

The ‘*Matthäus* mania’ in the local Dutch context: Religion goes easy?’¹

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Abstract

Audiencing or performing Johann Sebastian Bach’s Passion of St Matthew is nowadays considered as a ‘Dutch’ Easter tradition in the Netherlands. The week before Easter a ‘*Matthäus* fever’ is spreading around the country as in all cities and towns, performances of the passion are organised in multiple, often sold-out, venues. This tradition was the focus of a research project to study the formation of ‘modern’ traditions and the dynamics of religion, culture and tradition in contemporary Dutch society. In order to formulate a meta-cultural explanation of Dutch ‘traditionalization’ of the Passion of St Matthew, this research conceptualized local performances of this work as ‘emotion networks’ and the work itself as a miniature memory-complex (Macdonald). The expectation was that this perspective could reflect upon national, religious or cultural totalities while taking into account micro-orientational tendencies of ‘habitus’ theory. This study thus asked the question: Who is involved and what are the emotional and social capacities of (performances of) the Passion of St Matthew? An actor-oriented approach was adopted with semi-structured interviews and open conversations with stakeholders involved in performances of this work at several locations in the Netherlands. Resulting data seemed to reveal that the Passion of St Matthew functioned as a multitemporal and ‘appropriated’ embodied practice in which stakeholders felt deeply connected with Dutch cultural and/or religious history, as well as with collective human senses of nostalgia, suffering and empathy. Overall it could be argued that the passion functioned as a kind of ‘religion goes easy’ due to its enjoyable and inclusive communal sacralization of religious music heritage and its felt correlation with ‘Dutch’ identity by Protestants, Catholics and Atheists alike.

Keywords: Religious heritage, music, traditionalization, memory complex, emotion networks.

‘What used to appear to us against the backdrop of these times as a possibility that could only be dreamed about, has now become real: The passion has been given to the public, and has become the property of all.’²

¹ Johann Sebastian Bach’s Passion of St Matthew is in Dutch referred to as the ‘*Matthäus passion*’ or in short the ‘*Matthäus*’ pronounced in Dutch as *Mattheus*.

² Fanny Mendelssohn, march 1829 quoted in: Celia Applegate, *Nation and culture in Mendelssohn’s Revival of the St Matthew Passion* (2005) 1.

‘Bach’s st Matthew passion means for me a clean slate. I listen, confess and forgive and leave all the dirt of the year behind me. After the passion I feel like being born again.’³



Anonymous.⁴

‘Matthäus mania’

Yearly around Easter a particular cultural frenzy seems to take shape throughout the Netherlands. Every year around this time the nation is embedded in a kind of ‘*Matthäus*

³ Anonymous interviewee who is a member of the board of a *Matthäus* foundation which I interviewed at 19 June 2018.

⁴ Anonymous photograph in which the (former) prime minister Mark Rutte makes a selfie with children before or after the performance of the Passion of St Matthew in the church of Naarden. URL: <https://grotekerknaarden.nl/matthaus-passion/>, accessed at 08 March 2021.

fever' as in all the great concert halls, and in different churches big or small, people come together to listen to a performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's three hour Passion of Saint Matthew. While the national classical radio broadcasts the 'top' venues, 'nationalisation' even appears in more extreme forms. For example, each year prominent members of Parliament audience the Passion in the town of Naarden. There is a Dutch translation of the Passion and some venues even organise 'sing along' concerts in which the audience can loudly join the choir.⁵

