

To Applaud or Not to Applaud? Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* and Management of Sacrality in the Netherlands

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Introduction: A Slightly Awkward Moment

During a performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* in the Geertekerk (Geerte church) in Utrecht (the Netherlands, 30 March 2018), I witnessed someone committing a minor transgression. When the first part concluded, a young boy seated in the row in front of me started to applaud. He clapped his hands perhaps once before the father, who was seated next to him, placed his hand gently on his son's arm and whispered, "No applause." The boy acquiesced, the family stood up, and we all silently made our way to the area of the church where coffee and tea were served during intermission.

During my fieldwork into the popularity of passion plays in the Netherlands, I attended many performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) musical rendition of the Gospel of Matthew.¹ At almost each performance an instance like this occurred. Whether it was through explicit hushes, stalwart glances, or mumbled comments, people reminded each other not to applaud. For reasons that will become apparent below, refraining from applause has become a central indicator of the special status of the *Saint Matthew Passion*. Therefore, at the end of this particular performance, it was surprising that something entirely different happened. After the final notes sounded, the conductor drew out the silence for a moment with a slight smile on her lips, before allowing, with a small nod of her head, the audience to applaud. The enthusiastic applause that followed turned into a standing ovation. The father and the son in the row in front of me got up and



Figure 9.1. Performance of the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*. Geertekeer Utrecht, 30 March 2018. © Ernst van den Hemel.

applauded. The boy even let out an audible “whoooo.” Why was the young boy stopped from applauding after the first part, but not from letting out an excited “whoooo” after the second part?

These observations were made during a so-called *meezing-Matthäus*, a Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*. This performance featured a choir of untrained singers, supported by a professional orchestra and soloists. The observations from the sing-along performance provide an entrance into the world of *Saint Matthew Passion* performances in the Netherlands. In this chapter, I want to show how in small gestures, such as the one by the father preventing the boy from applauding, a specific form of sacralization is upheld. The applause at the end of the performance is, as I will show, indicative of a development that gives new form to this sacrality. I will unpack this in two parts. First, I will sketch how, from the first performance in the Netherlands in 1870, Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* became connected to notions of heritage and sacrality. Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* offers a good illustration of how the category of heritage may be associated with a secularizing gaze. It takes elements of religion and places these in a seemingly secular heritage framework. At the same time, this case study shows how the inverse may also hold true—namely, heritage involving processes of sacralization. The *Saint Matthew Passion* and the conventions surrounding applause and silence thus form an interesting example of what Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte have called the “sacralization of heritage,” providing an embodied and enacted illustration of how such sacralization takes shape in practices and gestures (Meyer and de Witte 2013: 277). Inspired by Haidy Geismar’s concept of “ideologies of ownership” (Geismar 2015), I investigate how heritagization involves claims about who is seen as the beneficiary of heritage and who is involved in the setting up of “communities of care” (82) that concern themselves with how heritagized objects are handled, managed, and circulated: “Claims to ownership and care . . . constitute the foundational definitions of heritage and also form the ideological underpinnings of most heritage regimes” (76).

Second, by providing an ethnographic description of the performance and presenting findings from interviews with participants, I highlight how participation in the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion* is indicative of the rise of new communities of care. Sing-along events can be productively interpreted as rebellious forms of performing music in which emotional participation is central. Far from being a vulgarization of the *Saint Matthew Passion*—an accusation frequently voiced by critics of the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*—I approach the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion* as a new development in the contentious history of ideologies of ownership of the *Matthäus-Passion*, and, by extension, of heritagized religion in the Netherlands. To illustrate this, I will continue my description of how the sing-along *Saint Matthew Passion* in the Geertekerk unfolded.

Singing Along with the *Saint Matthew Passion*

Upon entering the church, I noticed that the audience was seated in close proximity to the choir, in crescent-shaped rows surrounding the orchestra and soloists. It was difficult for me to identify who was part of the choir and who was part of the audience. At other performances the distance between audience and choir was usually more formally indicated, for instance by a red velvet cord separating audience from performers. The opening of the sing-along performance also differed from the professional performances I attended. Madeleine Ingen Housz, director of the foundation Passieprojecten, who would also conduct the performance, addressed us shortly to outline the program. She introduced Ruud Bakhuizen, the speaker who was to provide the introduction, as a “businessman, philanthropist, and Bach fanatic.” It was implied (“he is a great friend of the foundation”) that Bakhuizen was also a sponsor of the event. In his speech, Bakhuizen presented historical facts about Bach’s life and the history of the *Saint Matthew Passion*. He recounted how he traveled to the Thomaskirche (Leipzig, Germany) where Bach once performed the *Saint Matthew Passion* and described it as his “pilgrimage” (*pelgrimstocht*). He subsequently focused on the capacity of Bach to provide comfort in trying times, both in professional and personal life. After the introduction, Ingen Housz lit a candle, which, as she told us, was in commemoration of a board member of the foundation Passieprojecten who had recently passed away. After a moment’s silence, the performance began.

As the performance progressed, I noticed that some of the singers, whom I later found out were novice participants, skipped some parts of the chorales, rejoining when the piece reached a more accessible section. Others participated with more apparent self-confidence. Eye contact and small winks exchanged between singers seemed to indicate camaraderie and support. It struck me how well the performance sounded. In preparation for my attendance, I had wondered how the genre of the sing-along event, which I associated with playful popular culture, would turn into perhaps *the* symbol of high-brow identification in the Netherlands. To be sure, a difference in quality was noticeable, but it sounded to my, admittedly untrained, ears like a convincing and impressive performance. As I found out during the interviews with some of the participants (as I will outline in more detail below), the performance was the culmination of many hours of solitary rehearsals. Moreover, many of the singers had prior experience with singing in choirs in the past.

