

‘This great world event in our little Netherlands’

Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* in the Netherlands, 1919-1939: Music and National Identity

J.R.S. IJsselstein Mulder

ABSTRACT

With at least 174 performances in 2017, it is fair to say that Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* enjoys unusual popularity in the Netherlands. Many scholars have wondered why, but without looking at the formative years of the Dutch *Passion* tradition: the interwar period between 1919 and 1939, when, as a result of economic distress, fear for moral breakdown and social fragmentation, the Dutch rediscovered an inward sense of nationality.

First of all, this thesis shows that the tradition of yearly *Passion* performances, established by the conductor Willem Mengelberg, became a ritual through which citizens could profess this nationality. Subsequently, it analyses how a diverse group of intellectuals imbued Bach’s masterpiece with sublime properties. Finally, it turns its attention to peripheral regions, where locals took the initiative to organize their own *Passion* performances, enabling large swathes of the population to share and participate in a national musical culture.

This thesis thus moves beyond musical, textual and dramaturgical aspects and integrates Dutch interwar *Passion* performance within its historical, social and cultural context. It regards *Passion* performances as civic rituals fostering emotional identification among both the active and passive participants. This approach aims to do justice to the ideological, religious and socio-economical heterogeneity of Dutch interwar society, as reflected in the vast array of primary sources under scrutiny. By investigating the origins of the Dutch passion for the *Passion*, this thesis seeks to elucidate the relations between music and national identity.

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Sierk IJsselstein Mulder
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Introduction

Every year, when spring is in the air, many Dutch profess their love for a work of music that seems wholly disconnected from the country's history. It is the *St Matthew Passion*, composed by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) for the Good Friday service in the St Thomas Church (Thomaskirche) in Leipzig, on 11 April 1727. In the Lutheran churches of eighteenth-century Germany, music played an important role in activating, engaging and educating the laity. One of the foremost genres was the passion oratorio. 'Passion' here refers to the suffering of Jesus Christ and an oratorio is a tale, usually drawn from the Bible, set to music. So, the *St Matthew Passion* is a work of music that tells the story of Jesus Christ's last days, according to the words of St Matthew the Evangelist. Many composers created passion oratorios, not only St Matthew Passions but also passions according to St John, St Luke or St Mark. The *St Matthew Passion* was performed four times during Bach's lifetime but forgotten afterwards, until in 1829, the composer Felix Mendelssohn rediscovered it. His (abridged) performance was a huge success and the masterpiece re-entered the repertoire. The *Passion* was first performed in the Netherlands in 1870 but only gained momentum when the conductor Willem Mengelberg (1871-1951) started a tradition of yearly performances on Palm Sunday 1899.

This tradition developed rapidly. In March and April 2017, at least 174 performances took place in the Netherlands, among which children's performances, queer performances and 'sing along' performances (see figure 0.1).¹ Attending one of these has become a ritual that takes precedence over work, social life and holidays. Moreover, the *Passion* tops the radio's classical 'hit charts' year after year, and national television networks broadcast re-enacted spectacles or entertainment shows in which pop singers and other celebrities try to master one of the work's many arias. Outside the Netherlands, occasional performances are given not just

¹ 'Waarom stromen de kerken vol bij de Matthäus-Passion?', [<https://npofocus.nl/artikel/7753/waarom-stromen-de-kerken-vol-bij-de-matthaus-passion>] (last accessed on 13 June 2019).

around Easter but throughout the year, and these often feature Bach's much shorter *St. John Passion*.² The Dutch fondness for the *St Matthew Passion* remains unmatched, even in Germany: 'Germans are utterly amazed by this strange Dutch phenomenon', according to theologian Jan Luth.³



Figure 0.1: A 'sing along' Passion concert in Utrecht's Geertekerk on 30 March 2018.

Understandably, both the work and its position in Dutch society have attracted scholarly attention. Sociologists and theologians, most obviously, have published studies of the *Passion*'s religious significance in a supposedly secularizing world. Ad de Keyzer, for example, has written a 'spiritual-liturgical' account of the *St Matthew Passion*.⁴ Currently, the Meertens Institute for Dutch Language and Culture is contributing to the Europe-wide Heriligion Project by investigating the 'Dutch Passion for the Passion'.⁵ Musicologists have conducted additional research, although they largely focus on Bach's creative process, on performance practice through the ages, and on the musical, textual and dramaturgical aspects of the work itself. Emile

² Emile Wennekes, 'Wie zingt nu eigenlijk de paashaas? Nederland en de Matthäus-Passion' in Pieter Dirksen ed., *De geheimen van de Matthäus-Passion: ambacht en mystiek van een meesterwerk* (Amsterdam, 2010), pp. 104-124 at p. 105.

³ 'Dr. Jan R. Luth: 'De Matteüspassie is zó goed, zelfs een middelmatige uitvoering is indrukwekkend', [<https://www.rug.nl/news/2010/03/100309luth>] (last accessed on 13 June 2019): 'Duitsers zijn volledig verbaasd over dit rare Hollandse verschijnsel'.

⁴ Ad de Keyzer, *Bachs grote Passie. Een spiritueel-liturgische benadering van de Matthäus-Passion van Johann Sebastian Bach* (Baarn, 2014).

⁵ 'Heriligion: de vererfgoedisering van religie en de sacralisering van erfgoed', [<https://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/en/cms/nl/259-onderzoek/het-dagelijks-leven/145542-heriligion-de-vererfgoedisering-van-religie-en-de-sacralisering-van-erfgoed-in-hedendaags-europa-hera>] (last accessed on 13 June 2019).

Wennekes, however, has also provided an overview of the *Passion*'s performance history and reception in the Netherlands.⁶ He notes that in the early twentieth century, *Passion* performances spread from the west of the country to other regions.⁷ Jan Luth also acknowledges the local character of this 'Dutch ritual'.⁸ Unfortunately, neither of them delves into underlying historical circumstances which might explain this phenomenon. In that respect, a Master's thesis written by Frans Jansen, a musicologist as well, has made a significant contribution. He carefully describes why and how performance of Bach's music, primarily the *St Matthew Passion*, took root in the Netherlands during the nineteenth century.⁹ The twentieth century, however, falls outside the scope of his research. Finally, historians have supplemented the historiography by looking at specific locations or institutions. A fine example is Henriette Straub's article on the '*Passion* tradition' of the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam's foremost concert hall.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the question as to why the *St Matthew Passion* gained such popularity in the Netherlands has been left unanswered. As important factors, the literature variously points to the efforts of Mengelberg, different attitudes to religion and music, and the interaction between the national and the local. This thesis aims to connect these loose strands by examining each of them in three analytical chapters. The first chapter sets off where Frans Jansen ends, after the First World War, when Mengelberg's performances reached the peak of their fame, generating a multifarious intellectual debate which the second chapter seeks to capture. The

⁶ Wennekes, 'Wie zingt', pp. 104-124; Emile Wennekes, 'Over traditie en vernieuwing, romantische vervalsing en liturgische soberheid. De Nederlandse Bachvereniging versus het Concertgebouworkest,' in C.M. Schmidt ed., *De Matthäus-Passion: 100 jaar passietraditie van het Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest* (Bussum, 1999), pp. 100-110; Emile Wennekes, 'Het belangrijkste blijft de daad' in Mischa Spel and Floris Don eds., *De Matthäus-Passion. Wat Bachs muziek je vertelt, als je weet waar je op moet letten* (Amsterdam, 2016), pp. 23-31.

⁷ Wennekes, 'Het belangrijkste', pp. 28-29.

⁸ Jan R. Luth, 'Naar de Mattheus.' Over de populariteit van een Nederlands ritueel' in J.E.A. Kroesen, Y.B. Kuiper and P.G.T. Nanninga eds., *Religie en cultuur in hedendaags Nederland*, pp. 22-27.

⁹ Frans Jansen, 'Passie in de polder. Het begin van de Nederlandse Bach-traditie in de negentiende eeuw' (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2006).

¹⁰ Henriette Straub, 'Een raadselachtig opus. De Mattheus-traditie van het Concertgebouworkest tot en met 1958' in Schmidt, *De Matthäus-Passion*, pp. 50-66.

third chapter, finally, provides a contrast to these refined opinions by studying the reception of the *St Matthew Passion* at the local level. Although the Netherlands were neutral during the First World War, its aftermath transformed the daily lives of the Dutch. Rapid modernization and internationalization, combined with an economic crisis, political instability and social division, increased fears of moral decline and uncertainties about the Dutch identity. Such circumstances, dealt with more extensively in the chapters, provided a wider context in which the *St Matthew Passion* could evolve into a Dutch tradition.

The year 1939 seems to mark the end of an era. Politically of course, since the German invasion in 1940 had a devastating impact on the Netherlands, including its cultural landscape, but also emotionally: ‘From a ‘book with seven seals’, [the *St Matthew Passion*] has become a book that is open to everyone for whom music is more than a pleasant pastime, a book that gives direction to the lost, from which strength, solace, equanimity may be drawn’, the Dutch composer Willem Landré wrote in 1939.¹¹ Looking back at the time, people were apparently very much aware of the changes that had taken place over the intervening twenty years.

