interview with respondent, 08-10-2013.

²⁹ Interview with respondent, 01-11-2013.

³⁰ Interview with respondent, 01-11-2013.

³¹ K. JANSEN: 'Onwaarschijnlijk hoge sopraannoten', in *NRC Handelsblad*, 23-09-2013.

the internal doubts, which are otherwise unsayable. She sees parallels in the roles of Luther and the translator to that of the canonical literary characters of Dr. Faust, who sold his soul to Mephisto, the devil in disguise.³² Especially when the translator turns away from merely translating and starts conveying his personal views, he could be seen as gaining characteristics of Mephisto by revealing his true face.

These different responses to the performance indicate many levels on which the special quality that is the sacred is experienced and attributed. How this data and the theoretical broadening of the concept of the sacred inform each other will be elaborated upon next.

5. Connecting theory and practice

LUTHER is a performance that is representative of the way the program committee operates in creating *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. It was programmed as a performance dealing with a religious subject matter, but at the same time, the translator adds a very secular perspective to the performance. This demonstrates that the theoretical distinction between religious and secular subject matter is difficult to maintain in practice. This actually goes for all the levels of the performance – subject matter, artistic approach, experience, and reception. All these levels inform the supposed religious, secular or somewhere in between character.

The typologies are of relevance when relating the performance and the responses it received to the theoretical approaches presented above. As stated before, the resulting categories seem in most cases too strict and unidirectional to work with, but the dimensions that constitute the framework of the typologies offer a departure point for exploration. Evans's typology that deals with the use of the term the sacred is reflected in the responses. Both the composer and the actor playing the role of translator do not consider *LUTHER* as a sacred performance. They expressly link 'the sacred' to the Christian perception of God according to the ecclesial tradition and to the Christian faith, with which they were raised as children, but from which they departed later in life. They are actually the only ones that do fit a particular category in Evans's typology. Their understanding of sacrality fits with the category Evans named 'the religious sacred', which relates a supernatural source (the Christian God) to a collective holder (the church).

While Elly's reception of the performance is based on her convictions regarding collective ideas on sacrality, her attribution of value is very individual and based on – in her eyes – a wrongdoing to Luther's biography. The source of her use of the term 'the sacred' is not so much supernatural as it is natural. In her

³² B. LUTTMER: 'Musica Sacra', in *de Volkskrant*, 25-09-2013.

opinion the profane artistic approach overruled the sacrality that the person and the history of Luther have to her. Cees described his interpretations as being very individual. To a lesser extent, he made reference to the collective of Protestantism with which he grew up, but had departed from a long time ago. So both categories of individuality and collectivity are relevant here, but not in equal terms. Ann related *LUTHER* to a larger heritage that she associates with sacrality. She related it to a European heritage of Christianity, which deserves discussion on how it is treated in contemporary culture. In that sense she felt the performance was very much at place in the context of a festival dedicated to music and sacrality. The same occurred in the reviews about the performance, which related the content to a wider cultural and religious context. All these responses and treatments of the term sacrality are primarily individual, which are then related to values that are possibly collectively held.

At the same time, the performance of *LUTHER* and the participation of the respondents had a highly experiential quality. Elly said she literally felt ashamed that this performance took place in her church and even during the interview she relived that shame emotionally. This result is the exact opposite of what Tarenskeen hoped to achieve. The experience of the performance was, in the words of Demerath, a confirmatory one for her. Afterwards she was strengthened in the beliefs she had before. Cees also talked about an experience of significance, one of profound insight and wisdom. He described it as a breakthrough and also during the interview he still felt this breakthrough. It had impressed him deeply. It could be seen as a compensatory experience, because an alternative was offered to the teachings of his upbringing and because the experience provided him with new insights. The experience of the third respondent is difficult to be studied with either of the dimensions offered by Demerath. While the subject matter appealed to her both before and after the performance, she felt cheated by the artistic approach of the performance. This can be regarded as a highly experiential response to the performance. She felt this performance to be a failed performance but did not strongly relate it to any kind of personal feelings or beliefs. So despite its experiential character, it resulted in neither compensation nor affirmation for her beyond the ideas she had about the theatrical approach.

To overcome the problematic character of the typology, the building blocks of Taves aim to offer an instrument to analyze the sacred character of things or events, in this case musical performances, beyond that of differences in religion and secularity. The first building block regards the process of setting apart. This occurs by the composer that picked the subject matter of Luther for his new composition, by the actor who highly appreciates Tarenskeen's amoral artistic approach and thus chose to engage in *LUTHER*, by the festival that selects the performances for its program, and by the festival audience that selects particular performances to be special enough to visit. These three parties thus create moments that are spatial, temporal, and rational breaks away from a daily routine.

