MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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14. Spiritual Cultures: Innovations in Choral and Classical Music

Jonathan Arnold

Recent research has revealed not only the continued growth of interest in traditional Western sacred music but also the development of new initiatives that respond to people's desire to experience spirituality through music. For example, the work of Kathryn King and Hanna Rijken has demonstrated, through empirical research, why choral Evensong in the Anglican tradition appeals to so many, and exactly who is attending and listening to these services, both in England and, perhaps surprisingly, in the Netherlands, where choral Evensong is a popular 'new' or 'fresh' expression of worship with a burgeoning English-style choral tradition. Written from my own perspective as an Anglican priest and musician in the classical tradition, in this chapter I will explore how these trends in choral Evensong have been mapped and what conclusions have been drawn using both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, my own research through the 'Experience of Music' project, as well as analysis of non-liturgical or quasi-liturgical settings of both choral and instrumental classical music, have shown that there are social, ethical, and spiritual benefits to music experience. Such spiritual experience through music can point towards, and even reveal, a reality beyond our everyday human materiality.

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I. Choral Evensong in England Today: An Immersive Study

Kathryn King's empirical study of choral Evensong has made an important contribution to the scholarly understanding of music listening as well as of the experiences of congregants at choral Evensong.[1] Using a multi-methodological approach, King makes essential findings about tranquillity, transcendence, and retreat, about the agency afforded by an attendee, and about the use of Evensong as an escape from everyday life and towards an ideal 'Evensong persona', in ways that allow attendees to regulate emotions and seek fulfilment. Locating Evensong within the framework of everyday life, King argues that it is a '… powerful and trusted technology of the self'.[2] King shows that the experience can evoke both emotional and cognitive transformation, which lead the attendee towards experiences of tranquillity, transcendence, and retreat.

King's research methodology incorporated forty-three ' … in-depth interviews; an immersive, real-time experimental study involving twenty-six participants; two national surveys which elicited more than 2,100 responses; and two years of participant observation'.[3] The real-time experimental element, called the Immersive Evensong Study (IES) was an original methodology designed to ascertain how attendee participants thought and felt during an Evensong service.[4] Aware that '… situational factors are fundamental to listeners' experiences of music (Gabrielsson, 2011; Juslin et al., 2008), and that both music and emotion unfold over time, with thoughts and feelings changing continually and sometimes dramatically during the course of a listening experience (Schubert, 2010)', King sought out a 'real-time research method … that could capture participants' evolving thoughts, emotions, and experiences—including the non-cognitive and unconscious embodied responses that are a common feature of musical experience—in a

1 Kathryn King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat: The Transformative Practice of Listening at Evensong' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2021), https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:0772a6ce-d68e-4356-af39-dfab545ee108
2 Ibid., p. 11.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 57.

controlled environment, so that the responses of multiple participants could be investigated consistently, and with a reasonable degree of ecological validity'.[5]The practical and ethical difficulties of obtaining representative and replicable data about attendee experience were overcome by using virtual reality or 'VR'.

The use of a virtual experience of choral Evensong allowed '... multiple participants, separated in time, to engage with exactly the same replica environment (Blascovich et al. 2002)'.[6] Participants in the IES study, which included myself, sat in a pew or stall in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford. Through a VR headset and headphones I experienced a very high quality three-dimensional recording of a service, from May 2018, sung by the boy choristers and academical clerks (choral scholars). I stood and sat in all the correct liturgical places and faced east to speak the words of the creed. Through the headset I could see other members of the congregation who had been present when the 3D recording was made. Through sensors my heart rate, skin conductivity, and eye, or 'gaze', movement were also monitored. During the playback I was encouraged to think out loud about what I was thinking or feeling. After the recorded service was over the researcher asked me questions about the experience, including emotions or anything that had come to mind during my experience. It was a remarkable reproduction or representation of the 'real thing' that allowed for the research participant to express how they were experiencing the event that obviously would have been impossible during a live service, without disturbing other members of the congregation.