This thesis thus will not be concerned very much with music itself but rather with what cultural historian and theorist Burton W. Peretti calls the ‘discourses and social processes that make actual and metaphorical use of music’.¹² One of the best examples of this approach is Celia Applegate’s *Bach in Berlin: Nation and Culture in Mendelssohn’s Revival of the St. Matthew Passion* (Ithaca, 2005), in which she explains in convincing detail how Mendelssohn’s performances of the *Passion* reanimated Bach as a German national hero. Building on Applegate’s work, I conceive of *Passion* performances as civic rituals that fostered a sense of belonging among both the active and passive participants. Sharon Strocchia has written that

¹¹ Willem Landré, ‘De Matthäus Passion’, *Caecilia en De Muziek*, xcvi/xiii (1939), pp. 1-2 at p. 1: ‘Van ‘een boek met zeven sloten’ is het geworden een boek dat open ligt voor iedereen, wien muziek iets meer is dan aangename tijdspassing, een boek dat verdoodden weer de richting wijst, waaruit kracht, troost, berusting geput kan worden.’

¹² Burton W. Peretti, ‘Music: the composed sound’ in Sarah Barber and Corinna Peniston-Bird eds., *History Beyond the Text: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London and New York, 2013), pp. 89-105 at p. 98.

‘civic rituals mobilized a range of people, objects, urban spaces and notions of time in organized, sometimes scripted performances ... They enacted hierarchies of social and political power, yet at the same time tried to promote civic harmony among disparate social groups’.¹³ In this thesis, then, I explore the relations between music performance and identity against the background of pillarization, the four-fold division in Dutch society between Roman-Catholics, Protestants, socialists and liberals. By doing so, I join the small group of scholars who apply the concept of civic ritual, most popular among historians of the Early Modern period such as Strocchia, to the more recent past. Twentieth-century civic ritual built on previous models but also benefitted from the opportunities provided by mass media, as David Chaney has argued.¹⁴

My thesis has therefore been based on the availability and accessibility of media archives. Thanks to the Royal Dutch Library’s digitization programmes, I have been able to consult a wealth of journals and newspapers, most of which have never been studied before. The abundance of sources — during the interwar years, the number of magazine titles almost doubled — posed the problem of selecting the relevant information.¹⁵ Rather than subjecting a limited number of sources to detailed analysis, I have preferred to collect material from a range of sources that does justice to the heterogeneity of the Dutch interwar society. Consequently, the types of sources under scrutiny are manifold: reviews, in-depth articles, advertisements, announcements, interviews, letters and also fictional stories. Most unfortunate, however, is the absence of any radio broadcasts, which, according to the Dutch Institute for Sound and Vision, were seldom recorded at that time.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith has written that literary evaluations and value judgements involve ‘articulating an estimate of how well that work will serve certain implicitly defined

¹³ ‘Civic ritual’, [<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0037.xml>] (last accessed on 19 June 2019).

¹⁴ David Chaney, ‘A symbolic mirror of ourselves: civic ritual in mass society’, *Media, Culture and Society* v (1983), pp. 119-135.

¹⁵ Extensively discussed in Judith Frisman, ‘*De Vrijdagavond* as a Mirror of Dutch Jewry in the Interbellum, 1924-1932’ in Judith Frisman et al. eds., *Dutch Jewry in a Cultural Maelstrom: 1880-1940*, pp. 85-96 at p. 85.

functions for a specific implicitly defined audience, who are conceived of as experiencing the work under certain implicitly defined conditions'.¹⁶ In other words, sources such as Landré's retrospective say something about the importance of *Passion* performances, about the Dutch themselves, and about the world they were living in. By making these presuppositions explicit, I hope to contribute to our understanding of music performance and identity, and to enrich the historiography of the Dutch interwar years with a new socio-cultural perspective.

¹⁶ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge (MA), 1988), p. 13.

Chapter 1: Performing Dutch identity. Mengelberg, *Toonkunst* and the Paris tour of 1924

Introduction: crisis and identity

The economic crisis of the 1930s lingered on for a long time in the Netherlands: unemployment reached an all-time high in 1936, whilst surrounding countries were achieving economic growth again.¹ The economic troubles highlighted the weakness of the multi-party system, which gave the crisis a political dimension. In 1931, Anton Mussert founded the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging [NSB] (National-Socialist Movement), confronting the establishment over its inability to tackle the ongoing stagflation. In general however, both radical fascist and radical communist groups never managed to enthuse large sections of the population.² The pillarized democracy already provided a sense of belonging that extended beyond the realm of politics; and the people continued to vote dutifully for the politicians who represented their own groups.

As Niek van Sas has remarked, however, ‘in the face of the fascist challenge, an inward-looking sense of nationality was being rediscovered’.³ The scholarly debate on the Dutch ‘national character’ acquired a new impulse, while other publications revived virtues and glories from a ‘common’ past, such as Rembrandt, overseas trade and the House of Orange.⁴ All sought to reinforce the time-honoured Dutch self-image of a liberal, tolerant and moderate people.⁵ The creation of identities takes place on the basis of certain images of the past, after all. For this reason, every identity is intrinsically historical.⁶ But identity is also created in a social space: in interaction and in reaction against others, or as Claude Dubar has expressed it:

¹ Piet de Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten*, 2nd edn (Amsterdam, 2005), p. 184.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 185-188.

³ N.C.F. van Sas, ‘Varieties of Dutchness’ in Annemieke Galema, Barbara Henkes and Henk te Velde eds., *Images of the Nation: Different Meanings of Dutchness 1870-1940* (Amsterdam, 1993), pp. 5-17 at p. 8.

⁴ B. van Heerikhuizen, ‘Sociologen in de jaren dertig en veertig over het Nederlandse volkskarakter’, *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* vi (1980), pp. 643-675; N.C.F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland* (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 524-525.

⁵ Sas, ‘Varieties of Dutchness’, p. 15.

⁶ Maria Grever and Kees Ribbens, *Nationale identiteit en meervoudig verleden* (Amsterdam, 2003), p. 23.

‘Identity is difference and sameness together’.⁷ Although identities leave room for stability and continuity, they are never static. It therefore makes sense to focus not so much on identity itself, as on identification, the dynamic process of making, maintaining and breaking links.⁸ This chapter revolves around one specific type of identification, namely, emotional identification, where symbols and rituals foster feelings of belonging.⁹ Music performances, in their capacity as civic rituals, serve as platforms for creating, maintaining or strengthening emotional identification. Mengelberg’s *St Matthew Passion* performances provide a case in point.

Mengelberg’s *Passion*

Willem Mengelberg, born to Catholic German parents, rapidly made a career as conductor in the Netherlands and in Switzerland. Already in 1895, he was invited to become the principal conductor of the *Concertgebouworkest* (*Concertgebouw Orchestra*). The same year he also took charge of the *Toonkunstkoor Amsterdam* [TKKA] (*Toonkunst Choir Amsterdam*). Between 1921 and 1930 he worked as a guest conductor for the *Philharmonic Society New York* (now the *New York Philharmonic*), among many other shorter engagements. He was known, first and foremost, as a Gustav Mahler expert. His advocacy of the *St Matthew Passion*, however, should not be underestimated. Between 1899 and 1919, he conducted the work 45 times, including the final rehearsals, which were open to the public at a reduced rate.¹⁰ From 1910, less wealthy admirers could also attend the so-called ‘people’s performance’ (‘volksuitvoering’) on the night before the actual performance on Palm Sunday. Needless to say, tickets were invariably sold out well in advance.¹¹

⁷ Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, *Identificatie met Nederland* (Amsterdam, 2007), p. 41; Claude Dubar, *La crise des identités. L'interprétation d'une mutation* (Paris, 2000), p. 3: ‘L’identité, c’est la différence et l’appartenance commune’. NB: All translations from French and Dutch to English are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

⁸ Regeringsbeleid, *Identificatie met Nederland*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁰ Wennekes, ‘Wie zingt’, p. 117.

¹¹ Straub, ‘Een raadselachtig opus’, p. 51.

The 1920s marked the height of Mengelberg's fame. The popular magazine *Het Leven. Geïllustreerd* (*Life. Illustrated*) published surveys showing that he was one of the most famous and admired Dutchmen of his time.¹² Mengelberg spent 20 years refining his interpretation of the *St Matthew Passion* to perfection. Leipzig still counted as the cradle of Bach, but through Mengelberg, Amsterdam became a centre of Bach practice, specifically the *St Matthew Passion*: even the German composer Arnold Schönberg called Mengelberg's *Passion* performances exemplary.¹³

Catholic conductor, composer and music journalist Theo van der Bijl wrote in 1927 that 'many non-Amsterdammers [make the pilgrimage] to the Concertgebouw because this is not an ordinary performance, but because one can face a completely perfect music culture, which is unique in the entire world and represents one of the Dutch glories'.¹⁴ Indeed, the fact that Dutch Railways started to sell combined tickets, comprising a return journey to Amsterdam and a seat in the Concertgebouw, demonstrates the national dimension of these performances.¹⁵ Van der Bijl's colleague Alphons Vranken used the same vocabulary one year later: 'What an invaluable culture for our Dutch people! ... It is not a miracle, eminent and 'spoiled' foreigners declare, that this recurring *Passion* performance is a soul-lifting and great musical 'world event' in our little Netherlands time and again!'.¹⁶

The reporting in the non-Catholic media contains a similar amount of hyperbole. Art's magazine *De Kunst* (*Art*) expressed a 'deep, venerable admiration that turns into ecstasy, for

¹² Frits Zwart, *Willem Mengelberg. Een biografie 1920-1951* (Amsterdam, 2016), p. 203.

¹³ Straub, 'Een raadselachtig opus', p. 57.

