
Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in the Netherlands

Alternative Timeframe and Resonance

ABSTRACT This article examines the religious functions of the Dutch performance practice of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. It introduces the phenomenon, highlights its religious and ritual significance in the context of the late modern Netherlands, and interprets the piece through the lens of Hartmut Rosa's social theory. The article concludes by reflecting on resonance as the common third between religious and aesthetic experiences. **KEYWORDS** Alienation, Hartmut Rosa, Johann Sebastian Bach, passion play, resonance, social acceleration, *St. Matthew Passion*, the Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

How does a baroque oratorio like Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (MP) align with the focus of a journal dedicated to religion and contemporary popular culture? The first observation that precedes any attempt to address this question is that the MP holds a notably prominent place in the Netherlands today, far more so than in comparable countries (Bach 2016). This prompts an inquiry into the functions fulfilled by the performance practice of this passion play in a late modern society.

The enduring popularity of this piece of music, particularly in the Netherlands, warrants further explanation. One theory attributes this to the lingering influence of Calvinism on the mentality of at least some Dutch citizens, who may experience performances as exercises in repentance for their sins. After all, "Christianity has profoundly influenced our culture, and to this day we see the traces of this, such as...the annual events surrounding the *St. Matthew Passion*" (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016, 17). Another, more pragmatic explanation lies in the role of radio broadcasts of the Amsterdam MP, which helped popularize and disseminate the work (van Amerongen 2000, 113–22). A third theory suggests that the oratorio functions as a shared ritual that can unify Christians, followers of other religions, and nonbelievers. The MP itself serves as a "church for everyone," with its composer achieving a near-divine status (van Veldhoven 2010a). Bach's genius and music have acquired legendary significance in the Netherlands, more so than elsewhere, uniting an otherwise diverse population. The annual performances of the MP have taken on a cultic character, serving as ritual expressions of a shared cultural ground (Vernooij 2001, 58–63).

This article does not offer a musicological or text-critical interpretation of the MP (de Keyzer 2020; 2017; van Houten 1998; Schmidt 2018; Kingreen 2019). Rather, it examines the religious functions of its performances in late modern Dutch

society. My approach investigates the contemporary impact of the play through a reception-aesthetic lens. While I have not conducted an empirical study of audience members at a concert, I consider the performance practice of the MP as a “text” that involves both text-immanent recipients and actual recipients (Bosman and van Wieringen 2022). Adopting a communication-oriented perspective, I address the interaction between a text-immanent (idealized) author or composer and text-immanent (idealized) readers or listeners, both of whom exist within the textual world, as opposed to the real author or composer and real readers or listeners situated in the real world. Specifically, I interpret the MP using Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance (section 2) (see also Wils 2019; Peters and Schulz 2017; Kläden and Schüßler 2017; Hörsch and Pompe 2019; Olsman 2022). First, however, I will introduce the phenomenon itself (section 1.1) and outline additional approaches—beyond those already mentioned—to understanding its religious significance and popularity in the Netherlands (section 1.2).

1. THE DUTCH PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF *ST. MATTHEW PASSION*

1.1. Describing the Phenomenon

As “one of the main achievements of Western culture” (Platen 2009, 13), the MP occupies a “barely contested first place in Western European musical tradition” (de Keyzer 2020, 53). In the Netherlands, it consistently ranks number one in surveys of the most significant classical music works of all time. Annual performances of this oratorio during the Holy Week are a prominent fixture in contemporary Dutch society, engaging a broad audience beyond the cultural elite.

The MP has inspired adaptations across various genres, including house and pop music versions, as well as a children’s adaptation that includes didactic materials for classroom preparation. The television program *Mattheus Masterclass* confronted Dutch celebrities with Bach’s music, challenging them to perform selections from the MP. In Zaltbommel, performances are paused mid-event to allow patrons to dine at a restaurant before resuming the second half. Sing-along performances have emerged since the turn of the millennium, inviting audiences to participate in the chorales. Stichting PassieProjecten organized a digital sing-along in 2020 in response to Covid restrictions. This trend toward popularization has sparked recurring criticism. Jan Rot’s successful adaptation and retelling (2006), for example, was accused of banalizing and profaning the MP.