What constitutes this Dutch obsession with the 'masterpiece' of Johann Sebastian Bach, who in fact has written many great works? The Dutch tradition of annual performing started during the nineteenth century when the well known conductor Willem Mengelberg performed the piece with the Royal Concert Hall Orchestra of Amsterdam in 1899 and thereafter conducted it every year. Only some fifty years after the rediscovery of Bach's Passion by Felix Mendelssohn in 1822 and some hundred fifty years after the performances by Bach himself in 1726 and 1736, a tradition in the Netherlands started to take shape with unprecedented effect. In 1922 a second venue in the Netherlands joined the yearly event, namely the Dutch Bach society in the church of Naarden.⁶ With years passing more venues popped-up and nowadays local initiatives annually organise passions in Schiedam, Huizen, Breda, Zaltbommel, Oudenbosch, Deventer, Lochem, Hilversum, Oldenzaal, Edam, Harderwijk and Oirschot. Next to these smaller local initiatives, multiple large and small concerts are organised in many cities as Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Leiden, Den Haag and Eindhoven. Tickets are sold out, and in some venues, reservations need to take place months before Easter. In this sense, the Passion of St Matthew has been drawn from its 'original' local context namely a long Easter sermon on music according to the gospel of St Matthew to be performed in Leipzig, into something visitable, 'romantic' and perhaps

⁵ The tradition in the old church of Naarden is visited by members of Parliament such as the prime minister see URL: <https://grotekerknaarden.nl/matthaus-passion/>, accessed 03 March 2021; Tradition started with Mengelber see URL: <http://www.nederlandsmuziekinstituut.nl/actueel/nieuws/2015/willem-mengelberg-en-de-matthaus-traditie-1899-1944>, accessed at 04 March 2021; An example of a sing along passion see URL: <https://www.wijkverenigingberkum.nl/activiteiten2/meezing-mattheus/>, accessed at 04 March 2021.

⁶ Mengelberg started in Amsterdam the tradition to perform the piece in modern setting. Jan Dewilde, 'Er loopt een Matthäus-kloof door de Lage Landen: Het succes van de Matthäus-Passion in onze ontkerkelijkte maatschappij' in: *Neerlandia* 2019/1 (2019). URL: <https://www.anv.nl/tijdschrift/inhoudsopgaven/2019-1/er-loopt-een-matthaus-kloof-door-de-lage-landen/>, accessed 03 March 2021; Naarden URL: <https://grotekerknaarden.nl/matthaus-passion/>, accessed 03 March 2021.

‘owned’ by different venues in a Dutch local and national context. In short, this embodied musical performance has become something ‘meta-cultural’.⁷

Already from a young age I experienced the Dutch *Matthäus* fever. Every year a few weeks before Easter my mother, a musician, suddenly disappeared from daily life and our father clumsily took over the duties of cooking and cleaning. This yearly change in the somewhat outdated paternal roles often ended in our father taking us to one of the *Matthäus* performances in which my mother played. The cold church filled with people always made me realise how much I had missed my mother and the three hours of listening and waiting seemed eternal. As I did not particularly like the music nor understood the German texts, the concert felt way too long, and I wanted my mother back, audiencing the Passion of St Matthew was certainly not on my list of ‘fun things’ to do last pleasant things to remember.

However, years later I found myself ‘part’ of this *Matthäus* fever both in performance as well as in admiration.⁸ It seems that in years passing the routine of annual listening had slowly but secretly created a habit, ‘a trained ear’ to value the music accordingly but above all a kind of devotion that strongly correlated with religion.⁹ Although this development certainly arrived from the cultural reproduction that forms part of my ‘habitus’ meaning the sustained way of thinking, practise and observation which derives from a certain social *milieu*, this is not necessarily always the case.¹⁰ My sister for example, values Bach but never visits a classical concert voluntarily and prefers electronic music instead. Moreover, the Passion certainly flourishes in certain artistic and elitist fields but because of its religious connotation religious fields also embrace the tradition. Moreover I do not intend to charge the term elitism on a piece of art without first surveying this piece of art, in this case the Passion, on its own terms.¹¹ So far it can simply be argued that the *Matthäus* is not a Dutch tradition that is shared by everyone (as for example Kingsday) but least it can be said that it is shared by many.

In order to move beyond a mere elitist approach this paper shall foremost focus on the local Passions that are organised every year by local foundations. The main question asked is

⁷ Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (Oxon 2013) 18, 11-12.

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1996) 1-3.

⁹ Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 1-3.