The potential of using VR is evident from studies on clinical, affective, and social neurosciences:

> A virtual environment provides the researcher with an ecologically valid platform for presenting dynamic stimuli in a manner that allows for

5 Ibid. Alf Gabrielsson, *Strong Experiences with Music: Music Is Much More than Just Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Patrik N. Juslin, 'Emotional Responses to Music', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, ed. by Ian Cross et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 131–40; Emery Schubert, 'Affective, Evaluative and Collative Responses to Hated and Loved Music', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 4.1 (2010), 36–46.

6 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 58; Jim Blascovich et al., 'Immersive Virtual Environment Technology as a Methodological Tool for Social Psychology', *Psychological Inquiry* 13.2 (2002), 103–24.

> both the veridical control of laboratory measures and the verisimilitude of naturalistic observation of real-life situations ... Virtual environment-based assessments can provide a balance between naturalistic observation and the need for exacting control over key variables.[7]

The Evensong chosen for recording was selected because it was representative of a typical weekday Evensong, and because its music was without copyright limitations.[8] The IES research methods were chosen to encompass the three widely-recognised systems of monitoring human experience, which are '... physiological indicators; observable acts or behaviours; and language and other oral communication (M. M. Bradley and Lang 2002; P. J. Lang 1993)'.[9] King thus employed five research methods for the IES: thinking/speaking aloud, observation, gaze tracking, physiological monitoring, and post-IES follow-up interviews.

In addition to the data collected by the IES experience, King collected thousands of responses in two questionnaire surveys: 'Experiences of Evensong', conducted in 2019, and 'Absence of Evensong', conducted during the 2020 lockdown:

> The [Experiences of Evensong] survey asked 30 questions in five areas: (i) Evensong and other church attendance practices and motivations; (ii) the experience of being at Evensong; (iii) wider musical tastes, music listening habits, and musical training and performance practices; (iv) religious affiliation and faith; and (v) demographic factors. Questions were a combination of multiple choice, closed and open, and wording was constructed in line with established principles of social research surveys (e.g., De Vaus et al. 2013, 94–120). Multiple choice options were

7 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 59; Thomas D. Parsons, 'Virtual Reality for Enhanced Ecological Validity and Experimental Control in the Clinical, Affective and Social Neurosciences', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 9 (2015), 600; Alice Chirico et al., 'Effectiveness of Immersive Videos in Inducing Awe: An Experimental Study', *Scientific Reports* 7.1 (2017), 1218; Giuseppe Riva et al., 'Affective Interactions Using Virtual Reality: The Link between Presence and Emotions', *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 10.1 (2007), 45–56.

8 The recording can be viewed here: The Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford, 'The Choir of Magdalen College Oxford Sing Choral Evensong on Thursday...', online video recording, Facebook, 29 April 2019, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=370168640373718

9 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 63; Margaret M. Bradley and Peter J. Lang, 'Measuring Emotion: Behavior, Feeling, and Physiology', in *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Emotion*, ed. by R. D. Lane et al. (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 242–76.

> determined by reference to pre-existing findings, and where possible the same wording used by the relevant comparator survey was adopted. Five open questions were included to ensure that views or themes of importance to respondents that might not have been addressed in the closed or multiple-choice options could be captured.[10]

The Absence of Evensong survey was on a smaller scale, asking seven questions concerning the effects of being unable to attend live Evensong and on experiences of online or other Evensong broadcasts.

Analysis of the Experiences of Evensong survey revealed '... two important overall themes in participants' reasons for attending Evensong ... (a) the music, and (b) the attainment of a sense of tranquillity. Furthermore, it was clear that for a large majority of survey respondents, these two factors are inextricably linked'.[11] Likewise, the Absence of Evensong survey suggested the same '... inter-relationship between music and self-regulation for relaxation'.[12] This is evident in the response of one survey participant, as well as a link between this kind of self-regulated relaxation and divine presence:

> Attending choral services used to be one of my primary outlets to aid my emotional well-being... not having this outlet available ... meant that it felt like there was no safety valve to help calm my emotions. ... times of feeling anxious, powerless, isolated, and cut off would have been assuaged by being able to share in Choral Evensong. There is a real sense of divine presence and calm in the service which works against the feelings I describe above. Evensong is utter mindfulness. The lack of it has removed a slice of peace.... A recording is not a substitute for the balm to the soul that is evensong.[13]

The connection between musical quality and an experience of tranquillity was also indicted by the fact that, overall, 85% of attendees reported having had musical instrument or voice training, and 82% responded that they attended Evensong in order to reflect, meditate, contemplate, or find peace and quiet.[14]

10 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', pp. 76–77; David De Vaus et al., *Surveys in Social Research* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).
11 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 85.
12 Ibid., p. 90.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 91.