Nevertheless, it is undisputed that “the *St. Matthew Passion* is both for ordinary people and for the elite” (Wennekes 2010, 107). Among the latter, the prime minister, cabinet members, and high society regularly attend the annual Good Friday performance in the Grote Kerk of Naarden. “The *St. Matthew Passion* is not just a performance; it has become a national ritual” (van den Hemel 2020, 14). Organized trips to Leipzig, Germany, centered around Bach’s music include visits to St. Thomas Church—the site of the MP’s first performance and Bach’s burial place. The MP is also widely accessible through television and online broadcasts, as well as the radio program *Geen dag zonder Bach*, which exclusively features Bach’s music.

The cult following and enduring impact of MP performances have deep historical roots. Its rediscovery in Germany marked a pivotal turning point. On March 11, 1829, Felix

Mendelssohn Bartholdy conducted a rendition of the work, rescuing it from near oblivion (Platen 2009, 214–19; Schmidt 2018, 83–136; Applegate 2014). At the time, contemporary compositions dominated concert repertoires, and the MP had ceased to be part of the Holy Week liturgy as it had been in Bach's era (de Keyzer 2020, 67–77). The 1829 performance was held in a Berlin concert hall rather than a church, with soloists, musicians, and the choir appearing prominently on stage—a stark contrast to the anonymous and largely unseen performers in liturgical settings. The first Dutch concert of the MP, held in Rotterdam forty-one years later, also took place in a secular context. Reports suggest, however, that the audience was asked not to applaud.

In 1899, conductor Willem Mengelberg hosted a performance of the MP on Palm Sunday and the preceding Saturday at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. This performance has since become an annual tradition, playing a decisive role in popularizing the MP in the Netherlands (Wennekes 2010). As noted in the introduction, the annual radio broadcasts of the event, beginning in 1925, further fueled its popularity, as did the inexpensive Saturday-night “people’s performances.” The yearly Amsterdam event also became a model for similar performances in the Netherlands.

The national Netherlands Bach Society (De Nederlandse Bachvereniging) was founded in 1921, alongside local Bach societies. In 1922, this society established the Naarden tradition, discussed earlier, in deliberate contrast to the Amsterdam concert, which was regarded as overly opulent and romanticized. The Naarden performance—held on Good Friday instead of Palm Sunday, as it would have been in Bach's time—featured smaller instrumentation and was intentionally set in a church. Beginning in 1937, the performance was preceded by the ringing of church bells, as if for worship (van der Leeuw 2000, 15). The Netherlands Bach Society was critical of the emotionality of the Concertgebouw renditions, seeking instead to restore the authenticity and liturgical character of the music. A key aspect of this approach was concluding performances with devotional silence rather than applause, a tradition that continues today. The appropriateness of applause after a performance of the MP remains a topic of ongoing debate (van den Hemel 2020, 48–69).

Enthusiasm for Bach continued unabated after the Second World War. In 1959, for example, there were ninety-two performances of the MP in forty-eight Dutch cities during the Holy Week or the Easter season. Today, this number is even higher, often featuring amateur musicians and choirs or a combination of professional and amateur performers. It is estimated that more than a hundred thousand Dutch people participate in a performance each year, with several million attending one of the 180 concerts (Blom and Kok 2016). This popularity is bolstered by widespread media coverage and a nationwide vote to determine the best concert.

Remarkably, all this popularity centers on an oratorio that, at first glance, seems out of place in a largely secularized society like the Netherlands. Religious deinstitutionalization is more prevalent here than in many other so-called Western countries (Pollack and Rosta 2017; de Hart and van Houwelingen 2018), making the MP's prominent cultural role even more surprising. Certain preconditions enabled this development: A secular reception stripped the MP of its explicitly Christian significance (Bosman 2016). In Bach's time, the piece conveyed a Christian message, but today's audience does not regard itself as a

faith community. This shift signals an “irreversible secularization of the *St. Matthew Passion* performances” (van Veldhoven 2010b, 127), a trend mirrored in other popular passion plays. The MP is part of a broader historical trajectory in which passion plays have moved from liturgical settings into the public sphere (Schulze 2012, 78–135; 227–31).