¹⁴ Theo van der Bijl, 'Matthäus-Passion', *De Tijd*, 11 April 1927, p. 7: 'vele niet-Amsterdammers [pelgrimeeren] naar het Concertgebouw, omdat het geen gewone uitvoering geldt, maar omdat men hier tegenover een geheel volmaakte muziekcultuur staat, welke eenig is op de geheele wereld en die een der Nederlandsche gloriën uitmaakt'.

¹⁵ Straub, 'Een raadselachtig opus', p. 51.

¹⁶ Alphons Vranken, 'Bach's Matthäus-Passion', *De Tijd*, 2 April 1928, p. 2: 'Wat een onschatbare cultuur voor ons Nederlandsche volk! ... Het is geen wonder, dat ook hoogstaande en 'verwende' buitenlanders verklaren, dat deze telkens weer nieuwe Passion-Uitvoering steeds een ziels-verheffend en grootsch muzikaal 'wereldgebeuren' is in ons kleine Nederland!'

the ideal, for the truly unsurpassable and deeply impressive interpretation'.¹⁷ And the socialist women's magazine *De Proletarische Vrouw* (*The Proletarian Woman*) featured a story in which the narrator introduces the *St Matthew Passion* to a young girl. Together they listen intently to a radio broadcast of Mengelberg's Palm Sunday performance: 'the music led to higher spheres, where it was happy to be ... we live a miserable life, but upon hearing this, one has to believe everything will be alright'.¹⁸

This last source also reveals that Mengelberg's performances reached an audience far beyond the 6000 people who actually attended. From 1925, they were broadcast live on radio, proving so popular that in 1931, socialist radio association VARA and its neutral counterpart AVRO fought over the broadcasting rights, which in turn made headlines in several newspapers.¹⁹ In 1939, there were one million radios in use, along with 410.000 subscriptions to the cable network.²⁰ Assuming that a regular household consisted of four people, Mengelberg's performance reached more than 5,5 million potential listeners, on a population of 8,7 million. Exact listening figures are not available, but the growing number broadcasts related to Bach's masterpiece — fourteen by 1936 — suggest that people did show interest.²¹

Mengelberg became professor of musicology by special appointment at Utrecht University in 1934. By this year, however, he already spent most of his time abroad, although he continued to conduct the *St Matthew Passion* in the Concertgebouw until 1944, even moving the date if his obligations outside of the Netherlands required his presence during Easter time. The only exception was 1934, when Mengelberg fell ill shortly before the performance. He was

¹⁷ N.H. Wolf, 'Matthaeus-Passion. Concertgebouw, Palmzondag 1928.', *De Kunst. Een Algemeen Geïllustreerd en Artistiek Weekblad*, 7 April 1928, p. 326: 'diepe, eerbiedwaardige bewondering die in extase overgaat, over de ideale, over de werkelijk onovertrefbare en diep indrukwekkende vertolking'.

¹⁸ 'Over Bach en de Matthäus-Passion', *De Proletarische Vrouw. Weekblad van de Bond van Soc.-Dem. Vrouwen-Propaganda-clubs in Nederland onder redactie van C. Pothuis Smit [PV]*, 17 March 1937, pp. 2-3: 'De muziek voerde naar hoger sferen, waar 't gelukkig was te zijn ... We hebben 't thuis zo ellendig, maar als je dit hoort, geloof je toch, dat alles goed zal worden'.

¹⁹ 'De Radio-oorlog. Vara en Avro slaags', *De Tijd*, 8 March 1931, p. 12.

²⁰ Jeroen Dera, *Sprekend kritiek. Literatuurprogramma's in de vroege jaren van de Nederlandse radio en televisie* (Hilversum, 2017), p. 138.

²¹ Otto Glastra van Loon, 'Aethervoorspellingen. Aantekeningen bij de M P.', *Het Vaderland*, 14 April 1936.

replaced by German conductor Hermann Abendroth, who admitted that his interpretation ought to ‘conform to the deep-rooted tradition’.²² This shows again that Germans too acknowledged the Dutch tradition’s importance and independence.

All in all, the warm words of a wide range of newspapers across the socio-political spectrum indicate that the reverence for Mengelberg’s performances rose above the divisions in Dutch society. On Palm Sunday, thousands and thousands, foreigners included, gathered in the Concertgebouw or in front of their radio for a collective experience. The *Passion* remained a German work, but the Dutch cherished this performance tradition as something of their own.

Toonkunst’s *Passion*

Notwithstanding his fame, Mengelberg essentially owed his success, both at home and abroad, to the performers with whom he collaborated. The soloists were highly skilled singers and the *Concertgebouworkest* too consisted of professional musicians. The choir however, the *Toonkunstkoor Amsterdam*, was a choral society of 400 advanced amateur singers from the upper and lower middle classes.²³ In 1829, a group of music lovers in Amsterdam founded the *Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Toonkunst [MBT]* (*Society for the Advancement of Music*) to promote Dutch musical culture, educate people about music and to support musicians and composers, or as the founders put it, to ‘bring the blessing of beauty and harmony to the furthest corners of the Netherlands’.²⁴

The word ‘Toonkunst’, a translation of the German ‘Tonkunst’, literally means ‘tone art’, a more poetical and lofty name for music. Unlike the ‘composer’, a term with a more practical connotation, ‘tone artists’ stood on the same semantical level as painters, poets and writers, all being creative individuals. The words have eighteenth-century origins, but choral societies themselves arose only in the nineteenth century, when the arrival of printed music

²² Cited in Straub, ‘Een raadselachtig opus’, p. 56: ‘zich te voegen naar de diepgewortelde traditie’.

²³ Zwart, *Willem Mengelberg*, p. 197.

²⁴ J.D.C. van Dokkum, *Honderd Jaar Muziekleven in Nederland. Een Geschiedenis van de Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Toonkunst bij haar Eeuwfeest 1829-1929* (Amsterdam, 1929), p. 276.

editions and mass-produced pianos coincided with the emergence of theories that viewed music practice as a way of community-building.²⁵ They were manifestations of ‘associative sociability’, the cultivation of contacts between likeminded individuals, fostered by undertaking common activities, in this case singing.²⁶

The *MBV* was a special association, for it operated on a national level. The main board consisted of seven members, drawn from the country’s political and cultural elite: in 1921, Dirk Fock gave up his position as president to become governor of the Dutch East Indies. The main board oversaw all operations in the local chapters, the so-called ‘Toonkunst choirs’. The *TKKA* was by far the largest, the most prestigious, and the most influential. By 1929, the number of chapters had grown to 40, representing a total of 8000 members.²⁷ Its impact on Dutch society was significant. In the 1880s, the *MBV* was heavily involved in the foundation and exploitation of the Concertgebouw and the *Concertgebouworkest*.²⁸ During the interwar years, it expanded its influence: the *MBV* published music editions, organized people’s concerts, set up youth concerts, founded music schools, and advised the Dutch ministry of education, arts and culture on matters such as music pedagogy.²⁹ Apart from that, the *MBV* acted as benefactor by awarding subsidies to fresh initiatives and talented artists.

On the occasion of the *MBV*’s centenary in 1929, the board had a detailed history written, which overflowed with pride and prestige. It hailed new choral societies outside the *MBV*’s infrastructure as ‘daughters of Toonkunst’ and pointed to the *MBV*’s influence on the careers of all distinguished Dutch conductors.³⁰ However, pride is most evident in the paragraphs that highlight the cooperation between the *TKKA* and the *Concertgebouworkest*: ‘a

²⁵ Applegate, *Bach in Berlin*, pp. 150-51.

²⁶ W. van den Berg, ‘Sociabiliteit, genootschappelijkheid en de orale cultus’ in Marijke Spiess ed., *Historische letterkunde. Facetten van vakbeoefening* (Groningen, 1984), pp. 151-170 at p. 154.

²⁷ Dokkum, *Honderd Jaar Muziekleven*, p. 294.

²⁸ Johan Giskes, ‘De weg naar Mengelbergs monumentale creatie van de Matthäus-Passion’ in Schmidt, *De Matthäus-Passion*, pp. 22-40 at p. 28.

²⁹ Samama, *Nederlandse muziek in de 20-ste eeuw. Voorspel tot een nieuwe dag*, 2nd edn (Amsterdam, 2006), pp. 101 and 108.

³⁰ Dokkum, *Honderd Jaar Muziekleven*, p. 273.

monument *par excellence* for this splendid cooperation are the yearly performances ... of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, that started on 8 April 1899 and now for thirty years have enjoyed the undiminished interest of Amsterdam's music community'.³¹ Twenty-seven years later, Paul Cronheim published a revised history, devoting even more words to the Passion tradition: 'Much has since changed in that [Dutch] musical life. But still, on Palm Sunday, when spring pulsates above Holland and tulips blossom, the faithful flock proceeds to the Concertgebouw, as if it were a pilgrimage'.³² Cronheim's words are somewhat ambiguous. He was clearly proud that the *Passion* tradition was continued after Mengelberg's death, but the words 'much has changed' convey a sense of nostalgia to the pre-war days, when the amateur choir had gained international acclaim as the interpreter of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

The word 'amateur' does not apply entirely to the *TKKA* because the first 'professional' symphonic choir in the Netherlands was only founded after the Second World War. What is essential here, is that ordinary people convened twice a week in a social space that existed outside of the pillarized system. The *MBV* dated back to the era before pillarization and membership remained open to all. Therefore, it formed a paragon of historical continuity within Dutch society, that indeed could be simultaneously pillarized and national. The *St Matthew Passion* stimulated this emotional identification. Performing the work became part of the *TKKA*'s DNA, and connected new generations to older ones. Admittedly, the singers themselves were probably more concerned with making music than with questions of identity. But, as Hobsbawm observed, we cannot understand nationality without analysing the hopes, needs, desires and interests of 'ordinary people' who are not necessarily nationalist.³³ The

³¹ *Ibid.*, 284: 'een monument bovenal voor deze prachtige samenwerking zijn de jaarlijksche uitvoeringen in de Paaschweek van Bach's Matthäus-Passion, die 8 April 1899 begonnen en nu reeds sedert dertig jaren de onverzwakte belangstelling der Amsterdamsche muziekgemeente genieten'.