King questions the extent to which this self-regulation might be called a 'technology of the self', a term coined by Michel Foucault to describe those who use resources in order to perform '… operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality'.[15] Tia DeNora and Peter Rentfrow have identified music as such a resource used in 'creating, enhancing, sustaining and changing subjective, cognitive, bodily and self-conceptual states' (DeNora 1999, 34–35), and 'in a vast variety of situations, and for a range of social and psychological objectives (Rentfrow 2012)'.[16] Choral Evensong is not, however, an obvious technology of the self, as it is a live experience with its own rules of behaviour that cannot be manipulated or experienced on demand like a recording, it restricts the extent to which an attendee can participate or express themselves, and it is an act of worship. Nonetheless, King's findings indicate that there is an interwovenness between the use of the music and attendees' other motivations or objectives in attending, '… whether those objectives are religious and spiritual, self-directed as a means to attaining religious or spiritual ends, or focused on self-care without a religious or spiritual dimension'.[17] Those who do attend for 'spiritual' reasons, do so because they believe that the music will assist in their aim:

> Participants who attend to get in touch with a spiritual part of themselves, or with the spiritual in the abstract, widely believed that the music promotes spirituality; and participants who have no religious or spiritual goals, but are seeking tranquillity, often regarded the music an important resource in effecting the affective transformation they desire.[18]

Thus, King identifies that, in choral Evensong, music is a common factor in attendees who are there primarily for worship, or to achieve

15 Ibid., p. 101; *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Luther H. Martin et al. (London: Tavistock, 1988), p. 16.

16 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 101; Tia DeNora, 'Music as a Technology of the Self', *Poetics*, 27.1 (1999), 31–56.

17 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 105. Peter J. Rentfrow, 'The Role of Music in Everyday Life: Current Directions in the Social Psychology of Music', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6 (2012), 402–16.

18 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 106.

tranquillity, or for a spiritual experience.[19] As such, Evensong-goers use music '… knowingly and deliberately to balance their active and passive engagement for the achievement of a plurality of varying emotional, spiritual, intellectual and embodied goals'.[20]

In addition to this use, King also discovered, through the ISE study, survey, and in-depth interviews, that transcendence was a common experience in Evensong.

> Experiences of transcendence at Evensong are not only surprisingly common, but for a very significant proportion of participants, they are intrinsic to their participation in the service. These experiences are not unique to people professing a religious belief: they are reported widely, and by people across the spectrum of religiosity and of faith, doubt, and certainty about the existence or absence of any sort of spirit or God.[21]

King's findings show that these widely felt experiences of transcendence are what motivates people to return to choral Evensong multiple times. Indeed, it is the benchmark for judging a 'successful' Evensong: 'Evensong has "worked" if transcendence has been achieved'.[22] Experiences of transcendence are manifested in a variety of ways. They can be short or long in duration, with different levels of intensity: 'Some are manifest as fleeting flashes of insight; others are prolonged plateaus of divine encounter with life-changing consequence'.[23] But in all cases, the 'self' and the 'world' are experienced in a way that is different from everyday living. King identifies seven, overlapping, types of transcendence experienced at Evensong, all of which are responses to the 'musical soundscape of the service, regardless of the musical background or training of the individual involved'.[24] These are: enlightenment, elevation, encountering God or the Other, being transported, losing and finding the self, flow, and disassociation. These porous categories are situated diagrammatically, in King's thesis, within the boundaries of transformation, transience, and ineffability.

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 120.
21 Ibid., p. 197.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 198.