After the performance came to its end and the applause and cheers died down, the singers made their way to their loved ones in the audience. One of them, who turned out to be the wife and mother of the father and son in

front of me, approached them and received hugs, flowers, and warm compliments on her performance. Some singers idled in the church for about an hour, waiting in line to embrace the conductor. I overheard a first-time participant thanking Ingen Housz for helping her overcome her anxiety for the piece. There was no collective closing event or evaluation. Most people disbanded afterward, going their own way with family or friends.

The sing-along performance on the one hand combined well-known elements concerning the *Saint Matthew Passion*, like the policing of the applause and the framing of the *Saint Matthew Passion* as a source of inspiration for everyone. On the other hand, the burning of the candle, the applause at the end, and the use of the sing-along format do not fit expectations of a traditional performance of the *Saint Matthew Passion*.

In order to better understand how the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew's Passion* provokes and reinterprets hitherto dominant ideas about how the sacrality of the *Saint Matthew Passion* should be managed, I will first outline how silence and applause have become constitutive elements of the sacralization of the *Saint Matthew Passion*. Thereafter, I will return to the sing-along performance to present in more ethnographic detail how this sacrality takes on new forms.

Bach Is One of Us! The *Matthäus* in the Netherlands

For the non-Dutch reader, it may be a bit puzzling to understand why and how a work by a German Lutheran composer became so deeply engrained in the Dutch cultural landscape. Of course, Bach has been synonymous with accomplishments of Western culture for a long time, as indicated by the inclusion of Bach's works on the golden disc shot into space on the *Voyager* spacecraft in 1978 to acquaint unknown alien races with the miracle of music (Scott 2019). The "Bach mythos," the idea that Bach embodies the best of what humankind can produce, is an international phenomenon (Geck 1999). But in the Netherlands, Bach, and in particular attending or performing his *Saint Matthew Passion*, has become a particularly popular and well-known tradition.

In 2017 alone, the Netherlands saw nearly two-hundred performances of the *Matthäus*. For decades now, it is voted the most popular piece of classical music;² many Dutch families cherish the tradition of attending a performance of the *Saint Matthew Passion* once a year. What is more, a veritable "Bach industry" has developed. The Dutch broadcast radio station Concertzender started a daily radio program during which only pieces by Bach are broadcasted, entitled *Geen Dag Zonder Bach* (Not a day without Bach). This title also became the basis for a fashion collection, which has been selling



Figure 9.2. Performance of the *Saint Matthew Passion*, Grote Kerk Naarden, 22 April 2011. Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte and other cabinet members in attendance in the first row. Public domain.

Bach-themed hoodies, T-shirts, and romper suits for babies since 2011.³ Numerous travel agencies offer “pilgrimages” to the Saint Thomas Church in Leipzig, where Bach composed and performed the *Matthäus-Passion*.

Annually, the performances of the *Matthäus* at the towns of Naarden and Leiden attract the elite of Dutch cultural and political high society, with sometimes the entire government cabinet in attendance in the first rows. The prime minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, opened a major interview on national Dutch television just before the 2017 elections with the statement that attending the Naarden *Matthäus-Passion* is one of the high-lights of his job:

I get to go to see the *Saint Matthew Passion* every year. That’s a tradition in the Netherlands. You sit there for three hours and you are washed away by waves of the most divine music imaginable. . . . When you listen to Bach, you know, I think that, even when you see all the misery in the world, all the horrors and wars, we are also capable of the highest good.⁴

Moreover, in the unruly political climate of the twenty-first century, it has become a common trope for Dutch nationalist politicians to invoke the brilliance of Bach and his *Passion* as a contrast to the allegedly inferior culture of Islam. Especially for the populist right-wing parties, it has become a mainstay to refer to Bach when one wants to illustrate the superiority of Western or Dutch culture.

In short, the *Matthäus* is not just an example of classical music in the Netherlands; it became a tradition in which experiencing Bach’s composition is connected to matters of national and cultural identity. In order to understand how these affects became attached to the *Saint Matthew Passion*, it is helpful to trace the development of the popularity of Bach’s *Passion*.

Applauding Jesus and the Sacralization of Heritage

When Bach composed the different versions of his *Saint Matthew Passion* between 1727 and 1736, it functioned as an integral part of the liturgical year, to be performed during Lent. Such liturgical pieces were oriented toward emotional participation of the congregation in the service. Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* did not have a monumental reputation as a cultural accomplishment or the work of a genius, as these categories simply did not exist. Moreover, it was not common practice to perform compositions of composers after their death.

About a century later, the way in which music was staged and perceived changed drastically. The rise of Romantic nationalism (Leerssen 2013), multifaceted as it was (cf. Berlin and Gray 2013), contained one of the main pro-

grammatic goals to construct national identities based on a particular vision of the past (Leerssen 2013). This was paired with an emphasis on the capacity of art to give affective expression to the idea of communal identities (Leerssen 2013: 16). In Germany, intellectuals used Romantic cultural ideas to argue for the novel idea of one culture, one nation, and one state.