³² Paul Cronheim, *125 jaar Toonkunst* (Amsterdam, 1956), pp. 56-57: 'Veel is er sindsdien in dat muziekleven veranderd. Maar nog steeds trekt op Palmzondag, wanneer de lente boven Holland trilt en de eerste tulpen in bloei staan, de schaar der getrouwen, als een pelgrimage, naar het Concertgebouw'.

³³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1994), p. 10.

complex interplay between the *Passion* and identity becomes even more evident in the TKKA's tour to Paris in 1924.

Paris's *Passion*



Figure 1.1: Poster announcing the performances by Mengelberg, the TKKA and the Concertgebouworkest during their tour to Paris in 1924.

Gustave Bret, founding president of the Parisian *Société Bach*, had invited Mengelberg before, in 1908, to show the city's audiences how Bach's masterpiece was to be performed.³⁴ It is telling he did not invite German conductors or musicians to do so. The concert proved a great success and Mengelberg visited Paris again in 1924, when that city hosted the eighth Summer Olympic Games (figure 1.1). This last tour, then, was of a different order. The organization lay in the hands of a 'French syndicate' ('Frans syndicaat') under the supervision of the Dutch ambassador J. Loudon. The syndicate raised 65.000 of the 80.000 guilders needed to finance the tour, an equivalent of almost 600.000 euros today.³⁵ Sixty-five hotels and pensions had to

³⁴ Guus Hofman-Allema, 'Het Amsterdamse Toonkunskoor en de Matthäus-Passion' in Schmidt, *De Matthäus-Passion*, pp. 66-80 at p. 72.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74. All equivalents have been calculated with the International Institute for Social History's online tool: <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/calculate.php>.

be booked to accommodate all participants. Having arrived in Paris, Mengelberg was received at the Élysée Palace by President Alexandre Millerand and his wife. Judging by the Dutch and French newspaper coverage, the tour was a brilliant feat of cultural diplomacy.

In the Netherlands, at least eight national and four regional newspapers reported extensively on the events in Paris. A few had sent their own reporters along with the musicians, like the liberal *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* [NRC] (*New Rotterdam Courant*), whose correspondent wrote daily reports from 17 until 26 May. As if the tour were some kind of soap series, he included funny anecdotes about the French diet — far too light for the Dutch stomach — and about a French box office employee who suddenly went on strike.³⁶ Over the course of six days, Mengelberg conducted no fewer than five concerts, all in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The *St Matthew Passion* was performed on 19 and on 23 May, in the presence of ‘Tout-Paris’, among whom musicologist Henry Prunières, composers Charles-Marie Widor, Gabriel Fauré, Vincent d’Indy, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and Arthur Honegger, and many politicians, including not only president Millerand but also Louis Barthou and Raymond Poincaré.³⁷

First and foremost, the Dutch reporters sought to provide the readers with enthusiastic and detailed reports of the events. Between the lines, however, through their nationalist vocabulary, they seem to appropriate the performance of the *Passion* as a uniquely Dutch phenomenon. The liberal newspaper *Het Vaderland* (*The Fatherland*), for example, employed a strikingly militaristic vocabulary: the Dutch ‘[moved] into their quarters’, ‘took possession of the great Opera’ and ‘[opened] the battle’, while Mengelberg was called a ‘music Mussolini’ for having established a true autocracy within the ranks of his choir and orchestra.³⁸ The other

³⁶ ‘Mengelberg, Concertgebouw en Toonkunst te Parijs II.’, *NRC*, 20 May 1924, p. 4.; ‘Mengelberg, Concertgebouw en Toonkunst te Parijs V.’, *NRC*, 24 May 1924, p. 2.

³⁷ Zwart, *Willem Mengelberg*, p. 114.

³⁸ ‘Mengelberg naar Parijs’, *Het Vaderland*, 19 May 1924: ‘worden de kwartieren betrokken’, ‘[nam] de groote opera in bezit’, ‘[opende] de strijd’, ‘Muziek-Mussolini’.

newspapers too framed the tour as a campaign to showcase the musical qualities of the Dutch, in contrast to those of the French. After the first performance of the *St Matthew Passion*, the *NRC* wrote:

That is a way of making music that we have missed for a long time, too long a time, and that is incomparable to opera or ballet in terms of its emotional results. We Dutchmen are a people of tough and solid diligence, of honest and sincere earnestness; it may be that the Frenchman's agile mindset and playful elegant refinement will never be understood by us, but if we hold something dear, it goes deep. No music performance in Paris has this dark sonorous tone of a sentiment that has become a deep, self-contained truth ... this entire heterogeneous audience has listened with an excitement and an abandon that point to a complete triumph for our fellow countrymen.³⁹

In other words, it is Bach's *Passion* that exemplifies Dutch accomplishments and French shortcomings. The subsequent reports supported this interpretation, for example by suggesting that there were no renowned choirs in France because of the people's individualistic nature.⁴⁰ They eagerly cited ambassador Loudon's remark that the Parisian audience was amazed at the *TKKA*'s ability to stand up and sit down without making any noise.⁴¹ The campaign apparently succeeded. *NRC* spoke of a 'complete and decisive victory' ('algeheele beslissende eindoverwinning').⁴² 'Bach apostle' Mengelberg had won over the 'non-Calvinist hearts' of the French, normally 'too fickle and frivolous' to hear a Biblical oratorio.⁴³

The newspapers emphasized the Dutch character of this victory on numerous occasions, reaching a climax in the *NRC*'s concluding report:

From now on, in the consciousness of the Parisians, Mengelberg and the ensemble from Amsterdam [stand] on the same height as Diaghilev's ballets and the Viennese opera ... Our little Netherlands, that the general Parisian public nowadays mainly

³⁹ 'Mengelberg II': 'Dat is een wijze van muziek maken die wij lang, te lang gemist hebben en die aan emotioneele resultaten met geen opera of ballet te vergelijken valt. Wij Hollanders zijn een volk van stoere, taaie werkkraft, van eerlijken, oprechten ernst; het kan zijn dat een geesteslenigheid en de spelend elegante verfijning van een Franschman nooit volledig door ons begrepen zullen worden, maar als iets ons ter harte gaat, dan schiet het ook diep. Geen muziekuivoering te Parijs heeft dezen donkeren sonoren grondtoon van een levensgevoel dat tot een diepe in zichzelf besloten waarheid geworden is ... dit gansche heterogene publiek heeft in een spanning en overgave geluisterd, die een volledigen triomph voor onze landgenooten beduiden.'

⁴⁰ 'Mengelberg, Concertgebouw en Toonkunst te Parijs VI.', *NRC*, 26 May 1924, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ 'Mengelberg naar Parijs': 'Bach-apostel', 'niet-Calvinistische harten', 'te wuft en te wispelturig'.

relates to paintings, the House of Hohenzollern, to tulips or currency depreciation, from now on will be regarded forever as a country of music and as the chosen country for earnest, ideal dedication and beautiful, noble artistry.⁴⁴

Here, national pride and false modesty collaborate to delineate an identity at the expense of the French. The journey abroad meant that the social space had changed: an unfamiliar, audience in an unfamiliar venue, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, in a foreign country that was considered culturally superior in many aspects. This confrontation with the ‘other’ therefore must have heightened the national awareness of the performers.

In fact, the newspapers leave a strong impression that the tour provided an occasion for Mengelberg and the *TKKA* not only to display their artistry in general but also to assert their ownership of the *Passion* tradition. The performances of Beethoven’s first and ninth symphonies on 21 May, for example, were presented simply as a cultural achievement. In their reporting, the journalists emphasized the love for culture shared by Dutch and French alike.⁴⁵ The coverage of the passion concerts was of a different order. By advantageously weighing the Dutch *Passion* tradition against the supposedly rudimentary choral culture in France, the media constructed the image of a ‘Dutch victory’. This victory worked in two ways. In the first place, the reports celebrated having surpassed the French in choral music practice, the *St Matthew Passion* in particular. Meanwhile, however, they treated the performance of Bach’s masterpiece as a Dutch export product which lifted the Dutch to the same level of cultivation as the French. In other words, the *St Matthew Passion* served both to subvert and imitate French cultural superiority.

It appears that the comprehensive coverage was justified: the two *Passion* performances attracted so much attention that the organization decided to put on an additional performance

⁴⁴ ‘Mengelberg VI’: ‘Van nu af [staat] Mengelberg en het ensemble van Amsterdam in het bewustzijn der Parijzenaars op gelijke hoogte als de balletten van Diaghilew en de Weenske opera ... ons kleine Nederland, dat bij het groote Parijsche publiek de laatste jaren vooral in verband met schilderijen, en het huis der Hohenzollern, met tulpen of valutadepreciatie genoemd is, van nu af voor goed beschouwd zal worden als het land der muziek en als het uitverkoren land voor ernstige, ideëele toewijding en schoonen, nobelen kunstzin.’