Although Anglican psalm chanting particularly appealed to survey respondents, all aspects of the service encouraged intellectual and emotional engagement from the attendees:

> Listening to the choral psalms, canticles, and prayers at Evensong involves an in-depth intellectual engagement with the sung text, through well-honed practices of concentration, interpretation, reflection, and meditation. The involving nature of these processes was frequently associated with transcendent experiences related to being transported, the loss of self, enlightenment, and encountering God.[25]

For instance, one respondent wrote of his experiences as 'like floating in the sea' with the choir, 'communicating a sense of one's own smallness and God's infinite goodness',[26] corresponding to Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion's sociology of attachment in which 'the user strives tentatively to fulfil those conditions which will let him be seized and taken over by a potentialized exogenous force'.[27] In addition to the music, the words of the Book of Common Prayer contribute to the sense of 'otherness' and mystery in the experience, which Rijken has also noted in her study of choral Evensong in the Netherlands.[28]

The intentions of the attendee were also noted as significance factors in prioritising meaning, 'with participants activating or mobilizing selected features of what they perceived in order to produce meanings and interpretations in accordance with what they felt they needed at particular moments'.[29] Moreover, some attendees intentionally wish to feel connected to a community of Evensong-goers across the centuries, corresponding to Georgina Born's 'musically imagined community'.[30] Another important finding was that there is no adequate substitute for

25 Ibid., p. 202.
26 Ibid., p. 203.
27 Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion, 'A Sociology of Attachment: Music Amateurs, Drug Users', *The Sociological Review* 47.1 (1999), 220–47, cited in King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 203.
28 Hanna Rijken, *My Soul Doth Magnify: The Appropriation of Anglican Choral Evensong in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Vu Press, 2020), pp. 81–83; King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 206.
29 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 202; cf. Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 38.
30 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 209; Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth Century Music* 2.1, 7–36.

attending Evensong in person and having a live experience. King's much smaller survey regarding online services during lockdown found that respondents' opinions ranged from '…the best substitute, but nothing compared to being there' to '…remote and pointless... There is no substitute for being at a live musical service'. Indeed, many respondents actively sought in the broadcasts the same transformational effects they expected from attending Evensong, but instead reported finding them 'ridiculous' or voyeuristic.[31]

With regard to Evensong and well-being, King posits that there are several beneficial effects of attending Evensong, including a sense of escape, retreat, belonging, and a sense of home, sanctuary in certainty and stability, and security in Evensong's ongoing existence.[32] Contrary to Theofor Adorno and Jacques Attali's argument that listening to music for a sense of escape is a consumerist regressive trap created to childishly distract us from realities of life,[33] King finds that Evensong attendees find fortification from the service in order to face the realities of life thereafter, as evident in the words of one respondent, who found Evensong 'a time of contemplation and worship where my soul is filled and refreshed by the offering of prayers and music. It sets me up for the week ahead…'[34] Indeed, the 'sanctuary' of Evensong can enable human flourishing beyond the service itself:

> Evensong's role as a sanctuary extends beyond creating a retreat from the outside world. It also re-presents that world in a new way, that allows the exploration, expression, and development of dimensions of self and identity that can, in everyday life, be difficult to perform. Music is an important catalyst for these generative activities. Through musical sound, Evensong affords a space in which introversion and introspection can become platforms for flourishing.[35]

31 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 248.
32 Ibid., pp. 261–71.
33 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 29–60; Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the Social Situation of Music', in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 391–436; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
34 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 273.
35 Ibid., p. 299.

Overall, King finds that the majority of people are motivated to attend Evensong primarily for musical, religious/spiritual, or affective/cognitive reasons in varying degrees depending on the person. These motivations are all interrelated.[36] Moreover, attending Evensong was rarely perceived as a matter of indifference: 'It is not akin to attending a concert for entertainment, a historical building for awe or education, or a meditation class for relaxation', but rather a serious pursuit that seeks 'profound meaning, feeling, and transformation'.[37]

Three types of experience were found to be common: tranquillity, transcendence, and sanctuary.[38] Regarding musical experience, King found that attendees engage in 'multiple acts of agency in releasing and exploiting its [music's] potential. Specifically, they were shown to actively potentialize music to create the conditions for the experiences that they sought, before passing from activity to passivity in order to realise that experience through the relinquishment of agency'.[39]Thus, the listener moves from an active intentionality to a passive release of agency during the experience, where sounds of music and the words of the book of common prayer are 'heard as a de-personalised sound of Otherness', where a 'reassuring sense of calm' provides a path to transcendence.[40] Perhaps most surprisingly, the motivations for, and outcomes of, attendance at choral Evensong vary little due to 'religious affiliation, faith, or musical training and background'.[41] Rather, choral Evensong appealed to a wide variety of people with or without these attributes.