Instead of a composer firmly anchored in church life, Bach was now seen as of immense national value, whose work should be catalogued, performed, and preserved. In the works of poets, philosophers, and musicologists, art was presented as a sacred affair and as monuments commemorating the cultural roots of the nation. An early example can be found in the preface of musicologist Johann Forkel's (1749–1818) 1802 biography of Bach:

Bach's works are a priceless national patrimony [*Erbgut*]; no other nation possesses a treasure comparable to it. Their publication in an authoritative text will be a national service and raise an imperishable monument to the composer himself. All who hold Germany dear are bound in honour to promote the undertaking to the utmost of their power. I deem it a duty to remind the public of this obligation and to kindle interest in it in every true German heart. (Forkel 2020: xxvi)

As indicated by the emotional admonishments to “all who hold Germany dear,” Forkel provides a strong normative address to a national community that is expected to care. This citation expresses the tendency in early nineteenth-century Germany to embrace artists, writers, and composers as artistic geniuses, the faithful understanding and preservation of whose work should kindle an affective bond between the individual and the national community (Jensen et al. 2010; Leerssen 2013). Keeping in mind that this takes place before the unification in Germany (1871), it becomes apparent that such invocations of art and nation played a role in the ideological construction of the nation-state.

This citation is also an early example of how the idea of heritage is connected to a Romantic ideology of national identity. The word *Erbgut*, literally “inherited goods,” was initially used to describe the inheritance of material things within familial law. Frans Grijzenhout points out how in Germany the word *Erbgut* was used earlier than in other contexts to describe “the most fleeting of art forms, music” as an inheritance of immense cultural value (2007: 11). It shows how the modern notion of cultural heritage, as it emerged in the mid-twentieth century, was preceded by the embrace of cultural objects as *Erbgut* and as monuments of a national community. Against the backdrop of this Romantic vision, the *Saint Matthew Passion* was restaged for the first time since Bach's lifetime. Organized in 1829 by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–47), the first performance took place in the concert hall of the Berlin Sing-Akademie. Founded in 1791, the Sing-

Akademie was modeled after the London Academy of Ancient Music. These academies were themselves part of a late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century drive in which music from the past was seen as something that needed to be maintained and performed (Little 1991).

Mendelssohn's performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* was an event in which a sizable part of the elite of the time were present, including the Prussian king and Romantic intellectuals such as the poet Heine and philosophers Schleiermacher and Hegel (Applegate 2005). Though the objective was to revive Bach's work, Mendelssohn adapted Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* to the spirit and the demands of his time. The performance, for which Mendelssohn altered the score by shortening it by ten arias, among other adjustments, aimed to downplay certain baroque elements deemed to be outdated and too difficult to perform (Marissen 1993). Mendelssohn's *Passion* was literally framed by nineteenth-century developments. These included the emphasis on emotional connection rather than historical accuracy, the rise of the concert hall and the notion of "classical music," and an emphasis on cultural objects of the past as monuments to the artistic genius of the nation.

A wealth of scholarship has been devoted to Mendelssohn's 1829 *Passion* and its aftermath. I want to highlight how the rediscovery of Bach involved the mobilization of explicit religious terminology. Felix Mendelssohn himself wrote to a friend, "The choir sang with such devotion, as if they were in church" (Marissen 1993). Bach-specialist Martin Geck states in his monograph on the rise of the Bach mythos that the "rediscovery" of the *Saint Matthew Passion* took place against the backdrop of a profound reorientation of the role of art in German society. Art was imbued with a collective mythologizing, which before then was reserved for religion. Geck describes it as follows: "[It was a period in which] traditional authorities of church and state were losing their, until then self-evident, legitimacy. A new mythology was needed to unify the splintered bourgeois society. Art became the vehicle for this new mythology" (Geck 1999: 154). Aesthetic experience and nationalist fervor were brought together in an affective plea to experience religious objects of the past (and Christianity in general) as cultural roots of the nation. The *Saint Matthew Passion* arose in this framework as the miracle wrought by the German genius Bach.

This brings into view an early illustration of the double effect of heritagization as outlined by Meyer and de Witte (2013). First, the staging of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* in concert halls illustrates how heritagization can be seen as a form of secularization. As argued by Crispin Paine in connection to museum practices, setting a religious object apart as heritage usually means uprooting it from its religious context (Paine 2013). The same can be argued for Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*. Originally intended as liturgical object, it

was, metaphorically speaking, unearthed and performed in the nineteenth century in the concert hall as German *Erbgut*, or heritage. Religious elements remained at play, however. Again, returning to Meyer and De Witte's argument, in the very process of heritagization itself there is "some kind of sacralization" at work (2013: 275). As *Saint Matthew Passion* moved from church to concert hall, it changed from fulfilling a liturgical function to being an object of artistic genius and national heritage. This can be adequately described as a process of re-sacralization. The re-sacralization orients itself not primarily to God, but to art as a human accomplishment and to a national community.

By setting cultural forms apart and lifting them up, heritagization involves dimensions of sacralization and secularization that can occur dynamically and simultaneously. It is, for instance, very well possible for religious objects to be displayed as heritage in churches, to be enjoyed by visitors of a church as heritage *and* congregants, who see the same church as predominantly a place of worship (cf. Ahl, Poulsen, and Salemink, this volume). Heritagization also frequently means that practices, such as rituals or performances, are turned into spectacles, disconnecting the communities from the practices they themselves have brought forth (Salemink 2016: 339). These dimensions might also lead to tensions, as religious communities might resist heritagization of religious objects and practices because of the perceived secularizing effect it has. Conversely, communities that embrace objects or practices as cultural heritage that were or are religious in origin might not acknowledge religious communities as primary stakeholders of said heritage and even experience their claims as burdensome (Timothy and Olsen 2006).