The next two building blocks deal with non-ordinary worlds and non-ordinary powers. Tarenskeen and Muizelaar (together with the other performers) created a non-ordinary setting, or if you will, world by composing and performing *LUTHER*. The non-ordinary cannot exist without a link to the ordinary. In this case that is the traditional notion of the oratorio, which Tarenskeen departed from and then transformed into something non-ordinary. Tarenskeen also draws the same conclusion for the festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*, which departs from the religious heritage of the city of Maastricht and develops that further with their programming of unexpected musical performances, into a non-ordinary setting.

While Taves' formulation of non-ordinary powers and worlds might still resonate strongly with the religious studies context in which the building blocks approach originated, the musical context seems to offer a link between this idea of the non-ordinary and the notion of the non-negotiable that Anttonen uses. With regards to the experience of musical performances, the non-ordinary relates to the particularity of the musical experience an individual can have. Each experience is for the listener a reality, and as such a truth. The individual experience might differ from listener to listener, but each feels their experience to be real and provides it with a certain non-negotiability. Therefore, in the use of the terminology regarding the sacred, the terms of non-ordinary and non-negotiable seem to be very appropriate in exploring the perception and impact of musical performances.

In the performance of *LUTHER*, the connection made by Cees between his experience of the performance and the larger context of world history seems to border the non-ordinary. This seems especially so, because he described this as a moment of breakthrough, as an epiphany of wisdom. Through his experience of this profound insight, he reached a level of experience that went beyond his own individuality into a greater context and he suddenly felt like he understood the greater forces that write world history. This might be seen as a way of experiencing a power of non-ordinary character, as he described the performance to be deeply sacred to him. In the same line of text that Cees experienced as profoundly wise, Elly felt like the person of Luther was made all too ordinary. For her all the elements of the extraordinary, which Luther already possessed in her personal beliefs, were removed by the artistic approach and the story line of the performance. This experience of the totally ordinary did injustice to the non-ordinary person that Luther is to her. Ann did not really relate to the idea of the non-ordinary within this performance. The experience she had did not move beyond an analysis of the artistic instruments that were employed in the performance. These prohibited her from moving into an experience of the actual storyline or musical content of the performance.

The final building block of the valuing process is already implied in the descriptions of the experiences with regards to the previous building blocks. It was mainly the process of transformation of the oratorio that determined the valuing of the performance by all the respondents. Muizelaar called the scene

where he as translator suddenly takes the lead and demonstrates Luther what he should be singing as ‘the most fantastic part of the performance, and the part that made me most nervous!’³³ It is a total reversal of the roles, which completed the challenge Tarenskeen aimed for when inserting the role of the translator. Elly considered Tarenskeen’s secular approach a wrongdoing to Luther’s biography, while Cees was mainly struck by the epilogue of the translator. Ann was primarily unimpressed with Tarenskeen’s most important element of transformation (the role of the translator). In the variety of responses to the performance, both positive and negative experiences of the (non)ordinary contributed to the valuing process of that which is sacred. Also, all respondents with strong experiences during performances kept an impression and memory of this performance in their minds. They were able to relive and rekindle their strong excitement or disappointment, including their physical states during the performance. This way they took their experience of the set-apart back into their everyday lives.

All the elements mentioned by Anttonen in his description of sacrality are present in this analysis. First, the performance is regarded as a sacred-making activity, which is set apart by the festival organization, the composer, the actor, and the individual audience members. Second, this activity takes place within a particular context representing a system of meaning. Individuals relate to this particular system, while simultaneously employing their own systems of meaning. Third, these individuals have all experienced the performance in their own ways, which are to them non-negotiable. They have experienced the performance in a particular way and that is true to them. Finally, this leads to a possible attribution of a particular value, whether it is negative or positive. This in turn relates to all other things that are of value and which operate within the employed meaning system. All these elements make up the special quality that is regarded the sacred.

6. Discussion

When looking at the different involved parties in *LUTHER* in exploring whether this performance could be regarded as a platform for sacrality, many levels have to be taken into account. The subject matter of the performance, the artistic approach, the presence of music, and the historical context: all these matters offer levels of interpretation. Traditionally, the notion of *musica sacra* or sacred music is exclusively limited to religious or liturgical music. However, the theoretical broadening of the concept sacrality allows for finding new and unconventional kinds of music that could possibly be experienced or regarded as sacred.

³³ Interview with the actor, 27-05-2014.

The trend of reinterpreting religious histories, figures, and rituals and their heritage in a contemporary and artistic way coincides with this theoretical broadening. The value of the performance *LUTHER* is that it offers a way of exploring how such a reinterpretation of a religious subject matter functions within a secular context. It offers a departure point for the study of the position and treatment of the notion of the sacred in contemporary society.

Departing from the format of the oratorio, a context that can be associated with institutional religion and its traditions, the performance *LUTHER* has deliberately challenged these traditional convictions, by the composer's addition of the role of the interpreter. By doing this, room for new ideas and convictions was deliberately created. The artistic approach of the composer allowed for new ways of thinking about the sacred for the audience, which in turn offers a fruitful field for the researcher of sacred music.

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