⁴⁵ ‘Mengelberg V’.

on 24 May. Moreover, the French newspapers shared in the Dutch enthusiasm, albeit without the nationalist overtones. The arrival, reception, and concerts of the Dutch were discussed at great length in at least eight newspapers.⁴⁶ *Le Gaulois*, for example, wrote admiringly about Mengelberg's and the *TKKA*'s 'perfect sense of music' ('sens musical parfait') that had 'electrified' ('électrisé') the audience.⁴⁷

Conclusion: the *St Matthew Passion* and Dutch national identity

Mengelberg's *Passion* tradition was a new tradition. When, however, after the First World War, Dutch companies spread their wings abroad and cinema brought the outside world home, a more inward-turned nationalism kept the pillars together, giving Mengelberg's performances the potential to become professions of national unity. That this actually happened was thanks to the efforts of journalists, writers, composers, musicians and also mere admirers who articulated their opinions in the print media or over the radio.

The experience in Paris accelerated this process since it presented an opportunity to demarcate and shape the Dutch identity in contrast to the French. Unlike the *Concertgebouworkest* musicians, the singers of the *TKKA* were not professionals who made a living out of their art. First and foremost, they were the proud representatives of the Netherlands and of its musical culture. For the Dutch, experiencing Mengelberg's *Passion* through either seeing, hearing or performing constituted a form of emotional identification with their fellow countrymen. As a result of this elevated status, the *St Matthew Passion* gained enormous popularity as an autonomous work of music, sparking intense debates, which will be examined in the following chapter.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Louis Schneider, 'Les Concerts. Les chœurs et l'orchestre d'Amsterdam. Seances diverses', *Le Gaulois*, 27 May 1924, p. 4.

Chapter 2: Intellectual reception and intellectual action

Introduction: pillarization

After the First World War, the Dutch government came to realize that the country had to be able to stand on its own and that a solid administrative apparatus was indispensable in the fight against inflation.¹ Moreover, the threat of a revolution made politicians aware that they needed popular support and therefore accelerated the processes of democratization. Already in 1917, the confessional and socialist parties traded their respective crown jewels: state funding for religious schools and male suffrage, which became universal two years later. These political rearrangements heralded a new phase of pillarization.

The Roman-Catholics, Protestants, socialists and liberals constituted the four main pillars. Of course, they accommodated internal differences. The Roman-Catholic Church had traditionally been flexible as regards to expressions of faith, but the Protestant Churches were a true myriad of branches, characterized by varying degrees of orthodoxy and liberty. The traditional 'state church', the Dutch Reformed Church, had lost members to the unaffiliated category but also to several dissenting groups, of which the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands were the most substantial (figure 2.1). Within the socialist pillar, a spectrum existed from revolutionary communists to bourgeois social-democrats. Liberals experienced the greatest internal division, the term itself being hardly more than a socio-economic indicator for the middle classes and above. A liberal could be libertarian or conservative, noble or a self-made man. The Jewish upper and middle classes, finally, belonged to the liberal pillar too, whilst Jewish workers joined the socialist pillar.²

¹ Maarten Prak en Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Nederland en het poldermodel. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland, 1000-2000* (Amsterdam, 2013), p. 242.

² Bas Kromhout, 'Verzuiling is geen recept dat je altijd en overal kunt toepassen', *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, (September 2003), [<https://www.historischnieuwsblad.nl/nl/artikel/6222/verzuiling-is-geen-recept-dat-je-overal-en-altijd-kunt-toepassen.html>] (last accessed on 2 June 2019).

Figure 2.1: Religious denominations in the Netherlands in 1919 and 1939 as percentages of the total population.

	1919	1939
Protestant (Dutch Reformed Church)	41	33
Protestant (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands)	9	9
Roman-Catholic	36	37
Unaffiliated	8	16
Other	6	5

Historian Michael Wintle defines pillarization as the Dutch variant of consociationalism, a system whereby ‘political stability is achieved in situations where groups of roughly equal status are pitted against each other ideologically, by means of proportional influence being allocated to all groups, according to a well-defined set of rules, rather than dominance for one group in a majoritarian, first-past-the-post system.’³ Pillarization, then, refers to ‘the organizations and institutions of all sorts which proliferated around vertical or ideological groups from the later nineteenth century onwards: in politics, education, religion, welfare, leisure and many other spheres’.⁴ In 1940, conductor M.A. Brandts Buys wrote in the periodical *Neerlands Muziekleven (Dutch Music Life)*:

Sectarianism penetrating the choral societies too? We now encounter not only Roman Catholic, Protestant or Reformed societies but also choirs made up of teachers, factory workers, societies with political or propagandistic goals; there are choirs of the misunderstood, the disgruntled ... In a municipality of 20.000 souls, I counted in 1925 five neutral, five Christian choirs (of which two ‘on a Reformed basis’), four male choirs (of which two Roman Catholic and one Protestant)!!⁵

While his outcry bemoans the inward-looking worlds which resulted from pillarization, it also makes clear that the four largest groups acknowledged each other’s existence and relative

³ Michael Wintle, ‘Pillarisation, consociation and vertical pluralism in the Netherlands revisited: A European view’, *West European Politics*, xxiii/3 (2000), pp. 139-152 at p. 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵ Cited in Samama, *Nederlandse muziek*, pp. 95-96: ‘Het doordringende sectarisme ook bij de koorzangverenigingen? Wij kennen nu niet alleen: R.K., Protestantse, Gereformeerde zangverenigingen, maar ook koren van: onderwijzers, post- en fabriekspersoneel, verenigingen met een politiek of propagandistisch doel; men kent koren van miskenden, ontevreden ... In een gemeente met ongeveer 20.000 zielen telde ik in 1925 vijf neutrale, vijf Christelijke koren (waarvan een ‘op gereformeerde grondslag’), vier mannenkoren (waarbij twee R.K. en een Chr.)!!’.

equality.⁶ This pillarized social structure helps to understand the response to the *St Matthew Passion*, as it developed across the interwar years.

Christian voices: a cautious embrace

The Lutheran Passion Oratorio was alien to Dutch brands of Protestantism. The orthodox Calvinists, mostly associated with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, therefore approached the new tradition with caution. This is well illustrated by the advice column in the *Reformed Youth Magazine*, where, between questions on dancing – allowed under no circumstances – and on the Zwinglian conception of the Communion, a certain ‘A.J.’ from ‘V.’ asked whether he could listen to the *St Matthew Passion* or not.⁷ In summary, the answer was ‘yes you can, unless you conscientiously object’. Orthodox Christians generally appreciated music because of its prominent place in the Scripture and its edifying qualities: ‘Reformed youth *has* to sing’.⁸ Also, all seemed to agree that Bach was a god-fearing man who had only intended his *Passion* to glorify His name. It was not the music, then, that posed problems to orthodox Christians, but the performance. Although they conceded that God had gifted a few men and women with voices worthy of singing a work as holy as *Passion*, they struggled with the uncertainty about the performers’ intentions and they considered the practice of performing the *Passion* in a concert hall to be misplaced and outrageous.⁹

The majority of Protestants, however, embraced the *Passion* as a profoundly Christian work, even if they were conscious of its foreign origins. An article in *Voices of Time. Monthly for Christianity and Culture* provides a fierce example of this mentality. ‘Then a liturgical solemnity; now a concert, attended also by them who perhaps spend Good Friday in a different

⁶ Sas, *De metamorfose*, p. 561.

⁷ ‘Vragenbus’, *Gereformeerd jongelingsblad. Orgaan van den Nederlandschen Bond van Jongelingsverenigingen op Gereformeerde Grondslag* [GJ], 27 April 1928, pp. 557-558 at p. 558.

⁸ ‘Muziek en Zang.’, *GJ*, 29 October 1920, pp. 7-8 at p. 7: ‘een Gereformeerd jongeling moet zingen’.

⁹ V.d. B. ‘In en om het studentengilde.’, *Fraternitas: groot-gereformeerd studentenblad*, 15 May 1924, pp. 94-95; H.S.S.K. [Henriëtte Kuyper], ‘Kunst en Christendom II’, *Bouwen en bewaren. Orgaan van den Bond van Meisjesverenigingen op Gereformeerde Grondslag in Nederland* [BB], 17 July 1922, pp. 74-75; H.S.S.K., ‘Nog eens: Kunst en Christendom’, *BB*, 1 February 1923, pp. 233-235.

state than everyday life, who shed a tear on this day ... but who in reality are insensitive to the suffering of our Guarantor and Mediator.’¹⁰ During the 1920s and 1930s, Protestant intellectuals embarked on an endeavour to bridge the gap between the eighteenth century and their own time and uncover the *Passion*’s religious meaning. The clergyman, professor and culture minister Gerardus van der Leeuw wrote that ‘from the outside, the *St Matthew Passion* is unsuitable and unacceptable for the liturgy, but from the inside it is a miracle of God and breathes the liturgy’s spirit.’¹¹ Many of them went beyond periodicals and wrote entire books to convince the Dutch that the *Passion* was a work of theology with particular relevance for the present day.¹² J.H. Gunning, professor in pedagogy, said that ‘Bach embodies style, timeless values. There is a need for that in a time that has lost its grip on the larger picture. And therefore he is a man of our time *par excellence*’.¹³

This neutral phrasing would neatly fit into the Catholic reception of the *St Matthew Passion*. Catholics, unburdened by questions of liturgy, celebrated the work as a pinnacle of religious and artistic expression.¹⁴ The Catholic journalist and conductor Theo van der Bijl reflected that, ‘although we should keep [the *St Matthew Passion*] out of our churches, [it] hits us Catholics right in our hearts; this score seizes us and provokes intense meditation’.¹⁵ Catholics justified their adoration by interpreting the *Passion* as the brainchild of a genius

¹⁰ H. Burger, ‘Bachs Matthäus Passion en haar uitvoerings-problemen.’, *Stemmen des Tijds. Maandblad voor Christendom en Cultuur*, May 1931, pp. 405-419 at p. 410: ‘Vroeger een liturgische, een kerkelijke plechtigheid; thans een concert, bezocht ook door hen, die misschien weliswaar op Goeden Vrijdag in andere stemming plegen door te brengen dan in het leven van allen dag, die op dezen dag een traan wegpinken ... doch die in werkelijkheid ongevoelig zijn voor het lijden van onzen Borg en Middelaar’.