This affords a better understanding of how Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* and the notion of applause became significant issues in the Netherlands. It shows how the *Saint Matthew Passion* became sacralized and how this sacralization expressed an intense concern for, and management of, audience behavior.

The *Saint Matthew Passion* in the Netherlands

In 1870, the *Saint Matthew Passion* was performed for the first time in the Netherlands. Organized by the Maatschappij tot Bevordering van de Toonkunst (Society for the Promotion of the Performing Arts) in a concert hall in Rotterdam and directed by Woldemar Bargiel, a German director with close ties to Mendelssohn, the performance was heavily influenced by the way in which Bach was rediscovered in Germany. This was, for instance, also a truncated version, adapted both in length and in setting to the audience of its time. The discourse surrounding the performance was equally

influenced by Romantic notions of art, national culture, and the importance of its past. The booklet described the performance as follows: “May now the doors of the heavenly kingdom built by Bach in music be opened for our fellow inhabitants of this city, may many enter there and enjoy its splendor” (Dinglinger 1999: 23).

The quote is an example of how religious terminology is used, but there is an ambiguity whether this language concerns the heavenly kingdom built by Bach or by God, whether the enjoyment of it benefits the community (“the inhabitants of this city”) or the eternal salvation of the individual. We see here how religious and secular notions of sacrality mutually reinforce each other. Bach built a heavenly kingdom in music, the booklet states, and whether that is primarily Bach’s or God’s accomplishment is not (yet) a divisive issue. Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* is, so states the booklet, a sacred affair that should be venerated and cherished by all.

The number of performances of the *Saint Matthew Passion* increased in the decades that followed. In Rotterdam, performances were staged in 1871 and 1872. In 1874, the first performance was organized in Amsterdam, followed by performances in 1878, 1881, and 1883. Raving reviews in newspapers followed. Take for instance the following review that appeared in *Algemeen Handelsblad* about the 1874 performance:

We have witnessed Bach in all his greatness. All of us in our nation’s capital, this evening in March, admired his genius and experienced his powerful influence and holy solemnity came over us when the eternal beauties of the colossal work [*reuzenwerk*] appeared to our inner mind. (Dinglinger 1999: 25)

All of these performances took place in concert halls. The newly built concert hall of Amsterdam (Het Concertgebouw), opened in 1888, became a stage for *Saint Matthew Passion* performances. In 1899 conductor Willem Mengelberg (1871–1951) started the tradition of annually performing Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* in the Concertgebouw. Steeped in the vision of Mendelssohn, Mengelberg also presented his *Passion* in truncated form (Giskes 1999: 31). According to the conductor himself, the *Saint Matthew Passion* should only be performed “in the spirit and technique of the times in which it is performed” (Mengelberg, quoted in Giskes 1999: 37). With regard to Mendelssohn’s choices, he stated approvingly that Mendelssohn liberated the work from its past:

Mendelssohn has liberated the power of Bach’s art from the connection with liturgy and staged it according to completely different technical insights than were dominant at the time when the work originated. . . . This made Bach’s creation come to life again, it opened the eyes of contemporaries for the universal beauty of the work. (Mengelberg, quoted in Giskes 1999: 37–38)

This was also the period in which audiences were disciplined into behaving according to the new status of high art in the concert halls.⁵ Concerts in the early nineteenth century were noisy events during which people openly socialized, were called away publicly by carriage drivers, and or were making a late and dramatically enacted entrance or early exit. As outlined by Cas Smithuijsen in his history on the emergence of an expectation of silence in concert culture, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a new protocol for audiences of “classical music”:

The plea [for a change in attitude of the audience] was addressed to listeners who let their emotions dominate their reactions to the music. Audiences have to listen with the ears of an erudite, critically informed lover of music, not with the ears of a pious church-goer. (Smithuijsen 2001: 112)

Smithuijsen highlights how silence became a dominant symbol for this new attitude: “Characteristic for this cerebral reception of music is that the audience display a silence that can be characterized as goal-oriented: more silence means one can better scrutinize the music” (113).

In the Concertgebouw, this had the following practical consequences. In 1890, the director of the orchestra ordered the doors to be closed during performances. Not long after, in 1893, the chairs were bolted to the floor to prevent unwanted noisy mingling, and the serving of food and drink during performances was banned (Smithuijsen 2001: 114). Applause was allowed, but not until after the end of the entire performance. Applause served as a means for the cultured audience to express its appreciation in a controlled manner (94). Helped by the furious glances of conductors toward transgressive audience members, audiences were, slowly but surely, silenced.

The way in which Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* was taken up in this process soon gave rise to criticism. Critics objected to the way in which Mengelberg’s style, criticized for being extravagant and bombastic, detached the *Passion* from piety and introspection. Take for instance the following scathing article printed in the newspaper *De Telegraaf* on 30 March 1920:

This is why the *Saint Matthew Passion* belongs in a church. It pains the heart to see a mystery performed without anyone seemingly thinking about the consequences, it pains the heart to see sincerity feigned in matters of faith, hope, and love, to see them pass as vain sounds of which one expects nothing more than aesthetic appreciation. I know of no dilettantism more horrific.⁶

According to critics like these, the popularity of the *Saint Matthew Passion* in concert halls was nothing more than “aesthetic appreciation.” The fact that the *Saint Matthew Passion* was performed in concert halls where also mundane music was performed was seen as victory of entertainment over

religion. According to the reviewer, Bach's *Passion* should be performed with fidelity to the religious framework in which it was composed, including pious reflection on the mystery of salvation and faith.