¹⁰ Peter Burke, *Wat is cultuurgeschiedenis?* (Utrecht 2007) 88-89; Pierre Bourdieu

¹¹ Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (Oxford University Press 2002) 4-5.

why the *Matthäus* is experienced as an Easter tradition in the local, Dutch context? To be able to arrive at any satisfactory answer an actor-oriented approach is necessary. Who is involved? What are their motivations to be part of the event? And what are the memorizing and emotional capacities of the *Matthäus*? Is it a religious practise or an embodied form of multitemporal past-presencing?¹²

Can we speak of a ‘historical sensation’?¹³ The Dutch Passion tradition is the focus of this research that aims to further illuminate the formation of ‘modern’ traditions and the dynamics of religion, culture, tradition and heritage in contemporary Dutch society.

The *Matthäus* as a complex

Every kind of heritage formation is a process, it is something that is done rather than determined. Static top-down explanations might be applicable to the establishment of statues or monuments but what is often forgotten is that beforehand, a memory needs ‘promotion’ from a democratic, multidimensional platform in order to arrive at its supposed position.¹⁴ This organic and collective dynamic that surrounds heritage, memory and identity can be best explained as a ‘complex’ where practises, emotions and physical objects are shaped by perceptions of nostalgia and authenticity. Different human and non-human agents conduct these perceptions, which leads to random but certainly not unpatterned effects.¹⁵ As human and non-human actors are individually or institutionally embedded in different contexts with different socio-economic and socio-cultural ‘totalities’, static and plural patterns may prevail.¹⁶ But any culture is at the same time an open field under construction.¹⁷ Both dynamic and static processes, as well as plural or singular memories, identities and histories, alternate in the memory complex while individual patterns resonate with collective ones and dynamic and

¹² Sharon Macdonald, ‘Presencing Europe’s past’ in: Ullrich Kockel ed., Máiréad Nic ed., Jonas Fryman ed., *A Companion to the Anthropology of Europe* (John Wiley & Sons 2012) 233-235.

¹³ https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/anke002hist01_01/anke002hist01_01_0004.php consulted May 2020; Herman Paul, *Als het verleden trekt: Kernthema’s in de geschiedsfilosofie* (Boom Lemma uitgevers Den Haag 2014) 33.

¹⁴ The political regime of aesthetics can best be explained as the regime of democracy see: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (Continuum, New York 2004) 13-14.

¹⁵ Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 3, 5-6.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 8.

¹⁷ Brigitta Schmidt Lauber, ‘Seeing, Hearing, Feeling, Writing: Approaches and Methods from the Perspective of Ethnological Analysis of the Present’ in: Regina F. Bendix & Galit Hasan-Rokem, *A Companion to Folklore*, vol I (March 2012) 562.

static elements can work side by side.¹⁸

In order to arrive at an in depth-analysis of the annual tradition of the Passion of St Matthew in the Dutch context, first of all this broad context is problematic. Because we are dealing with an embodied practise, which is collectively 'done' but not necessarily nationally shared, and not with a 'national monument', this 'national' context is more of a totality above a totality. Undoubtedly, certain Dutch sociocultural and socio-economic structures, that are even recognised as such, may have a catalysing declarative function in revealing the appeal, popularity and metacultural function of the *Matthäus* Passion. However, seeking structural, relational segments between nationally shared values and a musical and to a certain extent religious embodied practise, is basically suggestive. Moreover this approach will only simplify the practise of the *Matthäus* into taken for granted static assumptions while it overlooks local contexts and individual agents.

To be able to reconfigure a qualitative, meta-cultural explanation for the Dutch 'traditionalization' of the Passion it is in place to reconfigure this tradition as a discursive construct, where different actors together collect memories.¹⁹ To arrive at this form of analysis an actor-oriented approach in the local context is needed. Therefore the tradition is sketched here as a miniature memory complex. By doing so a methodology is required that can evaluate human sources, which together will form the needed nodes that reveal emotions, memories and identities as attached to the passion as an embodied practise. Therefore this analysis relied on an anthropological understanding of *Matthäus* attached 'emotion networks'.²⁰ These networks, which are dense therefore they are networks, were found in the local *Matthäus* foundations and the different partners and stakeholders involved. Through a methodology of semi-structured interviews with different 'stakeholders' human data was collected. Interviews were considered 'semi-structured' because of the application of a short setted questionnaire that triggered a narrative on the theme of the *Matthäus* in the local context next to mere open conversation.²¹ The setted questions consisted of three elements. Firstly it was asked how a foundation, orchestra or choir worked together with different other institutions, partners or councils in order to be able to organise the event. Secondly, the

¹⁸ Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 3, 2, 11, 9, 8, 15, 16, 18.