1.2. The Religious Significance of the MP in the Netherlands

This brings us to the question posed in the introduction: Do Dutch audiences attribute a religious significance to the MP? To answer this, we must first differentiate between the performance of the passion play and its music and text, although these elements are inherently interwoven.

The performance practice of the MP has often been interpreted in religious terms. The oratorio appears to foster emotional and ritual connectedness within an otherwise highly segmented and multicultural society. Attendees often report feeling authenticity and depth, consciously drawing on a religious tradition to do so—an expression of what can be termed as “remembered sacrality” (Vernooij 2001, 63).

Even non-Christian believers and secular Dutch audiences regard the MP as a special event. Many biographical accounts describe participation as a transcending experience (de Keyzer 2020, 13–20; Witteman 2010; van den Pol 2010; Jansen 2005, 91–96, 105–14; Blom 2016). However, this effect occurs without assuming the experience has a transcendental origin. Instead, following Alfred Schütz, it reflects a “great transcendence”: a level of reality that goes beyond empirical experience yet remains an inner-worldly event (2020). In this context, individuals can transcend reality without explicit belief in a transcendental cause.

Any metaphysical or Christian interpretation of an MP performance—for example, as part of the liturgy of the Holy Week and Easter or as a means of proclaiming the gospel—is likely to deter most Dutch citizens from attending. Audiences seek an experience that feels special and allows them to transcend time and space, but without espousing religious beliefs, incurring any obligations, affiliating with a denomination, or sharing ideological consensus with other attendees. Instead, they desire a temporary and fluid connection with others, created simply by participating in this concert together (Berghuijs 2017).

In the past, such binding, integrative, and transcending functions were inherent to religion. However, in late modernity, the churches in the Netherlands represent only a minority (Pew Research Center 2018), and these functions are increasingly provided by secular equivalents, including performances like the MP. A functionalist understanding allows us to interpret MP performances as examples of “invisible religion” within an otherwise strongly secularized culture (Luckmann 1967). This concept refers to secular phenomena that fulfill social functions traditionally associated with religion.

Many of these phenomena reflect the individualization of late modern society, making the oratorio’s effect a personal matter. It is left to the individual whether to experience the MP as religious, sacred, authentic, spiritual, uplifting, emotional, or as something that provides orientation in life. Reception is diverse, and organizers cannot control how the play is interpreted. Approaches to the event are correspondingly plural. Moreover, any interpretation becomes just one element in a patchwork identity where spiritual seekers draw from various religious and nonreligious traditions (de Hart and Dekker 2015).

Despite this individualization, MP performances can also be seen as high-density events through which Dutch society reaffirms its cultural heritage (Stengs 2020). This heritage encompasses, among others, Jewish and Christian roots, which audiences can engage with through the oratorio. Such performances reinforce the narrative of Dutch identity that regards these religious traditions as foundational to the nation. This connection is further underscored by the annual attendance of the political elite in Naarden.

A high-density event is defined as “an intense occurrence, of an almost entertainment-like character, followed continuously by many and evoking new practices in a variety of ways and levels” (Stengs 2020, 179). The MP is an expression of a meaningful past that is shaped, among other influences, by religion. People seek to feel reconnected to this past, which is continually renewed through the performances. This connection contributes to the sense of a collective Dutch identity and remains a compelling reason for participating in the event (van den Hemel 2020, 40–43).

The music of the MP plays an essential role in this process. Its impressive musical impact allows listeners to overlook any potential discomfort with the piece’s theological statements. The music is so overwhelming that it renders precise attention to the text superfluous (Schmidt 2018, 29–35, 75–78; van Veldhoven 2010a, 151–54), allowing one to engage with the oratorio without being a Christian. The aesthetic experience thus merges into an unspecific religious one (Jansen 2005).