While DeNora has explored the routine use of music, especially recorded music, for 'affective and cognitive objectives in a range of settings',[42] King's research demonstrates that the 'live' experience of choral Evensong was used by many for self-regulation and 'affective scaffolding as part of everyday life', whether for listeners who wished to achieve a transformed state as a goal in itself, or those who aimed for

36 Ibid., pp. 301–02.
37 Ibid., p. 303.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p. 304.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., p. 305.
42 DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, passim; King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', p. 298.

another goal, such as worship.[43] Because Evensong is not on demand like recorded music it is a different, and more effective, mechanism for self-management. The recorded Evensong services during lockdown, then, were an extremely poor substitute for the live experience.

> Specifically, participants took comfort from the knowledge that Evensong was not available on demand, because that afforded a sense that it was not 'all about me'. This was experienced as liberating and a relief, or as recalling or even prefiguring a simpler time, outside of consumerist rules of exchange. For some, the experience of having to await gratification on the timescale of the service schedule rather than on demand created a reassuring and calming awareness of a different sense of time and priorities, that in turn promoted patience and a different, broader cognitive perspective.[44]

Because Evensong is often a daily event in cathedrals and chapels, the service is 'not as a standalone event, but rather—in many cases—as the culmination of a potentially prolonged period of preparation, in an ever-repeating cycle'.[45]

People go to Evensong with 'self-regulation and affective objectives' in mind, like meditation or worship and enhanced well-being.[46] Attendees also 'engage in practices and behaviours in support of a transformation of their affective state at Evensong prior to, and during, the commencement of the event'. King also finds that Evensong is 'vital, central, and indispensable' in the affect it can afford people.[47] In concluding her study, King suggests that

> ...a comparative study of experiences of Evensong in the UK and in the Netherlands, where Evensong has a different history, cultural position, and relationship with religion, could be mutually informative about the motivations and experiences of Evensong participants in both cultures. The foundations for an international research project with this focus have already been laid, and it is hoped its findings will elaborate further on contemporary participation in Evensong, and the many varieties of experience that it affords.[48]

43 King, 'Tranquillity, Transcendence, and Retreat', pp. 305–06.
44 Ibid., p. 306.
45 Ibid., p. 307.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p. 308.
48 Ibid., p. 324.

And so it is to the work of Hanna Rijken in the Netherlands that I turn now.

II. Choral Evensong in the Netherlands: A Ritual-Ethnographical Approach

When I was invited, by Dr Rijken of the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit in Amsterdam, to attend, and to speak at, the *Choral Evensong Symposium* in the Lutheran Church in Utrecht in February 2020, I was delighted to hear of the rise in popularity of Choral Evensong in the Netherlands with over one hundred choirs singing regular choral Evensongs up and down the land. I was privileged to attend the service of Choral Evensong, sung by the Kampen Boys' Choir in the packed cathedral, and immensely impressed by the high standard of liturgy and music-making at a professional level from the men and boys, even though I later learned that the singers are not paid for their services; on the contrary, they subscribe to the choir in order to resource it and its purposes. This only goes to demonstrate the enormous enthusiasm there is for the music and the liturgy, from clergy, musicians, and congregation alike. Of course, choral Evensong is not native to the Low Countries and there is no English cathedral choral tradition. Thus, the traditional choral service is seen as a 'fresh expression', a delightful phenomenon in Reformed and Lutheran Churches. It has also been described as the 'Anglican Virus.'[49]

How can something so ancient be 'fresh'? King's research would suggest that Evensong appeals 'afresh' to each new generation who seek the divine through liturgy, and Rijken herself has undertaken significant research into why choral Evensong is such a popular phenomenon in the Netherlands. Rijken asks:

> What is happening in the so-called secularized Netherlands? We notice something remarkable; overcrowded churches, chamber choirs which are transforming into evensong choirs and the establishment of 'Anglican' choir schools for boy and girl choristers.[50]

49 Hanna Rijken et al., 'The "Anglican Virus". The Emergence of Anglican Music in the Netherlands', *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 54 (2015), 131–52.