¹⁹ Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 15, 29.

²⁰ Hester Dibbits, 'Tradities, wijzelf en emotienetwerken' in: *Museum Peil: Vakblad voor Museummedewerkers in Vlaanderen en Nederland no. 49* (Voorjaar 2018) 15.

²¹ Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber, 'Seeing, Hearing, Feeling, Writing', 569; Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods: Second edition* (2012) 120.

interviewee's motivation to participate in the event was asked. Lastly, the interviewee was asked about the 'personal' relationship with the *Matthäus* Passion and when the interviewee had heard the Passion for the first time. It was chosen to add this last question to see whether habitus played a significant role. In this analysis the category of stakeholders consisted of board members, musicians, choir members and the audience. (For an overview of the emotion network at stake in this analysis, see table 1 at the end of this paper).

Participant observation during a *Matthäus* was unfortunately not possible during this research because I performed myself in several concerts and realised that it was difficult for me to audience a concert and put my professionalism as a musician apart. I reconsidered the research field as a place of interaction between musicians, choirs, listeners, professional musicians, amateur musicians, local sponsors and churches. I realised that even in this approach my own identity was at stake because there was still the possibility of 'being native', which basically means that as being part of the field, a loss of cultural identity occurs and any observation will only be self confirming.²² Moreover, interviewing other musicians turned out to be difficult as engagement in the 'specialised' language often took the conversation far away from social study. In order to circumvent these lures I reflected on my own experiences and how they might influence my gaze on the passion. This led to the notions that I overemphasized the importance of the tradition of the Passion due to the fact that I play it several times each Easter. Secondly I realised that I experience the embodied practise differently because I participated in this practise while I receive a financial wage for the performance. Therefore I tried to put my own devotion and experience aside during any conversation and I kept my identity as a musician, so far possible, secret. Moreover, by speaking to different stakeholders I tried to center stage their experience instead of my own understanding of the field.

Collective crying

The semi-structured interviews were held with three boards of a *Matthäus* foundation namely the 'traditions' of Schiedam, Oirschot and Hilversum. The conversations with these boards will be discussed separately in the next paragraph because this is where the nodes of the emotion network seemed to come together. Some of these board members joined the choir

²² Schmidt-Lauber, 'Seeing, Hearing, Feeling, Writing', 563; O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 121.

while performing, so these interviewee's were at the same time part of another node of the network namely the choirs. Next to board members and choir members I spoke with three violinists from different orchestra's who perform(ed) the passion each year. One of these only played 'baroque' settings, that is to say an 'authentic' historically informed performance on historically correct instruments (meaning gut strings, period bows) and the other two the 'romantic' or modern setting.²³ Other musicians interviewed consisted of an organ-player, a cellist, a soprano and a traverso player. Finally I selected the *Matthäus* 'audience' at musically oriented get together activities, ranging from concerts to small, livingroom student performances and even dinners with my own family as well as with friends. During these activities I tried to insinuate open conversation about the passion while at the same time I kept realizing that I was often moving around in my own social habitat.

Semi-structured interviews with the boards revealed four remarkable points. First of all the 'tradition' was expressed in terms of ownership, 'our tradition' or 'our *Matthäus*' was commonly heard. Secondly the network circling around the boards seemed dense and static, it was emphasized that they worked with the same church, orchestra, partners and choirs every year. Quality, trust and an eye for traditional repeat seemed important values in this static network. One board member even described it as a 'family'. Inside of this family however, distances occurred. Especially the professional orchestra members were unknown as they were only 'there' in the short run towards the event. The financial partners, if they were not music lovers yet, were talked about in an almost missionary zeal. 'Confessing' them to love Bach seemed a main concern. When networks were more heavy and top-down, financial partners were offered first rank seating during performances. The church, unexpectedly, played a minor role within the 'family'. Church-initiatives were absent and contact was limited to renting the church.