In the 1920s, a movement emerged that stressed the importance of a more modest, more authentic, and pious performance of the *Saint Matthew Passion*. Proponents of this view stated that Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* should be performed in a manner reminiscent of how Bach had intended it. Such performances should be held in a church, not a concert hall; it was to be unabridged, performed with the instruments used in Bach's time; and, naturally, there was to be no applause (Wennekes 1999: 103). These were at least the principles of the Netherlands Bach Society (Nederlandse Bachvereniging), which was established in 1921. Where the Concertgebouw version followed the style of Mengelberg, the Bach Society pleaded for a performance that resembles elements seen as characteristic of Bach's time. Take, for instance, these words of the first president of the society, J. H. Gunning (1859–1951), professor of pedagogy, in 1925:

A falsification [*vervalsching*], it is not an exaggeration to state that that is what is presented to the audiences of our concert halls, and regretfully, the most accomplished conductors often give the worst example! (Gunning, cited in Wennekes 1999: 100)

The Bach Society did not advocate for a return to the liturgical function of the *Saint Matthew Passion*. Instead, what we see is a quarrel not about *whether* Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* is heritage or liturgy, but about *what to prioritize* in the performance of heritage. This meant that performances should approximate and commemorate a vision of a Lutheran church service as sober, modest, and characterized by pious silence.

This, however, is a biased vision of what a church service and piety may sound like. Not only can church services be noisy, participatory affairs, the historical record of church services in Bach's time show that Mass was firmly planted in everyday life. Innovations in secular music spilled over into religious services and vice versa (Schoenbohm 1943). What is more, Lutheranism (and Protestantism in general) prided itself in the participation of the congregation in the singing of hymns, which was seen as a return to the pure Christianity of the early church (Blume 1975). In Bach's time, though people did not sing along with Passions, collective singing of hymns was common. In short, far from being an accurate record, the Bach Society's vision of what a religious service sounded like in the past should be seen as a projection onto the past of an idealized notion of Protestantism that arose in the nineteenth century.

The Bach Society held its first *Saint Matthew Passion* church performance in 1922, in the Grote Kerk in the town of Naarden. This return of the *Saint*

Matthew Passion to the church can be seen as an early version of what has been called the “authentic method” (*authentieke uitvoeringspraktijk*), which would lead to increasingly detailed re-creations of what the *Saint Matthew Passion* sounded like (Grijp and Bossuyt 2001). This is also an early version of the emphasis on authenticity in the maintenance and performance of heritage (Labadi 2010). The original drive of the society, a strong moral emphasis on how the *Saint Matthew Passion* should be performed, continues to this day. The society continues to stage the most well-known performance of the *Saint Matthew Passion* and has developed into an institution that emphasizes the importance of promoting Bach scholarship and “preserving and disseminating Bach’s heritage . . . as well as investing in a future filled with inspiration and emotion.”⁷ A small anecdote serves to illustrate how this mission continues to translate into policing practices of the audience. In 2020, on an internet forum devoted to Bach, a member of the Netherlands Bach Society relates how the society enforces its anti-applause stance:

As a long-standing member of the Bach Society, I went to Naarden each year. After every performance we immediately reserved our tickets for the next year. Every year your seat changes and normally your seats improve each year. Until a friend . . . joined our small group one year. After the performance, he stood up and started to applaud loudly. The next year, our seats were all the way in the back, behind these enormous pillars. Life is fickle, even with the Bach Society!⁸

The transgression committed by the friend was swiftly and ruthlessly penalized by the Bach Society. The Bach Society regulates the correct behavior of its audience both in its outreach activities as well as in its allocation of less desirable seats to unruly applauders.

Secular Sacralization of the *Saint Matthew Passion*

Though there was disagreement about location and behavior of the audience, the conviction that the *Saint Matthew Passion* is something to be treated with care by the Dutch audience became widely accepted and cited in the second half of the twentieth century. This is indicated by how explicitly secular atheist public figures speak of the *Saint Matthew Passion* as sacred. An exemplary illustration of this is the booklet *Zijn bliksem, zijn donder: Over de Mattheus-Passie van Johann Sebastian Bach* (His lightning, his thunder: about Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*) by Martin van Amerongen (1997). Martin van Amerongen (1941–2002) was an influential Dutch journalist and public intellectual in the second half of the twentieth century. As he outlined in interviews before his death in 2002, he had always been a

self-professed atheist: “I don’t feel any need for God because I have accepted art as a replacement of religion. For me religion is Mozart, Nabokov, Shakespeare. I can draw comfort from art like a believer does from religion.”⁹ He describes the *Saint Matthew Passion* as “an undeserved gift [given by Bach] to humanity” to which the most suitable response is “respectful silence” (van Amerongen 1997: 63). Throughout the book, he aims to set Bach’s *Passion* apart from “profane” popular culture. Against this backdrop, applause remains the symbol of blasphemous transgression:

Of course, people didn’t applaud. To applaud when seated at the foot of the cross would be highly inappropriate. This point of view is slowly disappearing in our secularized society. The Dutch audience has become increasingly eager to applaud. Everyone, moved to tears, loves to sound his approval from Protestant Dokkum to Catholic Monnickendam. Recently the first person who shouted “bis” [Latin for “twice,” used to request an encore] has been heard in Arnemuiden [a village known for the orthodoxy of its inhabitants]. (66)

To van Amerongen, applauding the *Saint Matthew Passion* is a sign of barbarous secularization. Yet in contrast with confessional critics of secularity who lament the decline of belief in God, he laments the decline of belief in Bach.