¹¹ G. van der Leeuw, ‘Bach’s Hoogmis’, *Het Kouter. Onafhankelijk tijdschrift voor religie en cultuur*, January 1937, pp. 258-271 at p. 270: ‘uiterlijk is MP voor de liturgie ongeschikt en onaanvaardbaar, maar innerlijk is het een godswonder, ademt het de geest van de liturgie’.

¹² G. van der Leeuw, *Bach’s Mattheuspassion* (Amsterdam, 1937), p. 7; O. de Moor, *De Matthäus-passion van Bach* (Baarn, 1938), p. 7.

¹³ Cited in Burger, ‘Bachs Matthäus Passion’, p. 419: ‘Bach belichaamt stijl, tijdloze waarden. Daar is behoefte aan in een tijd die de grip op de ‘groote lijnen’ kwijt is. ‘En daarom is hij bij uitnemendheid een man van onzen tijd’.

¹⁴ Theo van der Bijl, ‘Matthäus-Passion.’ and ‘Matthäus-Passion. – Toonkunst. Muzikale plechtigheid.’, *De Tijd*, 23 March 1926 and 25 March 1929, p. 9.

¹⁵ ‘Bach’s H-Moll Messe. Uitgevoerd onder A. v. d. Horst.’, *De Tijd*, 4 June 1935: ‘al moeten wij [de Matthäus-Passion) buiten onze kerken houden, [zij] treft ons katholieken midden in het hart; deze partituur grijpt ons aan en stemt ons tot intensieve meditatie’.

whose music was rooted in the mother church's liturgy and whose mind had not yet been tainted by 'blurry Protestant pretences' [wazigen protestantschen geloofs-schijn].¹⁶ Their reviews excelled in visual, sensuous descriptions: attending the Passion became an act of penitence, and the work itself a medieval Cathedral, simple in design, overwhelming in detail.¹⁷ Catholic voices, too, transcended the realm of newspapers and periodicals: in 1934, the liberal culture minister H.P. Marchant, who had lobbied for Mengelberg's professorship, converted to Catholicism. After his forced and immediate resignation, he wrote a book to explain his motivations.¹⁸ Interestingly, one chapter is devoted to the *Passion* and dedicated to Mengelberg. Marchant saw Bach's work as an expression of ultimate beauty and thereby as a revelation of God's grace.¹⁹ Whether Bach had been a Protestant or not did not matter to him. This indifference really distinguishes the Catholic voices from those of the Protestants. Nevertheless, they did agree on the *Passion*'s spiritual value, sometimes even joining forces to perform the work.²⁰

Socialist and liberal voices: edifying people, elevating society

Socialist leaders praised music for bringing people together. During the interwar period, the number of workers' choral societies rose to an impressive 160.²¹ Despite an aversion towards anything religious, the *Passion* entered their repertoire too. Feature articles in socialist newspapers and magazines usually highlighted Bach's lowly social position and credited Picander for being a 'people's poet' ('volksdichter').²² Even the revolutionary *Tribune* decided

¹⁶ Theo van der Bijl, 'Matthäus-Passion.', *De Tijd*, 29 March 1920. Theo van der Bijl, 'Matthäus-Passion', *De Tijd*, 16 January 1922; 'De uitvoering op Goeden Vrijdag in de Oude Kerk', *De Tijd*, 20 April 1935.

¹⁷ [J.P.W. Kuin], 'Matthäus Passion.' and 'Excelsior. Matthäus Passion.', *De Maasbode*, 28 March 1923 and 16 April 1924.

¹⁸ Zwart, Willem Mengelberg, 286.

¹⁹ H.P. Marchant, *Hoe kwam ik ertoe?* ('s-Hertogenbosch, 1936), pp. 117-120.

²⁰ [J.P.W. Kuin], 'Bach concert.', *De Maasbode*, 28 July 1922; Theo van der Bijl, 'Matthäus-Passion', *De Tijd*, 23 March 1937.

²¹ Samama, *Nederlandse muziek*, 24.

²² 'Doelezaal: die Mattheüs Passion, J.S. Bach.', *Voorwaarts: sociaal-democratisch dagblad*, 15 April 1922; 'Johann Sebastian Bach. Als religieus kunstenaar schiep hij het hoogste. Een bescheiden genie.', *Het Volksdagblad: dagblad voor Nederland*, 7 April 1938; H.L. [Hendrik Lindt], 'Mattheuspasion door de K.O.V.', *Zaans volksblad: Sociaal-Democratisch Dagblad*, 21 March 1939.

to give its readers some background information, so that they would enjoy the radio broadcasts more.²³ In the conclusion, the author expressed his hope that one day a genius would set the communist struggle to music in a similar fashion. More moderate socialists went one step further and referred to Bach's masterpiece in attempts to assert their degree of civilization. When a book reviewer called saleswomen uncivilized, *De Proletarische Vrouw* responded by reprinting a story about a bookseller who befriended her new colleague after finding out she also loved the *Passion*.²⁴ And when a Protestant clergyman dismissed sportsmen as heathens, *De revue der sporten* (*The sports' review*) pointed to billiards player Jan Dommering's habit of singing chorales from the *St Matthew Passion* before the start of a match: '... is it alright now? From now on, we will proceed to the stadium singing psalms!'²⁵ This extensive coverage had effect: numerous workers' associations offered their members discounted tickets for *Passion* performances and lectures. Tickets for regular performances were often far too expensive. In an essay titled 'If you've got money...', a radical socialist fulminated against the rising ticket prices: 'the proletariat may feed itself on the crumbs that fall from the tables of the rich'.²⁶ Advertisements indicate however, that thanks to the unions, at least office clerks, flower bulb farmers, housewives, and metalworkers had the opportunity to attend a performance.²⁷

The *St Matthew Passion* never could have become an indicator of civilization without the efforts of a small but influential liberal elite. Most vocal were the music critics, people such as *enfant terrible* Matthijs Vermeulen, or Sem Dresden, principal of Amsterdam's first

²³ 'Een Meesterwerk der Muziek. De Mattheus Passie van Joh. Seb. Bach.', *De Tribune. Revolutionair volksblad. Orgaan der communistische partij in Nederland*, 23 March 1929.

²⁴ 'Over het warenhuis. En óf wij gelijk hadden.', *PV*, 6 July 1938, p. 5.

²⁵ J. Hoven, 'Sportieve overdenkingen', *De revue der sporten*, 11 May 1925, pp. 594-595 at p. 594: '... is 't nu goed? We zullen voortaan psalmen zingend naar het stadion trekken!'

²⁶ 'Als je geld hebt...', *De arbeider: socialistisch weekblad voor de provincie Groningen*, 28 March 1925: 'het proletariaat mag zich voeden met de geestelijke kruimkens, die van de tafels der rijken vallen'.

²⁷ 'Nijmegen.', *Mercurius. Orgaan van den Nationalen Bond van Handels- en Kantoorbedienden Mercurius*, 24 February 1928, p. 64; 'Maandag 13 April', *Weekblad voor bloembollencultuur. Orgaan van de Algemeene Vereeniging voor Bloembollencultuur te Haarlem*, 7 April 1925, p. 443; 'Uit de afdelingen', *Maandblad van de Nederlandsche Vereeniging van Huisvrouwen*, November 1924, p. 246; W.H.S., 'Groningen', *De Metaalbewerker. Weekblad van de Algemene Nederlandse Metaalbewerkerbond*, 27 October 1934, p. 3; 'Volksconcert', *Het Volk*, 21 March 1931.

conservatoire. Notwithstanding their specific and sometimes very personal thoughts on the *Passion* and how it should be performed, they all sought to acquaint the Dutch population with this masterpiece and deepen their knowledge about it, with the purpose of enhancing taste and lifting society to a higher level.²⁸ According to critic H.F. Kernkamp, the *Passion* unlocked a palette of emotional responses which could help the listener cope with the haste and uncertainty of the time.²⁹ Attending a performance every year became an ‘inner need’ [innerlijke behoefte].³⁰ Like their Protestant compatriots, the liberal men of letters encouraged their readers to look for meaning in the *Passion* themselves: ‘the true confessor [can] *never do enough*’.³¹ This advice was taken very seriously: in 1926, the composer Willem Pijper reported that one third of the audience had brought a vocal score to read along, a practice that continues to this day in the Netherlands.³²

As more and more people gained familiarity with the *Passion*, a civilized Dutchman was expected to know not just the work but also the debates surrounding it. A reviewer in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* (*Common Trade Paper*) made a great fuss over a singer’s ‘long grace notes’ (‘lange voorstellen’) in ‘no. 12’, explaining neither reference, while a colleague in the *NRC* deemed it ‘backward’ (‘achterlijk’) never to have heard Mengelberg’s performance.³³ Less pretentious authors cheerfully mocked this pedantry. Pioneering sports manager Pim Mulier, for example, wrote a short story about a snobbish young woman and her father who settle down in front of the radio to hear the *Passion* but end up enjoying a wild football match broadcast on another channel.³⁴

²⁸ Matthijs Vermeulen, ‘Die Matthäus-Passion’, *De Telegraaf*, 30 March 1920; Sam Dresden, ‘Nagekomen Recensies. Matthäus Passion. Ned. Bach-Vereeniging’, *De Telegraaf*, 19 April 1924.