At the same time, the libretto is not unimportant. The MP includes three types of texts: the biblical passion narrative from Matthew 26 and 27, church hymns of Bach’s time, and poetic texts in the form of chorales, duets, and arias written by Leipzig poet Christian Friedrich Henrici, known as Picander (Platen 2009, 52–72). These texts integrate Martin Luther’s theology of grace—portraying Jesus Christ’s suffering and death as proof of his love for humankind—and, in part, an older passion mysticism, into a largely secular context. In the libretto, the outstretched hands of the Son of God on the cross are interpreted as an embrace and an expression of love. Jesus Christ is depicted as a bridegroom united with his church, and his passion is presented as vicarious suffering for the sins of the world (Eschenbach 2010). In Bach’s time, the MP was about salvation, seeking to make past events significant in the present through impressive music.

Today, the Christian faith is no longer a prerequisite for attending the MP. The fact that the sung or recited text in German is often not fully understood by the audience helps explain why the dissonances between traditional theology and a secular mentality are rarely to the fore. Dutch performances are typically in MP’s original language, which enhances the perceived authenticity of the event. Audiences are sometimes provided with a German-Dutch translation or attend with a music score in hand (van der Leeuw 2000). Nevertheless, the ancient language and theology seldom cause irritation.

For many listeners, the MP is instead about a universal and timeless drama, accessible to both believers and nonbelievers, rooted in shared human experiences such as farewell, love, betrayal, or mourning (Luth 2010). The text of the MP reflects “a recognition of the limits of human existence. It is about the confrontation with finitude, about loneliness, about the limits of one’s freedom and responsibility, and about the fight against futility. In addition to this recognition and acceptance, there is a clear message of consolation. Despite all these

borders, there is hope and perspective, the longing for a meaningful existence, the longing for a greater story that encompasses us” (Körver 2020, 5). A secular reception can thus transform the theological message into an anthropological one.

2. THE MP INTERPRETED IN TERMS OF RESONANCE

These insights provide the foundation for interpreting the Dutch performance practice of the MP as a phenomenon of resonance, drawing on Hartmut Rosa’s social theory. This theory underpins and broadens aspects of the religious or analog-religious functions and significance previously discussed. The MP creates an alternative timeframe in an otherwise “accelerated” society (2.1) and can offer an experience of resonance (2.2).

2.1. The MP as Interruption of an Accelerated Reality

The basis of Rosa’s theory is that all social movements, communications, and processes today are subject to an unprecedented acceleration (Kläden 2014). Late modern capitalist societies can stabilize themselves only dynamically—that is, by relying on unlimited and self-referential growth, innovation, improvement, and change. Resources must be continually expanded, more capital accumulated, and possibilities for action increased (Rosa 2019a, 404–24). It is about “making the world economically and technically *available*, scientifically *perceptible* and *controllable*, and politically and administratively *steerable* under the auspices of growth” (Rosa 2019b, 13). The overarching goal is to constantly expand humanity’s share of the world (Rosa 2019a, 310).

The consequences of this acceleration are evident socially as well as individually—existentially, psychologically, physically, or emotionally (Rosa 2013a, 382–83). Acceleration impairs an individual’s relationship with their self and the world, often leading to alienation that ultimately severs the connection between the subject and reality (Rosa 2010). In such cases, the individual no longer feels supported by or familiar with the world, perceiving it as mute, indifferent, or even hostile.

The acceleration of social life also influences how people actively shape and interact with their environment, affecting how they act, speak, and think. According to the logic of acceleration, people’s actions must always maximize domination, power, and influence and involve an instrumentalist use of goods, opportunities, capital, knowledge, resources, and even relationships (Gärtner 2014).

An alternative goal for society is reciprocal, caring, and creative interaction with reality, in association with others. Rosa refers to this as resonance—a relationship “in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed. Resonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship...[that] implies an aspect of constitutive inaccessibility. Resonant relationships require that both subject and world be sufficiently ‘closed’ or self-consistent so as to each speak in their own voice, while also remaining open enough to be affected or reached by each other” (Rosa 2019a, 174). The acceleration prevalent in society often prevents a synchronous human relationship with the world, as described above, inhibiting congruence between the subject and reality and precluding reciprocal adaptation and adjustment among individuals.

