

# Musical religiosity

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## Abstract

In this essay the author explores the thesis that music is by its nature religious, or rather, that it has qualities that correspond well with what religion, in a broad sense, aspires to be. Four musical qualities are explored: timbre, the tonal system of western music, the time relations within the tonal network, and the non-referential nature of music. These qualities are linked to the definition of 'the religious' by John Dewey. The main conclusion is that an analogy can be shown between the musical and the religious experience: both composers and musicians challenge the listeners to explore the hidden religiosity in the performance of music.

Keywords: *music, religion, transcendence, experience*

In December 2010 I attended a performance of the composition *Blue Encounter* by the Dutch composer Joep Franssens,<sup>1</sup> a fascinating piece that 'moved' me during the performance. *Blue Encounter* is a composition for solo instrument. It was performed by Sarah Oates, a young violinist, who played the work with great concentration. The live performance made everyone focus on the violinist and the music she was making. For fifteen minutes Oates captivated the audience of over a hundred people. With just her violin, she managed to achieve the greatest possible richness of sound, as she let the long melodic lines flow into each other, making good use of the acoustics. Oates created a sphere, a soundscape, in which the audience could, albeit temporarily, 'live' (Murray Schafer 1993).

## New spirituality

joep Franssens (1955) can be regarded as a composer of the New Spirituality movement. Internationally, this movement is associated with composers such as Arvo Pärt (Hillier 1997; Shenton 2012), John Tavener (Dudgeon

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1 For more on the composer Joep Franssens, see <[www.joepfranssens.com](http://www.joepfranssens.com)>.

2003), Pēteris Vasks and Henryk Górecki (Thomas 1997). In the Netherlands the main representatives of the New Spirituality movement are Franssens, Daan Manneke and Coen Vermeeren. Critics have described the music by these composers as a denial of the usual format of western, classical music (Fisk 1994). Rather than a propelling motion, a development of themes and motifs, the New Spirituality composers present us with a standstill: their music moves forward very slowly, it is not about motion, but about the sound itself. Critics also refer to New Spirituality as 'New Simplicity'. A more positive approach would be to describe the New Spirituality compositions as affirmative music: it consists of comprehensible, tonal harmonies and does not set out to alienate the listener. Communication with the listener is key (Cobussen 2007).

The biographies of New Spirituality composers show that they place themselves, implicitly or explicitly, in a religious tradition, and their music is to a greater or lesser extent an expression of their religiosity. We could say that the consciously sought-after simplicity of these compositions serves a higher purpose, the expression of the religious. Josiah Fisk provocatively writes:

With the religious aspect we get closer to the nub of the problem. We are asked to accept that the New Simplists' elimination of the play of ideas in music isn't born of highhandedness, confusion or lack of ability. It is authorized by powers far beyond human comprehension. (Fisk 1994, 405.)

Joep Franssens also places himself in a religious field of meaning. He says: 'I did not have a religious upbringing. I am not Russian Orthodox like Pärt, or Catholic like Górecki. I stay away from everything to do with the institutionalization of religion. But there is something. There is more than we can perceive.' (Van Eekeren 1999)<sup>2</sup> Through his music Franssens aims to make that 'something' explicit and thus 'move' people. 'When music does not move the heart, it does not move anything', says Franssens in an interview in the *Timbres* magazine. (Lelie 2010, 18.)

### **Social-cultural context and frame**

*Blue Encounter* by Joep Franssens aims to be 'religious music', at least that is how I understand the composer, and that is how I understand this com-

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2 All translations by the author.

position as part of the New Spirituality movement. But what does it mean, religious music? Let me take my own listening experience as a starting point for my reflection. What moves me when I listen to *Blue Encounter*? I experience listening to this composition as a special moment, a sacred or holy moment (Evans 2003). 'Sacred' means something like 'whole and healing' (Van Uden & Pieper 2012). For a moment there is unity, my existence is one. Listening to *Blue Encounter*, time and space momentarily cease to exist. In my listening experience there is only sound, I am captivated by the music, I am captivated by the movement of Sarah Oates, I engage myself with her and the music she is making. For a moment there is, in my experience, an ideal situation of unity, harmony and happiness (Small 1998).