²⁹ H.F. Kernkamp, ‘De Matthäus-Passion in de Naarderkerk.’, *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 6 April 1925.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ A. de Wal, *De Matthäus-Passion van Joh. Seb. Bach* (’s-Gravenhage, 1927), p. 8: ‘de ware belijder [kan] *nooit genoeg doen*’.

³² Willem Pijper, ‘Toonkunst - Matthäus-Passion’, *Het Utrechtsch Dagblad*, 23 January 1918.

³³ L., ‘Matthäus-Passion. Uitvoering door de Ned. Bachver. In de Groote Kerk te Naarden, o.l.v. Anthon van der Horst’, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 27 March 1937; ‘Matthäus-Passion’, *NRC*, 16 January 1922.

³⁴ Pim Pernel [Pim Mulier], ‘Palmzondag’, *Het Vaderland. Staat- en Letterkundig Nieuwsblad*, 5 April 1931.

The Nederlandsche Bachvereniging: a Protestant elite at work

The 1924 tour marked the peak of Mengelberg's and the *TKKA's* *Passion* tradition. Now that it was becoming a part of Dutch musical culture, however, dissenting voices became louder and resistance more concrete.³⁵ In 1921, Johan Schoonderbeek (1874-1927), conductor of the *Toonkunst* choir in the twin towns of Naarden-Bussum, located around 25 kilometres southeast of Amsterdam, 'rebelled' against Mengelberg by founding the *Nederlandsche Bachvereniging* [*NBV*] (*Dutch Bach Society*). Along with a group of like-minded friends and colleagues, he strove to develop a more objective way of performing Bach's music, away from nineteenth-century massiveness, and back to the days of Bach.³⁶ The *NBV's* *Passion* performances therefore took and still take place in a church, the Great Church (Grote Kerk) in Naarden.



Figure 2.2: Johan Schoonderbeek's funeral displayed his wealth in life.

The *NBV* was an elite platform from the very beginning. Schoonderbeek's affluent background enabled him to secure the support of many upper-class families, among whom the

³⁵ Zwart, *Willem Mengelberg*, p. 196; Giskes, 'De weg naar Mengelbergs', p. 34.

³⁶ Wennekes, 'Wie zingt nu eigenlijk de paashaas?', pp. 118-119.

Royal House: Queen Wilhelmina donated 100 guilders (736 euros) (figure 2.2).³⁷ Clergyman and culture minister J.Th. de Visser became the first honorary chairman. Already in 1923, the *NBV*'s board of governors received a letter from the workers' choral society *Stem des Volks* (*Voice of the People*) in the neighbouring town of Bussum, requesting free entry to the *NBV*'s final rehearsal.³⁸ But, after some deliberation, the governors decided that a worker who earns money should pay: 'within workers' circles there is sufficient money available to attend football matches and film screenings, so why not for a performance like this?'³⁹

Nevertheless, Schoonderbeek's goal to create a 'Bach community' was quickly achieved.⁴⁰ Each year, more people flocked to the quiet fortress town of Naarden, prompting comparisons with places such as Mecca.⁴¹ In 1908, German musicologist Alfred Heuß deplored the increasingly inartistic and routinized *Passion* performances in his home country.⁴² The *St Matthew Passion* was in need of its proper 'Bayreuth', a reference to Richard Wagner's legacy. Only 18 years later, German composer and conductor Siegfried Ochs said he had found it in the Netherlands: not the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam but the Great Church in Naarden.⁴³ The *NBV*'s governors indeed pursued lofty ideals: Professors Gunning and Van der Leeuw, who served as honorary chairman and president respectively, reflected in 1946 that the *NBV* had had a beneficial influence on the country by providing 'edification and deepening of inner spiritual and religious life', rather than 'entertainment, recreation or artistic enjoyment'.⁴⁴ The *NBV* was a bulwark of Protestant spirituality, with the *St Matthew Passion* at its centre.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13; see also the list of honorary members in 'Eere-comité', in *Bachfeest 1921-September-1946* (Amsterdam, 1946), p. 7.

³⁸ Maurits Schmidt, *Het Geheim van Naarden* (Utrecht, 1988), p. 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16: 'Onder de arbeiderskringen is voldoende geld beschikbaar voor het bijwonen van voetbalmatches en bioscoopvoorstellingen, doch waarom dan niet voor een uitvoering als hierbedoeld?'

⁴⁰ H.F. Kernkamp, 'De Matthäus-Passion', *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 15 April 1922.

⁴¹ Forambus [E.W. de Jong], 'Forensen-lief en -leed. XVIII.', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 14 April 1925; 'Nederlandsche Bachvereniging. Matthäus Passion. Groote Kerk te Naarden.', *NRC*, 30 March 1929; Herman Rutters, 'Een historisch overzicht', in *Bachfeest*, pp. 14-24 at p. 16.

⁴² Applegate, *Bach in Berlin*, 262.

⁴³ Wennekes, 'Over traditie en vernieuwing', p. 104.

⁴⁴ G. van der Leeuw, 'Bachvereniging en Bach.', in *Bachfeest*, p. 10; J.H. Gunning, 'S.D.G.', in *Bachfeest*, pp. 11-13 at p. 11: 'opbouw en verdieping van innerlijk geestelijk en godsdienstig leven ... vermaak, tijdverdrijf of kunstgenot'.

Born out of Schoonderbeek's dissatisfaction with Mengelberg's Romantic, or even 'Catholic' interpretation, under successive conductors the *NBV* continued to define its performance ideas in contrast to those of Mengelberg. The sons of Anthon van der Horst, who led the *NBV* from 1931 until his death, later said that '[Mengelberg's interpretation] impressed the people and made the *St Matthew Passion* famous, but we thought it was ridiculous'.⁴⁵ The Catholic newspapers were the only media to criticize the *NBV*'s Protestant aesthetic. *De Maasbode* (*The Meuse Messenger*) asked for beauty, not a 'historical demonstration' ('historische demonstratie'), and *De Tijd* (*The Time*) maliciously remarked that the choir was far too small to fill the vast church.⁴⁶ This confessional polemic gathered momentum, as publications in each camp weighed the *Passion*'s 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' contents against each other.⁴⁷

The reality, however, nuances this dichotomy. The *NBV* employed Mengelberg's soloists, a large part of his orchestra and choir, made the same abridgements and edified the same audience of metropolitans, the majority of whom appreciated both of the conductors' efforts.⁴⁸ And, although a deep religiosity infused Mengelberg's *Passion* tradition — its visual counterpart may be the triptych offered to Mengelberg on the occasion of the *Passion* tradition's twenty-fifth anniversary (figure 2.3) — Mengelberg himself was first and foremost an artist, working in the Concertgebouw, a secular institution. Ultimately, it was his collaboration during the German Occupation of 1940-1945 that knocked him off his pedestal, while the *NBV*'s prestige kept increasing. From the 1950s, the Dutch Cabinet would attend the Good Friday performance in Naarden, a tradition that has continued till this day.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Schmidt, *Het Geheim*, p. 20: '[Mengelbergs interpretatie] maakte indruk op het volk, en daarmee werd de Matthäus Passion bekend, maar verder vonden wij het belachelijk.'

⁴⁶ 'De Matthaëuspassie', *De Maasbode*, 30 March 1929; Theo van der Bijl, 'Matthäus-Passion te Naarden', *De Tijd*, 3 April 1926.

⁴⁷ M.A. Brandts Buys, *Problemen bij Matthäus-Passion uitvoeringen* (Arnhem, 1929), critically reviewed by P.A. van Westrheene, 'Problemen bij Matthäus uitvoeringen' and 'Problemen bij Matthäus Passion uitvoeringen (Slot.)', *De Vereenigde Tijdschriften Caecilia, Maandblad voor Muziek, en Het Muziekcollege. Algemeen onafhankelijk Toonkunstblad voor Groot-Nederland*, lxxxvi (1929), pp. 222-232 and pp. 255-258.

⁴⁸ Wennekes, 'Over traditie en vernieuwing', p. 103.

⁴⁹ Wennekes, 'Wie zingt nu', p. 107.



Figure 2.3: 'MDCCCIC To Willem Mengelberg from all who for 25 years cooperated under his supervision on the yearly performances of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* - Amsterdam MCMXXII'.⁵⁰ Triptych depicting the Lamentation of Christ and two scenes from the *St Matthew Passion*, by W.A. van Konijnenburg.