50 Ibid., p. 13.

In order to answer this question, Rijken takes a ritual-musical ethnographical approach which deploys an empirical process of mapping the field. Like King, Rijken chooses particular loci for investigation, conducts interviews, and draws on participant observation. This process includes an historical investigation of music within the church of the Netherlands, and of the 'cultural brokers' who introduced Anglican music in the Netherlands.[51] The research also involves a study of the use of language in choral Evensong, both English and Dutch, noticing that Evensong language is notably different to Sunday morning services in the Netherlands; the non-native archaic language of the prayer book, sung or spoken, can aid a transcendental experience, both through its sacrality and its rituality; an experience of 'otherness' lies in the use of a non-native ritual language, which evokes an unarticulated 'sens du sacré'; and, finally, the use of language in Evensong, from the prayer book and Bible, creates a noticeably different and ritualistic sacrality than a common choral concert.[52]

Rijken's empirical research programme also investigates the changing uses of ecclesiastical space, and where the choir is positioned in the building. Rijken calls this 'cathedralization', where buildings made for preaching have been changed with the introduction of choir stalls: the choir has moved from a concert layout (with the choir at the front and congregation in audience positions), to a more antiphonal mode (with Decani and Cantoris sides facing each other, and turning east to say the creed).[53] Choral Evensong choirs in the Netherlands have also appropriated Anglican liturgical dress, with cassocks and surplices, indicating a 'transformation in the way religion is expressed' in Protestant churches. 'A new form of religiosity', corresponding to Anton van Harskamp's observance of a 'new religious longing' in the Netherlands, is characterised by what W. B. H. J. van de Donk has called 'non-compulsory choice options'.[54]

51 Ibid., p. 60.
52 Ibid., pp. 82–83.
53 Ibid., pp. 87–105.
54 Ibid., p. 124; Anton Van Harskamp, *Het nieuw-religieuze verlangen* (Kampen: Kok, 2000), p. 48; W. B. H. J. van de Donk et al., *Geloven in het publieke domein: verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 13–14.

In analysing interview material, Rijken identifies six different categories of metaphors which participants and attendees of choral Evensong use to describe their experiences: eschatological (such as 'heavenly', 'paradise'); aesthetical (such as 'beautiful', 'gorgeous'); sensorial (such as 'bright', 'light', 'transparent'); transcendental metaphors (such as 'lifted up', 'higher plain', or 'revelatory'); emotional (which can be evident in an attendee crying, or feeling emotional, or in physiological change related to emotion, such as 'your heart rate goes down'—a phenomenon that can occur during choral Evensong, as King has shown); and, finally, connective (where participants describe their experience as a connection, either between the singers and choir, or choir and congregation, or between other groups, or between heaven and earth).[55] Like King, Rijken finds that 'there are no strict boundaries between religious and musical experiences'. Thus, any antithesis between an experience as either 'beautiful' or 'sacred' becomes artificial. The metaphors used by participants demonstrate that the experience is many things at once, from religious to aesthetic.[56]

In the ritual appropriation of choral Evensong in the Netherlands, those who attend have typically been attracted by beauty, sacrality, rituality, a desire for transcendent experience and, closely related to this, a service that contrasts with the usual Sunday morning services. In her understanding of this phenomenon, Rijken draws on Paul Post's notion of ritual-sacral practice, where 'ritual and sacrality go hand in hand',[57] whether in religion, marking and remembering, culture or leisure. Choral Evensong is popular 'because of the possibility of appropriating this ritual-musical form in diverse ways (religion, arts, leisure)'.[58] But this does not fully explain the phenomenon for Rijken, and she draws also, therefore, on the concept of 're-enchantment', as mentioned in Erika Fischer-Lichte's observations regarding aesthetic experiences that can lead to a re-enchantment of the world, and Andrew Burnham's call

55 Rijken, 'The "Anglican Virus"', p. 134.
56 Ibid., pp. 142–43.
57 P. G. J. Post, 'From Identity to Accent: The Ritual Studies Perspective of Fields of the Sacred', *Pastoraltheologische Informationen* 33.1 (2013), 149–58 (at 149); Rijken, 'The "Anglican Virus"', p. 155.
58 Rijken, 'The "Anglican Virus"', p. 157.