Works like these are part of the construction and maintenance of a community of care. Through the idealization of Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* as a miracle and through the shaming of transgressions, performances of the *Saint Matthew Passion* became more than a concert among others; it became a tradition to be safeguarded—it became cultural heritage. Here is how the *Saint Matthew Passion* is described in the national register for Dutch Intangible Heritage:

The Dutch *Saint Matthew* tradition [*de Matthäustraditie*] is unique in the world. Nowhere is it entrenched so deeply [*diep verankerd*] in society as in the Netherlands. . . . De *Matthäus* in Naarden became an annually recurring ritual of reflection [*beinning*] and, for many, a family tradition.¹⁰

Two things stand out here. The Dutch word *beinning* (which I, imperfectly, translated as “reflection”) contains spiritual connotations, indicating that the *Saint Matthew Passion* is connected to reflection on existential questions. Secondly, the tradition of performing the *Saint Matthew Passion* in Naarden, including its emphasis on silence and sacrality, is presented as a national ritual, deeply rooted in Dutch society. It shows how the Romantic discourses I outlined above, in which sacred art is connected to the cultural past and present of national societies, have resulted in and are perpetuated in the heritagization of the *Saint Matthew Passion* in the Netherlands.

The Rise of New Forms: The Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*

The history of sacralization and heritagization I outlined above is present in the hand placed on the arm of the young boy with which I began this chapter. But what of the applause that sounded after the sing-along performance? In order to understand this, we need to sketch how new forms of performing the *Saint Matthew Passion* arose. The Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion* has its roots in a series of performances that challenge traditional views of how the *Saint Matthew Passion* is supposed to be performed. Starting in the 1990s, new forms of performing the *Saint Matthew Passion* began to appear. In 2003, a “DJ-Matthäus” was performed; in 2006, a popularized Dutch translation premiered; in 2011, a television program with the title *Matthäus Masterclass* was aired in which celebrities tried to sing arias from Bach’s *Passion*; in 2012, a children’s version of the *Saint Matthew Passion* was performed. Perhaps the first and most successful of these new forms of staging the *Saint Matthew Passion* was the sing-along version.

A sing-along event enables an untrained audience to participate in singing a piece of music. This differentiates a sing-along event from, for instance, a recital by an amateur choir. It is also what differentiates a sing-along event from a concert in which participating in singing might be a by-effect of its popularity. A sing-along event is also differentiated from karaoke, which generally does not involve communal singing but rather offers a stage for individuals (or duos) to perform in front of smaller audiences as a technologically informed mode of escapism (Zhou and Tarocco 2007). Yet, under different monikers, participation by untrained singers in the performance of pieces of music are as old as amateur choirs, folk music performances, religious revivals, or even church services of the early Christian church in the first centuries CE (Alikin 2010). Though sing-along events can be seen as continuations of such practices, it is nonetheless productive to highlight the effect of this new name. By calling something a “sing-along” event, a semblance of newness is evoked, allowing people to appropriate musical objects in new ways, often in provocative contrast with more established traditions.

This rebellious mode of audience participation under the name “sing-along” events arose in the 1990s. The Sing-Along *Sound of Music* (1998) is credited to be the first sing-along event, although screenings of musicals like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *Jesus Christ Superstar* are also mentioned as early examples of the phenomenon.¹¹ During the performances, audiences, often dressed up in drag as characters of the movie, sang along with screenings of the musicals. This was a stark contrast with the mainstream reception of the musical, which tended to see (and still sees) *The Sound of Music* (1965) as a mainstream family-friendly box-office hit. David Johnson,

organizer of the Sing-Along *Sound of Music*, stated in an interview with the *New York Times*:

It was sacrilegious, but great fun. . . . Within a few weeks, the largely gay audience was balanced out by Julie [Julie Andrews, lead in *the Sound of the Music*] worshippers of all ages, genders and sexual orientations. It was clear we had a hit.¹²

The genre of sing-along events developed from subcultural playful subversion into a popular (and lucrative) phenomenon. It has since 1998 developed into large-scale sing-along festivals, cinema festivals, and official sing-along editions released by movie studios and Broadway production companies. Sing-along events of more high-brow objects have appeared. Today it is not uncommon to see sing-along performances of Mozart, Händel, or Beethoven.