The alienation caused by acceleration is evident in late modern society, particularly in the experience of time. A confusing multiplicity of different, often contrasting, notions of time has emerged, and the “noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous” (Rosa 2013b, 115) is steadily growing. Acceleration diminishes congruence between the individual and social time practices. This is part of a comprehensive “desynchronization of processes, systems, and perspectives” (Rosa 2013b, 17) and, again, impacts all aspects of both personal life and the social world. Amid this pervasive acceleration, it is significant that so many Dutch people deliberately choose to slow down each year by attending a performance of the MP.

The more someone loses their embeddedness in the world (Giddens 1990) by the diminution of shared time with others, the more negligible they feel in the face of an accelerated society and the more insignificant their lives seem to be (Blumenberg 1986, 218–312). A person’s life begins to resemble a fragmented jumble of episodes. Identity becomes situational, fluid, or even self-contradictory (Rosa 2013a, 224–65) and subject to the demands of expanding resources, increasing influence, engaging in strategic action, and being effective.

The pressure to accelerate is also reflected in a change to the dominant timeframe. “It is a sociological common sense that there is a reciprocal relationship between the differentiation and complexity of a society and its time horizons” (Nassehi 2008, 238). Thus, in an accelerated society, processes, communications, and movements can no longer be synchronized with cyclical or linear notions of time, as they could be in the past.

In the Netherlands, Christianity historically provided such a framework for most people. The liturgical structure of the year, reflected in everyday life, represented a cyclical understanding of time within a basic linear orientation (Zerfaß 2013). On the one hand, the Christian message of salvation was commemorated cyclically throughout the year, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as depicted in the MP. On the other hand, this cyclical remembrance was embedded in a linear dynamic, with history moving toward the ultimate salvation of the world at the end of time.

Since the advent of industrialized modernity, this Christian timeframe has been supplemented by more abstract orientations, such as measuring time by the clock or by monetary value. Although people still experience time in cycles today—evident in the passing of generations, the changing of seasons, recurring celebrations, various bodily rhythms aligned with so-called inner clocks, or the alternation between work and leisure—the cyclical understanding of time is no longer dominant, particularly in the context of the social world. Similarly, a linear perspective of the future, once shared and recognized by most Dutch people, is also largely absent. Examples of this former perspective include the progression of technological development or economic growth. The negative side effects of these developments, such as climate change and physical or psychological illnesses, are now criticized as consequences of society’s alienating acceleration.

What are the consequences of this acceleration, on the one hand, and the decline of linear and cyclical time structures, on the other, for our interpretation of the religious aspects of performances of the MP? When we consider these factors in light of social changes, the MP represents, first and foremost, a meaningful anachronism. The play symbolizes an alternative concept of time: the cyclical and linear Christian framework. At the core of this framework

lies the narrated Passion of Christ, which serves as a religious sediment within a late modern society dominated by vastly different rhythms and practices of time. The Christian notion of time is invoked deliberately through the continued performance of the oratorio during the Holy Week, as it was in Bach's era. This notion "proves to be largely resistant to imperatives of innovation, acceleration, or escalation" (Rosa 2019a, 413). A performance of the MP induces an alternative time order, which otherwise occupies a minimal role in contemporary society. It induces a sacred time that offers potential resistance to acceleration.

Secondly, the MP creates a shared event in a society that is otherwise highly fragmented and seemingly on the verge of disintegration, in ways extending beyond the concept of time. As mentioned earlier, many Dutch people consider annual attendance at the MP a way to intentionally slow down. Audience members experience a temporary sense of community, knowing that many others are simultaneously participating, either in other locations or through media and online broadcasts (Gärtner 2021, 30). The segmentation of late modern life is symbolically overcome during performances of the MP, extending beyond the immediate community of fellow audience members in the same concert hall or church. Additionally, the MP is a recurring event that can simulate a cyclical, albeit partial and temporary, unity within contemporary Dutch society.