for a re-enchantment of the liturgy.[59] In addition, Rijken finds resonance with Charles Taylor's call for a 'transcendent humanism', which is a 'liberating alternative to the exclusive, secularist humanism on the one hand and religious dogmatism on the other. For Taylor this is a new Christian humanism which is open to transcendence, an attempt to 'believe again'.[60] Richard Kearney calls this 'anatheism', which is 'the space where an open theism and an open atheism can come into dialogue'.[61] Rijken also finds common ground with Pieter Villiers who has applied the notion of re-enchantment to theology, and who pleads for a 're-enchantment of theology by beauty and mysticism', through aesthetics.[62]

Thus, the churches of the Low Countries, ringing out with the sounds of voices lifted up in choral praise, can act as spiritual centres in their communities, opening their doors to people of all faiths and none, offering musical and liturgical excellence. If you pop in to one you may well find an inclusive spirit of welcome, prayerful worship, and aesthetic beauty. Choral music within the liturgy has long been one of Britain's greatest cultural and religious heritages. Thus, I now turn to consider the results of a UK national live music survey and those of my own research survey on the experience of music.

III. 'Experience of Music' Surveys in England

The twenty-first century has seen a rise in attendance at English cathedral services. Sunday service attendance has risen by a few thousand, but midweek service attendance has increased dramatically, from 7,000 in 2000 (when first reported) to a peak of 19,900 in 2015, since when it has remained basically stable until 2020. The number of

59 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya I. Jain (London, New York: Routledge, 2008); Andrew Burnham, *Heaven and Earth in Little Space: The Re-Enchantment of the Liturgy* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2010), p. 129.

60 Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman, eds, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Kearney in conversation with Charles Taylor, author of *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 77 (cited in Rijken, 'The "Anglican Virus"', p. 160).

61 Ibid., p. 80 (cited in Rijken, 'The "Anglican Virus"', p. 160)

62 Pieter G.R. de Villiers, 'Re-Enchanted by Beauty: On Aesthetics and Mysticism', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72.4 (2016), 1–7.

people hearing sacred music in these ancient buildings by attending both Sunday and weekday services has almost returned to 2019 levels, following the pandemic.[63] In two surveys I conducted, also in 2018, I collected qualitative data from people who had attended performances of sacred music. One survey focussed on those listening to sacred music in a liturgical context and the other survey collected responses from those listening to sacred music as part of a concert. The results from both surveys contained overlapping ideas: those claiming to have had a religious or spiritual experience were as evident in the concert audience survey as the church congregation survey. Thus, for example, a concert attendee commented:

> I find that I can experience the transcendent power that I call God through the unique beauty of unaccompanied song such as this: the finest music of its time, performed in the architectural context for which it was written, and with the highest quality of vocal refinement.[64]

Performance quality was a common factor to both surveys. Another respondent wrote:

> Overall, the experience was spiritually uplifting and the uplift was due partly to the performance. The quality of the choir and soloists was such that I felt confident in the performance. The sense of peace and awareness of having been in God's presence remained for some days after the concert.[65]

For others, the musical genre was also a factor in the quality of experience:

> Sacred music always brings me back to the knowledge that I have a spiritual dimension. It enables me to be grounded in my prayer and meditation. For me, sacred music … is a bridge between our worldly existence and the wonder, power and awesomeness of God.[66]

Moreover, some respondents found that the venue was a contributory factor in their quality of experience:

63 *The Church of England, Cathedral Statistics, 2021* (London: Data Services, 2023), https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/cathedral-statistics-2021.pdf

64 Jonathan Arnold, *Experience of Music*, 2018, www.experienceofmusic.org

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

> Sacred music and churches usually give me a space where I can be other than my quotidian self ... To walk into any place of worship and find sacred music being performed, usually makes me feel particularly blessed.[67]

Likewise, in the congregation survey, a consecrated venue and a liturgical context was significant for some respondents' experience:

> I have always loved evensong and will go to services and listen on the radio. I follow the psalm and make that a time for reflection. I appreciate the other music and often find it uplifting. I sing the hymns if there are any.[68]

Similarly, for this person, the liturgical and musical encounter helped to foster a sense of mental well-being and moral resolution: 'I find the weekly evensong spiritually enriching and feel it provides me with mental strength to realise my duties'.