In the Netherlands, the first sing-along concert of classical music, a performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, took place in 1998. Composer and conductor Huub Kerstens and journalist Huib Schreurs in collaboration with *De Groene Amsterdammer* opened a call for a "Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*: no experience needed." Kerstens is a composer who has predominantly worked on contemporary classical music. Huib Schreurs is a pop musician and journalist. The organizers were not interested in debates about concert halls or churches at all. As they stated in an interview in 1998:

"We wanted to see what we could do with a big group of people, and we wanted to see what was left of religion," says Schreurs after the final choir ended in blistering silence followed by applause and cheers, which would normally be seen as desecration of the *Matthäus*. "And that seems to be more than we thought!"¹³

In 1999, one year after the first Sing-Along *Matthäus*, the phenomenon was further developed by Passieprojecten (Passion projects), the foundation introduced in the opening of this chapter, which has organized Sing-Along *Matthäus* performances since then. The slogan used by this foundation is "Everybody can sing." The slogan reflects the motivations of director Madeleine Ingen Housz. Ingen Housz has a history herself as singer in the professional official Bach choir of the Netherlands Bach Society. According to her, dominant forms of staging the *Saint Matthew Passion*, including both those by the Bach Foundation and those organized in the main concert halls, prevent people from experiencing "fun and freedom."¹⁴ Ingen Housz aims at lowering the threshold for the audience to maximize the emotional connection with the piece through participation. The Sing-Along *Matthäus* is, in Ingen Housz's words, aimed at freeing Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* from "the straitjacket" it was placed in. She experienced considerable pushback from both sides in the debate between church and concert hall. As she indi-

cates, “I was criticized by everybody in the classical music world because it was supposed to be impossible to have untrained singers perform the *Saint Matthew Passion*. Now, you see sing-along concerts all over the place.”¹⁵

Ingen Housz attributes the success of sing-along events to “freedom and fun.” But this does not yet fully answer the questions we have asked above. How does the sing-along performance relate to the registers that have influenced how the sacrality of the *Saint Matthew Passion* is managed or regulated? The answer to this question can be found in the motivation of the participants of the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*.

In the words of Tine, a 72-year-old retired doctor and experienced amateur choir singer, “Pfah. These people, the Bach Society or the church, they want to tell us how to enjoy the *Passion* narrative. I have had enough of that.” Tine made it clear that after a religious upbringing, she left religion behind and that her participation in the *Matthäus* has little to do with the religion of her childhood: “Look, I was born a Catholic. But the Catholic Church is an empty shell and no one goes there anymore. But people like me still want to experience spirituality in a community, and that is what they, or I should say I, find in the *Matthäus*.” This communal experience, according to Tine, is “so much more important than theological bickering [*theologische scherpelijperij*].” She finds it refreshing to sing with people with little or no experience: “We help each other, you see people grow into their role in the choir. When you see someone become one [*samensmelten*] with the piece, that’s really something special.”

Tine’s reflections on religion were similar to the reflections of other participants I spoke with, like John, fifty-eight years old. John is a trained musician, who has participated in a variety of orchestras, usually supporting amateur choirs in the performance of classical music. The religious dimension of the *Passion* is of no interest to him: “The text is highly outdated. I mean come on, Lutheran theology dating back three centuries? Hardly a source of wisdom for today’s world.” John was raised in a religious household; his father was a Protestant preacher. John left the church when becoming an adult. He described his own interest in the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion* as more “horizontally oriented than vertically.” When I asked him to explain this, he stated that he values his participation more because of the shared experience with other people rather than because of any higher spiritual reflection. His participation reminded him of what “is good about church, a sense of community and connection with your fellow human beings [*medemensen*] but without the brainwashing and mumbo jumbo [*poespas*].” When I asked him whether he had a preference for concert halls or churches, he scoffed, “No, it works everywhere.”

Whereas John and Tine referenced their religious upbringing, Frederique, forty-two, was raised “without religion” and has never really “felt the urge”

to believe. She has had some prior experience with singing in choirs; she joined a choir two years ago but did not always like the repertoire: “I like a challenge, and singing the Andrews Sisters with a bunch of old ladies doesn’t really do it for me.” But she considers herself nonetheless a novice (*nieuweling*). The status of the *Saint Matthew Passion* was attractive to her: “I thought to myself, could I do this? Should I do this? I thought it was terribly scary [*doodeng*], but exciting.” She admitted she did not sing all parts but enjoyed participating in the overwhelming sound: “When we sang the part *Sind Blitze, sind Donner*, you know, we were really hitting it off [*we gingen echt los*], it gave me chills.” Asked about whether the ideal location is a church or concert hall, Frederique answered carelessly, “Oh, I don’t really care. As long as the acoustics are good.” When we talked about the religious dimension of the piece, she indicated that for her the *Matthäus* is about “what religion is meant to be about.” She specified that religion should be about “sharing emotions with each other; that is why music was such a big part of church services, I guess.”

These three sing-along *Matthäus* participants spoke about the capacity of *Saint Matthew Passion* to recover something that, in their experience, used to be or should be part of religion. This also implies that to them religion has become something less geared toward emotional participation. It is worth mentioning here that the negative image of religion that is projected by Tine, John, and Frederique arises out of reflections on mainstream Christianity in the Netherlands. As I concluded above, the idea that applause seems to be anathema to religious piety hails from mainstream reformed Christianity in the Netherlands. However, within Pentecostal or Charismatic forms of Christianity, emotional participation including the clapping of hands is quite common. Though it would be imaginable that a sing-along performance would be associated with forms of religion in which emotional participation is allowed or stimulated, all three of them see the *Saint Matthew Passion* as a sort of substitute for religion.