The performance of *Blue Encounter* was attended by around a hundred people. Did all of them experience this performance as an expression of religiosity? The performance took place during a symposium at Radboud University, Nijmegen (the Netherlands), entitled *Welluidend modern klassiek. Over nieuwe spirituele muziek* (Harmonious Modern Classical Music. About New Spiritual Music). In other words, those present knew that they were going to hear 'spiritual music'. Their ears had, as it were, been pre-tuned. We always listen to music within a certain context (Blacking 1995). That context to an important extent determines what meanings we attribute to music. The production and reception of music can only be understood if we realize that composers, performers and listeners operate within the parameters of a specific social-cultural context (Shepherd 1991). Whether music is considered 'good' or 'important' depends, at least partly, on the meanings a social group attributes to this music. What this actually means is that music itself does not have an objective, fixed meaning. In other words, the meaning of music is not *in* the music; meaning can only be attributed to it. The meaning there is, is one that is *experienced* and one that depends on the subject who is listening to it or performing it (Hoondert 2009). This also applies to music that is classed as religious: music *is* not religious, but it can be *experienced* as religious. For that matter, this applies to the religious in general: nothing is religious in itself; depending on people's interaction with something, the religious can appear in everything and anything can acquire a religious meaning (Borgman 2006, 65).

In addition to the social-cultural factors that always play a role in the process of attributing meaning, the concrete listening experience is largely determined by the setting or *frame* in which a musical performance takes place. Framing is something we do all the time: we search for interpretations of cultural expressions we encounter by placing them in a specific frame

(Bell 1997, 160). Sometimes the frame is handed to us from the outside. For example, a church acts as a frame: music we hear within the walls of a church, whether as part of a ritual or in a concert, will generally acquire a religious meaning. Titles of a composition can also act as a frame. An example of this is the composition *Sanctus* (1996) by Joep Franssens. The title of this work refers to one of the fixed sections of the Roman Catholic liturgy. The *Sanctus* is part of the Ordinary of the Mass (the sections that do not vary by different seasons or occasions) and for many it is a familiar term. For some of the listeners, this will 'direct' the process of attributing meaning: they will search for an attribution of meaning that for them 'corresponds' with the title of the composition. However, Franssens did not compose *Sanctus* for the liturgy. He has radically transformed the form: we do not get to hear the text from the liturgy which we would expect. *Sanctus* by Joep Franssens is an instrumental composition without a text and has a duration of more than twenty minutes.

Categorizing the works by composers such as Joep Franssens, Arvo Pärt, John Tavener and Henryk Górecki as New Spirituality also acts as a frame. Not the composers, but journalists and musicologists are the ones who have given this movement its name. They have created a new frame in which this music is perceived. A lot of the music by the 'new spiritualists' employs old compositional techniques: from a modernist perspective, this music is old-fashioned and refers to the past rather than to the present. By means of reframing, by placing the music in a new frame, it is given a positive classification. This music is not 'unmodern', no, it is 'new spirituality'. And spirituality is 'in' (De Hart 2011; Houtman and Aupers 2007).

*Blue Encounter* complies with the frame of New Spirituality. To a certain extent it is harmonious music that is easy to understand: it develops somewhat slowly, without sudden changes in dynamics, tempo or rhythm. Both the setting of the symposium and the frame of New Spirituality acted, as it were, as a church for *Blue Encounter*: the listeners were willing to accept the music as an expression of religiosity. The frame may even be so dominant that we perceive meanings which are not intended. This became painfully obvious when a second work was played at the same symposium: *ShivaShakti* (2008) by Rokus de Groot. When this composition was also announced as 'new spiritual music', the composer immediately responded that he himself did not classify his music as such.