Not everyone, however, had a spiritual or religious experience through music in a liturgical context: 'My reaction is entirely musical and not spiritual at all. I find that I may be overwhelmed by church music ... without having any spiritual or religious feeling at all'. However, the majority of responses, albeit from self-selecting participants of a largely middle-class and educated background, were positive towards the religious or spiritual aspect of the musical encounter. Moreover, for others, vocal participation is an important factor that is present in worship but not in a concert hall, even if the congregational participant is not of the Christian faith: 'I very much enjoy singing hymns, plainchant, etc., despite not connecting with (and actually opposing in some ways) what is said in the words and what it means, on account of practising Judaism and not Christianity'.

For some of those who are practising Christians, the liturgical and sacramental nature of a service is an essential difference from a concert performance, with regard to musical function: 'What a joy it is when music is in a church—doing its JOB! This was much, much, better than a concert—concerts don't include a Eucharist. With this, my soul could keep hovering, reaching in beauty to God'. Likewise, this respondent indicates why cathedral and chapel attendance at worship in England

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.

might have increased so much over the last few years: 'I greatly value evensong and other liturgical offices in the public churches and cathedrals. It constitutes a real and valuable public service in offering a space of peace and meditation in the midst of life's routine and cares'. One interesting response to music within the liturgy involved a two-year old child:

> I had a two-year old with me. He is riveted by this experience every time. He is just still and calm and listens for minutes at a time. He is also clearly fascinated by the action and movement within the liturgy. In turn, I am moved and inspired by his response to this music, and it calms me too, drawing me, in a way I can only feel, and cannot articulate, closer to God.[69]

It must also be acknowledged that the participants of my own small survey were self-selecting and were not representative of the population as a whole. Indeed, there have been valid critiques concerning the exclusive nature of Anglican choral Evensong, particularly the gendered nature of the tradition, and in terms of ethnicity, class, disability, and vocal timbre.[70] However, the responses to sacred music recorded in my survey do align with Jeff. R. Warren's assessment of the ethical efficacy of music as relational, suggesting both the intrinsic value and the practical benefits of sacred music, at least to some people.[71] Sacred music had a positive effect on individuals, helping them to feel 'blessed', 'uplifted', and 'enriched', as well as providing a 'valuable public service' to the wider community.

Conclusion

King's ground-breaking research into choral Evensong in England, Rijken's mapping of the growth in popularity of choral Evensong in the Netherlands, and the results of my own 'Experience of Music' surveys all indicate that sacred music, and its ritual-sacral context, leads towards tranquillity, transcendence and sanctuary, re-enchanting both

69 Ibid.

70 Bertram J. Schirr, 'The Body We Sing: Reclaiming of the Queer Materiality of Vocal Bodies' in *Queering Freedom: Music, Identity and Spirituality*, ed. by Karin Hendricks and June Boyce-Tillman (Bern: Peter Lang), pp. 35-52.

71 Jeff R. Warren, *Music and Ethical Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

religion and the secular, and leading the listener or participant away from potentially destructive emotions of pride, anger, greed, or envy, towards more benevolent feelings of humility, patience, temperance, and generosity, to name but a few of the cardinal vices and virtues. The liminal space of Evensong, with its mystical overtones and transcendental properties, is not a consumerist distraction from the 'real' world of work, business, money, or other realities of the everyday that can give us anxiety and stress. It is a retreat into the numinous that can give strength, encouragement, and inspiration to face our problems, and look outwards from our own selfish desires. Both choral Evensong and semi-liturgical rituals bring us musical and sacral encounters which can increase our sense of empathy and galvanise us for action. Hearts and minds can be transformed by music and the word in combination, a transformation encouraged by a shared experience. Listening to sacred music in community, even as strangers, can also inspire a broader sense of cohesion and socially committed resolve. Now that the heritage of choral Evensong and its cousins in concert form are spreading once more, we should treasure it and support it, because those who take care of that ever 'fresh' expression of praise offer an enormous gift, not just to their local communities but to the wider society as a whole.