Thirdly, the performances of the MP (and this applies to other concerts as well) themselves slow down acceleration. Attendees at a concert venue are prepared to sit still for three hours, to listen, and to withdraw from everyday life, for example by turning off their smartphones. The piece disrupts the flow of time, which follows a different pace before and after the concert. The MP provides a restorative break from the accelerated reality of late modern life. Not least because of its age, it serves as a counterprogram to the alienation caused by acceleration.

2.2. The MP as Axis of Resonance

The oratorio interrupts accelerated reality. In doing so, it fosters a world characterized by resonance rather than alienation. If acceleration represents the central crisis of late modern life, resonance offers a potential pathway out of this crisis. Resonance involves cultivating a noninstrumentalist human relationship with the world because, in certain moments, the world reveals itself to be responsive and supportive. Those who allow themselves to be moved by such experiences can contribute to the creation of a better society. The world does not remain mute and cold; rather, an existential experience may emerge, one "of being carried and held by a world that turns out to be familiar, warm, kind and above all: responsive" (Rosa 2013a, 384).

Such experiences can lead to an adaptive transformation in the relationship between human beings and reality, which implies an irreducible aspect of inaccessibility (*Unverfügbarkeit*) and fosters a shift in the relationship between the subject and the world and within the subject itself. However, this transformation cannot be anticipated in advance. Inaccessibility implies that resonance cannot be forced; rather, it requires openness and the absence of resistance. Furthermore, it cannot be accumulated, perpetuated, fully explored, or instrumentally enhanced (Rosa 2019c, 43-70). Life flourishes when individuals experience such moments of inaccessible resonance: moments marked by a sense

of congruence and happiness, unity of body and mind, and harmony with reality. In such instances, being, morality, and action converge, yet the nonidentical is not extinguished. Alienation continues to persist. Thus, any resonant relationship between individuals and the world in accelerated late modernity remains precarious and fleeting.

Harmut Rosa speaks of volatile *resonant experiences* in which the world reveals itself as accessible and responsive for a moment. Such episodes may grow into established and more enduring relationships, known as *axes of resonance*. These axes, in turn, are not spontaneously formed; rather, people cultivate them within culturally and socially shaped *resonant spaces* or *spheres of resonance*. These spaces serve as reservoirs from which individuals draw to interpret their personal experiences of resonance, thereby shaping an individual's relationship with both the self and reality (Rosa 2019a, 164–74). A society, thus, can be either resonance-friendly or resonance-hostile.

In addition to these three dimensions, Rosa distinguishes three forms of resonance. Firstly, *diagonal axes of resonance* express how individuals relate to objects. An example would be fulfilling work, where someone feels self-efficacy, and the material ultimately begins to respond. Secondly, *horizontal axes of resonance* are characterized by significant relationships with the world in association with others, such as within families, friendships, or even politics. Finally, *vertical axes of resonance* encompass modes of relating to reality itself. Resonance then emerges as a totality that transcends the individual and reveals a different mode of relating to the world than that of daily life. It involves transcendent experiences, among which religious and aesthetic ones are particularly consequential for our analysis (Rosa 2019a, 195–304).

It is important to note that the distinctions between these three forms of resonance are heuristic in nature, based on the dominant aspect of resonance in each case. All three aspects may be at play simultaneously in a given situation. An example is religious ritual, which integrates the relationship with objects, the communal aspect, and the transcendental aspect (Rohner and Winter 2017, 104–9). So far as performances of the MP bear ritual traits, this observation is significant for our case study: the oratorio also provides access to multiple forms of resonance.