The third observation worth mentioning in this study was that all boards consisted of religious and non-religious individuals, but no one denied the religious content of the piece nor the spiritual and emotional effect. Moreover, all board members expressed the 'social' value of the Passion respectively. For members in retirement, it was a nice way of doing something with other people. For others, it was a social get together of meetings and choir

²³ For an explanation of historically informed performance (HIP) see: Kailan R. Rubinoff, 'Orchestrating the Early Music Revival: The Dutch baroque orchestras and the mediation of commodification and counterculture' in: *Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis (KVNMM)*, deel 63 (2013) 169-188.

rehearsals. Even during the *Matthäus* performance, this social cohesion added to the emotional effect. For example, three members of boards told me how they thought of the sufferings of acquaintances in the audience and/or choir when listening to the suffering of Jesus Christ.

The notion of ‘owning’ the *Matthäus* was absolutely lacking when I talked with professional musicians. Interestingly out of the seven musicians I spoke, four mentioned that when they were young playing the *Matthäus* was the aimed for, ultimate goal to achieve.²⁴ All of them experienced Easter as a period of the Passion and of devotion, tiredness and nostalgia. None of them spoke about the financial part of their job. Even though all of them highly admired the piece from a young age, it was not their favourite piece and they didn't understand that other works received less attention from the public. Besides it was ‘so long’ and the last half hour they longed for their bed and just wanted to sleep. Two of them mentioned that the audience only comes to cry, which they found annoying. More interesting however is that all of them directly linked the *Matthäus* tradition in the Netherlands to Calvinism. This observation was lacking in the statements of the boards. Within the professional part of the *Matthäus* network, a division between romantic and authentic was a basic assumption. Romantic represented the slow Mengelberg tradition while authentic was in line with the tradition of Naarden which sought to perform the piece in an ‘authentic’ Bach style on authentic instruments.

‘Audiencing’ the Passion was experienced as something spiritual, both by religious and non-religious interviewee’s. The division of Catholic versus Protestant was not a concert, the Passion was seen as a general Christian tradition for everyone. Often mentioned was the nostalgia of being in the church with Easter and the universal human suffering in the piece, which both created the emotional effect. One interviewee even mentioned that he forgave his sins during the Passion and felt reborn afterwards. Several times the Passion was compared to a funeral and the practise described as ‘collective crying’ and an act of ‘fraternity’. Everyone saw the *Matthäus* as a tradition and the majority of the interviewee’s had been brought up with it. A few of them even had clear memories of when they heard it for the first time. Only two interviewee’s discovered the piece when they were much older, surprisingly these two seemed more emotionally connected to the performance then others and were

²⁴ Interviewee who is a violinist in different orchestra’s and plays the ‘Erbarme Dich’ solo every year, interviewed at 16-06-2018.

willingly trying to ‘confess’ others to become part of this tradition. Next to emotional appeal, a few interviewees were not able to express why they liked the music and only talked in standard assumptions as ‘it is a masterpiece’. Romantic versus authentic was also a common expressionist tool used by the audience. Interestingly, a kind of pride seemed to rely on the fact that some interviewee’s always went to see an ‘authentic’ performance. Others mentioned that they liked the romantic effect of the Passion, because it was in a church and the candles were on.

Conclusion: Religion goes easy?

By approaching the *Matthäus* tradition as a discursive construct with different, collected memories involved, data resulting from interviews are seen as reflections of overarching totalities. With this approach the appeal, affect and even commercialisation of the Passion can be illuminated. When looking at the socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-economic structures that assemble in the *Matthäus* complex, the analysis can be explained in broad conclusions.

Actors involved in this tradition shaped their identities, memories and the Passion itself from perceptions of nostalgia and authenticity. Nostalgia arrived from different socio-cultural and socio-religious backgrounds. Firstly being in the church and listening to a religious piece could revive memories of religious education or family tradition. Secondly nostalgia also relied on the common idea that the story of the Bible was something deeply connected to Dutch culture. The idea of togetherness, fraternity and ‘family’ also formed part of the discourse of the *Matthäus* network which can be linked to nostalgia. In short, a collection of different memories, an individualisation of memories, connected to different, personal and collective pasts, occurred under the umbrella of nostalgia.