### **Hidden religiosity in music**

We have seen that the explicit religious meanings we attribute to music are to a great extent determined by the social-cultural context and the frame in which the musical performance takes place. However, the performance also comprises a 'hidden religiosity', hidden because it is musical. I would like to elaborate on this by describing how music works. But before I do this, I would like to discuss the concept of 'hidden religiosity'.

This concept has been defined by Leo van der Tuin in his inaugural lecture from 2008 (Van der Tuin 2008). Generally, in our culture, religion and religiosity are seen as categories undergoing change. Religion is not disappearing, but it is transforming (Van de Donk 2006). The institutional form ('religion') is being replaced by a more individualistic form ('religiosity'). In his inaugural lecture Van der Tuin prefers to speak of religiosity, defining it as 'people's desire to continue to search for answers so they can deal with the uncertainty of their existence' (Van der Tuin 2008, 21). Van der Tuin does not approach religiosity as a theoretical category, but as a praxis: it becomes visible in the doings of people. Religiosity is first and foremost

[...] the praxis of symbolic action in which the desire for a transcendental attribution of meaning to the unfathomable miracle of existence is expressed. The vocabulary – words, images, symbols, music – in which these meanings are expressed, sometimes contains traditional language which, used in new contexts, should be interpreted anew, and sometimes it contains new language which is not yet understood according to its proper meaning. (Van der Tuin 2008, 21.)

In this last phrase, Van der Tuin gives a description of 'hidden religiosity': it refers to a language that researchers or representatives of institutionalized religions do not immediately recognise as 'religious'. And it might also refer to a form of religiosity that those who are themselves attributing meaning do not place in the field of meaning of 'religion'.

How can we uncover this 'hidden religiosity'? Can it be researched, or is the gap between the conceptual frame of the researcher and that of the 'field' unbridgeable? Is there a traceable form of religiosity, or is it, by its nature, undetectable? Van der Tuin appears to approach these probing questions from a particular preconception when he states that religion is simply there:

[Religion is] inherent in a culture and society that maintains the human measure, precisely because that is, in the end, what it is about: the ultimate

meaning of reality, the meaning that finally lies beyond existence, beyond life. (Van der Tuin 2008, 21.)

Underlying this, one can perceive the ideas about meaning and transcendence of philosophers such as Heidegger, Levinas, or Derrida, who argue that experiences of meaning are always transcendent: in other words, they are exempt from human control or manipulation (Burms and Dijn 1986). However much I may identify myself with this philosophical tradition and however much I may be willing to accept the premise that religion is a self-evident part of culture, it will have to prove itself 'in the field'. In other words, the much-heard and often cited thesis that institutionalized religion has not disappeared, but has transformed and taken on a cultural form, requires careful investigation. Such investigation needs to be of an ethnographic nature: it will examine behaviour through the eyes of the participants and let them explain how that behaviour is meaningful for them; and whether it entails a notion of transcendence; and also whether the meanings that are found are religious in some understandable or still to be discovered way.

However, there is yet another way to trace the 'hidden religiosity', namely by experiencing it. How? By listening to music intensely and with full attention. I want to defend the thesis that music is by its nature religious, or rather, that it has qualities that correspond well with what religion aspires to be. If we listen intensely, we participate in the movement and in the 'now' of the music. Does this listening experience explain the fact that music plays such an important role in almost all religions (Beck 2006; Suppan 1984)? Music can be heard in many different ways in relation to religion, but music is always there, whether it is the recitation of psalms or verses of the Qur'an, the communal singing of a strophic hymn, the listening to a melodious motet by Bruckner or the singing of a mantra. There is a close connection between music, rituality and religiosity, a connection which I believe is also logical and explicable (Beck 1993).

### **The working of music**

To explain my hypothesis, I will use a book by Kathleen Harmon, who is music director for the programmes of the Institute for Liturgical Ministry in Dayton, Ohio (USA). In 2008 she published a theology of liturgical music titled *The mystery we celebrate, the song we sing* (Harmon 2008). In her book she attempts to understand music from within, making use of theories by various authors. I will summarize her discourse in four points.