What further insights does Rosa's theory offer for our interpretation of the MP? Given the significance and functions attributed to this passion play in the Netherlands, its performance can be interpreted as an axis of resonance. The text-immanent listeners are invited to experience an extraordinary event in which reality is not mute but speaks. This type of resonance cannot be simply produced by the performance; it must occur during it. The intention of this "text"—a play of the oratorio—is to touch the audience and render their relationship with the world and with themselves more fluid. The audience is meant to encounter a transcending totality in the sense of a vertical resonance. The meaningful voice of "something else" or "someone higher" becomes audible. Reality no longer remains dismissive or indifferent; instead, it responds and speaks. Bach's music likely exudes a force capable of touching audience members and transforming their experience of being in the world, at least for the duration of the performance. An "adaptive transformation" (Rosa 2019a, 284) occurs when an individual responds existentially to this music; this phenomenon transcends mere sentimentality or entertainment.

The particularity of art, or of an event like the MP as vertical axis of resonance, lies in the ability of aesthetics to thematize all other resonant relationships with both the world and the self, as well as instances of alienation, such as an execution on the cross. Aesthetics not only offer the possibility of resonance but also represents the resonant capacity, or incapacity, of other relationships. Art can thus serve as a critique of alienation through the refusal of resonance and as a field for experimenting with successful notions of resonance (Rosa 2019a, 285–92).

In this manner, an alternative to a frequently mute world becomes apparent. A work of music like the MP can be a medium that elicits particularly strong and immediate resonance because it engages the audience's relationship with the world beyond a merely intellectual level. A mirror effect, which enables the subject to realize their existence in the world, is expressed resonantly (Rosa 2019a, 88–95). The oratorio appeals to all the senses, not just the mind.

Additionally, the “radical decoupling of resonance and emotion is specific to *aesthetic experiences*” (Rosa 2019a, 168–69). This means that audience members attending a performance of the MP can experience resonance, even though the piece depicts a dramatic, sorrowful, and brutal story. Witnessing an actual crucifixion would evoke strong resonance, though solely through negative emotions. An aesthetic axis of resonance puts this experience into perspective. The MP does evoke consternation, yet this can be tempered because the performance is only an artistic representation of a real event. At the same time, the negativity of the Passion of Jesus Christ is not downplayed by the harmony of the music but rather presented in all its harshness. Nevertheless, the possibility of transcending suffering and the cross is at least suggested.

3. RESONANCE AS THE COMMON THIRD BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

In conclusion, the MP can be interpreted reception-aesthetically and text-immanently as a striking example of vertical resonance and as a representation of an alternative to the often alienating reality of late modernity. This quality of being an alternative is especially evident in the Dutch ritualized performance practice, whose religious patterns have been examined in this article. The MP creates a different timeframe amidst the instrumentalist acceleration that pervades all aspects of late modern life.

Moreover, the theory of resonance offers an answer to the question of whether the MP possesses a religious function or meaning in contemporary Dutch society. In late modernity, art and music have partially supplanted religion as the dominant promise of resonance. In Rosa's terminology: “Capacity for aesthetic resonance has taken the place of capacity for religious resonance as a collectively binding social demand” (Rosa 2019a, 280). Accordingly, aesthetics can be regarded as “functionally equivalent to religion without requiring a metaphysical system of belief” (Rosa 2019a, 268). This aligns with the earlier interpretation of the MP as a form of invisible religion.

The oratorio's specific impact lies in its role as an aesthetic axis of resonance, invoking religious semantics through its text and the ritualized practice of its performances. It explicitly references religion as the dominant vector of resonance and implicitly invokes its sacred

order of time. The aesthetic expression derives additional depth from its religious semantics, which reinforces the resonant effect of this passion play. In doing so, the potentially dissonant tension between Christian theology and late modern society is avoided. Listeners can accept the reentry of religious language into a secularized world, provided they can interpret the MP also in nonreligious ways.

Simultaneously, the aesthetic event conveys a vertical resonance analogous to experiences traditionally regarded as religious. The MP has the capacity to establish a relationship with the world, conveyed through explicitly religious events as well as the domains of art and music. The resonance theory ultimately surpasses the distinction between the religious and the secular by appealing to the shared significance and functions that art and religion hold as culturally and socially prestructured spaces of resonance. Resonance is the common third between religion and aesthetics. ■

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