Next to nostalgia, different reminiscences and emotions also contributed to the actor’s perception of authenticity as attached to the passion. As a practise in which different histories rely, from the bible to Bach and the romantic concert tradition in the nineteenth century, the Passion is a multitemporal construct.²⁵ The idea that the Passion is something ‘old’ was often expressed among the interviewee’s and there existed a kind of synchronism by appearance, because it was said that the tradition had never changed. This idea of continuation from a

²⁵ For an explanation of Multitemporal see: Macdonald, *Memorylands*, 55.

certain past, could derive from different pasts. The authentic version in Bach's style on old instruments, sometimes figured as the main example of 'authenticity' as if Bach and his entire religious context came back just then, during the event.

To conclude this study it can be said that as an embodied practise Bach's Passion of St Matthew functions as a multitemporal, fluid tradition. In this research the appeal of this tradition in the local Dutch context has been mirrored in different socio-religious and socio-cultural totalities. Overall it can be argued that the passion functions as a kind of 'religion goes easy' because as an embodied tradition it commemorates Dutch religious and social history and it reflects on universal suffering, human vulnerability and sins during a collective happening.

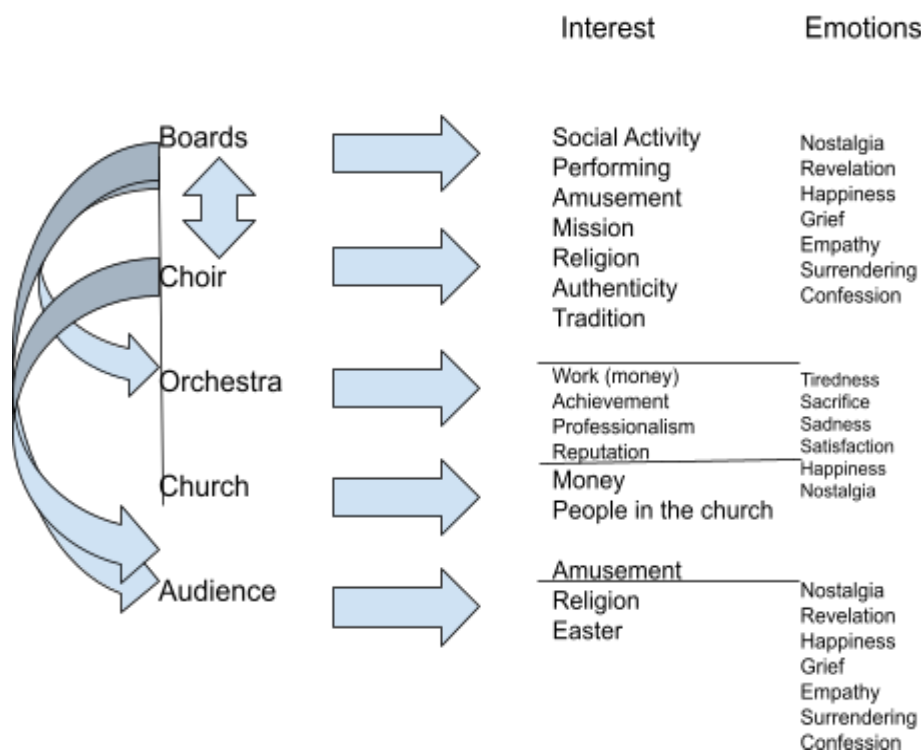


Table 1: Emotion network of the Passion of St Matthew.

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Links

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<https://www.matthauspassionschiedam.nl/bestuur/>

Musicians interviewed

<https://marijkeschaap.nl/biografie-tekst/>

<http://www.triodafusignano.nl/>

<http://www.evavaningen.com/>

Koosje Kiezenbrink (pianist, singer, conductor).

Benzion Shamir (violinist).

Other interviewees wished to remain anonymous.

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