*Participation*

Music is a form of sound. Any sound, whether musical tones or simply noise, manifests itself to us as 'present'. Even if we can't see the source of the sound, it is still there; it as it were forces itself on us, from all directions and inescapably. Sound is produced by a 'body' (Brown 2007), an object or person with certain characteristics that together determine the nature of the sound; this is called the timbre. In other words, the sound manifests inner qualities of the object or person. However, the sound can only be heard if I as a listener let my body resonate, resound. Hearing is participating in the inner qualities of the source of the sound. This aspect means that sound unites. If we sing or make music together we get through to each other; there is to a certain extent an intimacy, a 'sense of belonging'. Sound makes you engage with the other, albeit not entirely voluntarily and not always in a positive manner: the power of sound can evoke a positive or comfortable feeling of identification, but it can also alarm us and make us run away from the source of the sound.

*Dynamic quality: immeasurable but real*

Music consists of sounding tones. These tones are not detached, but form a system of relations. The relations between the tones give the individual tones a dynamic quality, so the tones are constantly in motion, always on their way to the next tone. A tone becomes a musical fact through this dynamic quality. When we listen to music, we participate in this dynamism. Thus, we become part of a world that goes beyond actual perception. After all, while the tones can be measured as vibrations in the air, the inner dynamism is not measurable, but that does not make it less real. Harmon writes: 'What we learn from musical hearing, is that there is more to the world than what meets the eye' (Harmon 2008, 27). Musical experience teaches us that the material and the immaterial world are connected: they permeate each other, or rather, they are two aspects of one and the same world.

The working of music Harmon describes here, is reminiscent of the way Christopher Small characterises musical performance (Small 1998). Small does not speak of 'music', but of musical performances, which he refers to with the verb 'to music' and the participle 'musicking' that goes with it. Meanings are created during and by the performance, in the network of all those involved in the act of 'musicking'. Small elaborates on this by explicitly including the network of relations in the process of attributing meaning. I

quote a passage from a lecture he gave at the University of Melbourne on 6 June 1995:

The act of musicking brings into existence among those present a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act of musicking lies. [...] These sets of relationships stand in turn for relationships in the larger world outside the performance space, relationships between person and person, between individual and society, humanity and the natural world and even the supernatural world, as they are imagined to be by those taking part in the performance. (Small 1995)

In his book *Musicking* from 1998 he elaborates further on this idea, adding a remarkable but exciting idea. The musical performance creates a network of human relations: not, however, the relations as they are in reality, but the *ideal relations* we long for. This includes not only relations between people, but also relations with our own body, the cosmos and the world beyond. During a musical performance the desired relations reach a virtual existence, so the participants can experience them as if they were real. Thus music acquires the character of a ritual. These ideal relations not only come into virtual existence, but, suggests Small, they are also 'explored, affirmed, and celebrated' (Small 1998, 139-189, 183).

### *The 'now' of music*

The dynamic quality of the tones gives us a new relationship with time. Music takes place in time, but through the relations between the tones, the expected and realized ascents and descents, we experience the past, the present and the future at the same time. In the 'now' of the music we hear the tones that have already sounded and anticipate the tones still to come. We hear the tone in the relations-network of tones, although what we actually hear is always a 'now' in which the past and the future resound. In other words, in the 'now' of the music we experience time to its full extent. Harmon writes: 'Musical hearing is [...] presence to and participation in the completeness of time in every present moment' (Harmon 2008, 33). This anamnestic quality of music connects it with the religious, and in particular with the ritual expression of the religious. Indeed, many rituals, e.g. the celebration of the Eucharist or Last Supper, commemorate the past in the present for the sake of the future.

### *Centripetal*

The working of music we experience while we are listening, the musical experience, is meaningful in itself. In this respect music differs fundamentally from language. Words refer to reality, while this reality in no way depends on words. Such a distinction can't be made for music: the meaning of music does not lie in what it refers to, but in the presence, in the sounding of the tones. In language there is a distinction between 'signifier' and 'signified'. Music focuses the listeners (and also the musicians, who are the first listeners!) on itself, it has a centripetal working. Thus, music reveals the fundamental unity that lies under or behind the diversity of our reality. We experience this in an intense way when we sing together: we are invited to participate, to join in with the sound and the 'now' of the music; we become partners in the musicking. This focused attention takes away the barriers between the participants. Harmon: 'The sense of other as oppositional dissipates as we enter together into a shared new world' (Harmon 2008, 39).