The participants are also critical of the way in which the heritagized sacrality is managed by the Bach Society. Participants even lumped “the church” together with the Bach Society. As Tine said, “Pfah. These people, the Bach Society or the church, they want to tell us how to enjoy the *Passion* narrative. I have had enough of that.” The moniker “sing-along” enables a mode of participation that appropriates the sacrality of the *Matthäus* in new ways. It rebels against the nonparticipation enforced in the heritagized performances in church and concert hall. It also rebels against the code of conduct that connects the sacrality of the *Saint Matthew Passion* to pious silence and abstaining from applause. As a result, the applause at the end of the performance in the Geertekerk is to be understood not as anathema to the sacrality of the *Saint Matthew Passion*, but as a new incarnation of it.

Conclusion

Since Mendelssohn's rediscovery of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, its value has been described in terms of heritage and sacrality. This chapter illustrates the idea, formulated by Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte, that heritagization involves secularization as well as sacralization. As the *Saint Matthew Passion* moved from church to concert hall, it was secularized in that it was taken out of the liturgical context, but it was simultaneously re-sacralized as a monument that commemorates the cultural roots of the national community and as a communal experience of cultural identity in the present. This chapter further builds on Meyer and de Witte's work in that it zooms in on the contestations that arise out of such processes of sacralization.

This chapter shows a perpetual process of contestation: Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, originally a part of liturgy, was performed in concert halls as a sacred work of genius, expressive of the cultural roots or accomplishments of a nation. This led to a backlash from people who disagreed with the role of religion in such processes of heritagization. The resulting tradition, characterized by secular performances in churches, where silence and sober style are dominant, in turn encountered criticism from those like Madeleine Ingen Housz who feel that the *Saint Matthew Passion* was placed in a strait-jacket. The sing-along performance is, in that sense, the latest installment in a process in which heritagization and sacralization give rise to new contestations and new forms.

Applause has functioned in this history as an example of how audience behavior is managed, disciplined, and self-imposed. Whether it was seen as indicator of vulgar emotional enthusiasm or as cultured appreciation of the concert hall audience, applause was and remains part of how the emotional participation of the audience is managed. For the participants of the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion*, however, applause took on new meaning. The sing-along format and the applause that sounded at the end can productively be read as a reappropriation of sacrality. Participants affirm the status of the *Saint Matthew Passion* as sacred and inscribe themselves in the tradition that sees emotional participation in Bach's *Passion* as an important source of spiritual inspiration and communal identity. But for them, this sacrality of the *Saint Matthew Passion* entails a justification to perform and participate in new ways.

As outlined in the introduction to this volume, heritagization can be (and has been) seen as a top-down process, involving the official recognition of and management by (inter)national organizations. This chapter shows how top-down processes can lead to bottom-up reappropriations. As illustrated by this chapter (and others in this volume), a focus on how heritagization takes shape and is managed "on the ground" can productively add to our

understanding of how heritagization sets up communities of care for whom the experience of sacralized heritage is the impetus for reappropriation and creative innovation.

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NOTES

1. This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in the Easter periods of 2017–20. I attended eleven performances of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* and held seven interviews with participants of the Sing-Along *Saint Matthew Passion* and two interviews with its organizer. Besides ethnographic fieldwork, I conducted archival research and social media analysis. This research was conducted in the context of the HERILIGION: *The Heritagization of Religion and Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe* project, funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) grant # 5087-00505A. See www.heriligion.eu.
2. "Matthäus Passion op 1 in Hart & Ziel Lijst NPO," *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 10 November 2019.
3. <https://www.muziekweb.nl/Muziekweb/Kledinglijn> (accessed 8 October 2020).
4. VPRO, *Zomergasten*, 4 September 2016, <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/zomergasten/kijk/afleveringen/2016/Mark-Rutte.html>. Min. 04:30–04:45 (accessed 30 November 2020). All translations by Ernst van den Hemel.
5. This development mirrors the work done, for instance, by Tony Bennett on the role of the museum as a disciplinary institution (Bennett 2013).
6. Mattijs Vermeulen, "Die Matthäus-Passion," *De Telegraaf*, 30 March 1920.
7. See <https://www.bachvereniging.nl/en/support> (accessed 7 October 2020).
8. <https://www.nederlanders.fr/profiles/blog/show?id=3295325%3ABlogPost%3A991738&commentId=3295325%3AComment%3A991927> (accessed 7 October 2020).
9. Arjan Visser, "Martin van Amerongen," *Trouw*, 15 August 2005.
10. See the entry "*Matthäus Passion* Door de Nederlandse Bachvereniging in de Grote Kerk Naarden" on the website of the Dutch Center for Intangible Heritage, <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/page/5581/matth%20percentC3%20percentA4us-passion-door-de-nederlandse-bachvereniging-in-grote-kerk> (accessed 28 November 2020).

11. The “Sing-A-Long-A-Sound of Music” was introduced at London’s 1998 Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. It was continued by the London Prince Charles Cinema, which had been showing participatory screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* since 1991. See Kristin Hohenadel, “The Hall Is Alive with the Sound of Music,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 May 2000, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-may-14-ca-29768-story.htm> (accessed 7 October 2020).
12. Thomas Vinciguerra, “Do You Really Call That Sound Music?,” *Week in Review, New York Times*, 20 August 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/20/weekinreview/do-you-really-call-that-sound-music.html> (accessed 7 October 2020).
13. See Cultuur & Media, *De Volkskrant*, 23 March 1998.
14. Marieke Van Willigen, “Madeleine Ingen Housz: Ik had heel lang geen houvast,” Voorpagina, *Trouw*, 31 December 2017, <https://www.trouw.nl/gs-b22cd56e> (accessed 7 October 2020).
15. *Ibid.*

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