### **The religious**

The description of the working of music offered by Kathleen Harmon provides us with keywords like *sense of belonging*, *the connection between the material and the immaterial*, *anamnesis*, and *unity* or *totality*. We also find these keywords in the definition of the religious (Matsunobu 2011). Referring to 'the religious', I go along with the Canadian pragmatic philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952). He distinguishes a *religion* (with its specific content and recognizable religious experiences) from *the religious*, which is an attitude that can characterize any human experience, including the experience of music (Berding 1999). Dewey describes the religious as seeing one's own position as part of a comprehensive whole, which makes life meaningful, despite its complexity (Avest 2011, 49). Both the musical experience and the religious experience in the meaning given by Dewey are experiences of unity, experiences of totality. From the perspective offered by Dewey, there is an analogy between the musical and the religious experience, without reducing the one to the other. In other words, musical experiences can be interpreted analogously to religious experiences. In the musical experience we find a *hidden* religiosity, because it has taken on a musical form and only becomes religious when we explicitly interpret our musical experience as such. The religious is first and foremost a category of interpretation: by interpreting we can discover the religious in reality and the other way round; thus the religious also helps us to understand reality. As Lynda Sexson puts

it in her fascinating book *Ordinary Sacred* (Sexson 1982), composers are the 'tricksters': '[...] the ones who do not fit into any categorization and break through all categorizations, the ones who turn order into chaos and chaos back into order, like religion itself does in a both secularizing and religionizing culture such as ours', says Erik Borgman in his review of Sexson's book (Borgman 2006, 63). Borgman adds:

In the current situation the trickster reveals itself in numerous places: for example, by classical mythological and religious themes going underground in popular literature and mass culture, in comics and films. [...] Those who want to investigate the present religious situation need to be led by the trickster from the periphery of existence to the centre and back again and be shown reality as an endless number of options. (Borgman 2006, 63.)

Seen from this perspective, it is the composers and musicians who make it possible to experience the religious through their musical take on reality. At times this takes some getting used to, because this musical take on reality is also an experiment with the sacred, an experiment that does not always lead to recognized religious truths. Both pop culture (Ostwalt 2012; Sylvan 2002) and New Spirituality offer a hermeneutic open space (Hoondert 2006, 194, 201; Vuijsje 2007, 195ff.), in which musical experiences and experiences of the religious meet (Cobussen 2008).

For me, listening to *Blue encounter* at the symposium mentioned in the introduction was an intense musical experience, a 'deep experience' (Heijerman 2011). I regard this deep experience as a religious experience. I believe that the openness of sound and form are essential to this denotation. The composition by Franssens is not a 'discourse', like a symphony by Beethoven, but an open space, a cathedral of sound. I am allowed to enter this cathedral, look around, see what is meaningful to me, admire the beauty. I am not really sure what to do with this space. Like a cathedral of stone and glass, this musical cathedral is too large for me. I feel both at home and not at home in it: the musical space is *fascinans* and *tremendum* (Otto 1917). I can't really cope with this space, I can't comprehend it. In this context I quote the Flemish musician and musicologist Jan Christiaens, who compares this musical experience to the experience of the major mystic writers:

Through the *via negativa* of no longer being able to comprehend, no longer being able to synthesize what has been heard into an overall picture, the music can make the listener break through to the hereafter. (...) The major

mystic writers proclaim that the strongest experience of God is not one of knowing and comprehending, but is often one that implies a not-knowing and a 'no longer being able to understand'. Where the usual frames of reference break down, in those very cracks and breaks themselves the mystery, the 'hereafter' shines strongest. (Christiaens 2005, 58.)

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