Marginal voices, economy and politics: an omnipresent *Passion*

So far, this chapter has looked at the major groups in Dutch society, which provokes the question as to how smaller groups viewed the *St Matthew Passion*, or, more importantly, whether they cared at all. Indifference and aloofness are very well imaginable. Such an attitude certainly did not exist among the Mennonites, a small yet very liberal branch of Protestantism. According to their weekly *De Zondagsbode* (*The Sunday Messenger*), 'ingesting' ('laten indrinken') the *Passion* could bring the believer closer to Christ's message of salvation.⁵¹

⁵⁰ 'Aan Willem Mengelberg van allen die gedurende 25 jaar onder zyne leiding medewerkten aan de jaarlyksche uitvoeringen van Bach's Matthäus-Passion.'

⁵¹ 'De waarde voor ons hart van het kruis.', *Doopsgezind weekblad*, xxxiv, 20 March 1921, p. 155.

Outside the realm of religion, freemasons appreciated the *Passion* as a work of art and demonstration of morality: ‘one listens and is edified, captivated’.⁵² Sometimes they even integrated fragments into their funerary rituals.⁵³

The Jewish reception of the *Passion* was strikingly diverse. There were literati such as the aforementioned journalist Sem Dresden or Nathan Wolf, an art critic who regularly published ebullient reviews of Mengelberg’s performances in *De Kunst* (*Art*), the weekly he had founded in 1909.⁵⁴ Specifically Jewish magazines also discussed the *Passion*: in an article about the links between the Reformation and synagogue music, Sim Gokkes constantly referred to chorales from Bach’s masterpiece.⁵⁵ It also featured multiple times in the *Weekblad van den Algemeenen Nederlandschen Diamantbewerkerbond* [*WAND*] (*Weekly of the General Dutch Diamond Worker’s Union*), where it was described as the culmination of Bach’s vitality and religiosity, and as an immortal work of art: Jewish intellectuals educated their followers as well.⁵⁶ Workers’ oratorio societies welcomed Jewish members with open arms, not only because of their social-economic position but also because they were usually excellent singers.⁵⁷ Mengelberg biographer Frits Zwart, finally, mentions the fascinating dissenting opinion of a certain S.S. Polak, who wrote to Mengelberg that he was most unhappy to be forced to relive the historic crime of the Jewish people each year and suggested performing Arnold Schönberg’s *Gurre-Lieder* instead.⁵⁸

The establishment of the *Third Reich*, and its aggressive policy towards the Netherlands,

⁵² ‘Boekbespreking’, *Maçonniek tijdschrift*, xviii (1927), pp. 79-82 at p. 81: ‘men luistert en wordt gesticht, gegrepen’.

⁵³ H., ‘In memoriam Br. Jacobus Colijn.’, *Maçonniek tijdschrift*, xxvi (June 1936), pp. 475-476 at p. 476; ‘Rouw-Grootloge’, *Indisch Maçonniek Tijdschrift*, xliii (1937), pp. 159-167 at p. 159.

⁵⁴ N.H. Wolf, ‘Matthaeus-Passion’, *De Kunst*, 23 April 1927, p. 372.

⁵⁵ Sim Gokkes, ‘De houding van de eerste reform ten opzichte van de synagogale muziek’, *De vrijdagavond; joodsch weekblad*, 27 February 1931, pp. 341-342.

⁵⁶ Meyer de Haas, ‘Inleiding tot de muziek-uitvoering ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling, door M.W. ingericht.’, *WAND*, 27 September 1929; Abraham van Zweeden, [letter to the editor], *WAND*, 16 January 1931; H.v.d.M., ‘Sociale aangelegenheden. Ontwikkelingswerk onder Amsterdamsche arbeiders.’, *WAND*, 9 October 1931.

⁵⁷ Sandra Kooke, ‘De Stem des Volks zwijgt’, *Trouw*, 22 November 2002.

⁵⁸ Zwart, Willem Mengelberg, 198.

did not harm the *Passion*'s status. On the contrary, Jewish and Protestant magazines portrayed the work as a victim after the German authorities had aligned the text with Nazi ideology.⁵⁹ In 1939, a *Telegraaf* reviewer observed that the troubled times had only increased the need for *Passion* performances.⁶⁰ When in the same year a group of German Jewish child refugees was handed over to the care of educational reformer Kees Boeke, the improbable assembly of anarchists, Jews and high-ranking local officials was concluded by singing the chorale *Befiehl du deine Wege* from the *St Matthew Passion*.⁶¹ Some nine months later, musicologist Louis Couturier published his pamphlet 'In Nederland Nederlandsch!' ('In the Netherlands Dutch!') in an important liberal newspaper, the *Arnhemsche Courant* (*Arnhem Current*).⁶² He demanded positive discrimination for Dutch composers and musicians, as the economic crisis had forced impresarios to focus on profitable concerts, often involving well-known music and foreign performers.⁶³ The *Passion*, however, belonged to a different category, according to Couturier, for the 'greatest of all musical creations' dispelled any notion of nationality.⁶⁴ These events and opinions reveal that the Dutch, despite all their differences, shared in an admiration that transcended the ritual performances in Amsterdam and Naarden. The *Passion* had become a social glue in its own right.

Conclusion: beyond the pillars

In the first chapter, I argued that during the interwar years, Mengelberg's *Passion* performances became professions of national unity. In this chapter, I have shown that intellectuals from different religions and classes found meaning in the work, which they sought to translate to

⁵⁹ 'De Joden en het Duitsche muziekleven in 1937', *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*, 14 January 1938, p. 1; W., 'Duitschland. Ook Bach in den ban?', *De Heraut voor de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, 30 May 1937, p. 3.

⁶⁰ 'Matthäus Passion Kon. Oratorium-Vereeniging; dir. Anthon v. d. Horst. Amsterdam.', *De Telegraaf*, 20 March 1939.

⁶¹ 'Onderwijs aan Duits-Joodse vluchtelingetjes begonnen. In de werkgemeenschap van Kees Boeke.', *Zaans Volksblad*, 7 February 1939.

⁶² Louis Couturier, 'In Nederland Nederlandsch!', *Arnhemsche Courant*, 21 October 1939.

⁶³ Samama, *Nederlandse muziek*, 93.

⁶⁴ Couturier, 'In Nederland': 'meest grootsche aller muzikale scheppingen'.

their pillarized audiences. Since the *Passion* was a religious work of music, they voiced their interpretations in spiritual terms, communists just as well as Catholics. All of them believed that the *Passion* contained a profound truth, provided spiritual nourishment to cope with the hardships of modern life, and even offered a glimpse of a higher plane of existence. At the same time, the *Passion* became the subject of contention. Protestant men of letters appropriated Bach's masterpiece as their own heritage. As part of the *NBV*, they believed the people would benefit spiritually only by returning to the 'original', liturgical, Protestant *Passion*. This entailed discarding Mengelberg's Romantic interpretations: fierce polemics ensued. In other words, a two-fold discourse arose around the *Passion*, in which it symbolized harmony and national unity but also generated tension and divergent attitudes. The *Passion* now existed as a much more widespread phenomenon, independent of Mengelberg's and Naarden's performance traditions. It is this wider context which I will now address by turning my attention to the provinces, where locals mobilized all their resources to turn lofty ideals into reality.

Chapter 3: *Passion* fever. A small musical geography

Introduction: a *St Matthew Passion* community

The long-standing cultural differences within the Netherlands diminished during the interwar years: remorseless urbanization went hand in hand with the modernization of rural areas.¹ Paradoxically, the contrasts that remained, either between cities, or between cities and the countryside, were experienced more strongly. An increasing number of people escaped the city's hustle and bustle to spend a few days on the countryside, which was hailed as 'pure, real and eternal': the Dutch touring club *ANWB* grew to become one of the largest associations in the country.² At the same time, economic powerhouses in the East and South challenged Holland's traditional dominance within the country. The ambivalent relation between core and periphery also had a strong cultural dimension, as represented by *St Matthew Passion*.

Already in 1925, a music journalist wrote that the number of *Passion* performances was increasing: 'every large self-respecting choral society presents [the *St Matthew Passion*] in the weeks before Easter and everywhere the audience's interest is growing too'.³ Just two months later, the colonial *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (*Batavian Newspaper*), published in the Dutch East Indies, pointed its readers to the *Passion*'s omnipresence in the mother country:

'One reads about *St Matthew Passion* performances in Enschede, Leeuwarden, Middelburg, Haarlem etc. ... [It is] a 'happening' when one gets to enjoy this masterpiece outside the large music centres as well ... And it is a happy phenomenon, that even in the provinces, aside from cinema aspirations, one appears to value [...] a famous masterpiece.'⁴

¹ Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten*, p. 171.

² *Ibid.*

³ 'Het praatje van de maand', *Caecilia en Het Muziekcollege*, 16 March 1925, pp. 157-159 at p. 159: 'iedere grote zangvereniging die zichzelf respecteert komt tegenwoordig zoo in de weken voor Paschen met [de Matthäus-Passion] voor den dag en overall stijgt ook de belangstelling van de zijde van het publiek'.

⁴ H.S.K., 'Kunstleven in Holland', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 14 May 1925: 'Men leest van Matthäus Passion-uitvoeringen te Enschedé, Leeuwarden, Middelburg, Haarlem etc. ... [Het is] een 'gebeurtenis' als men ook buiten de groote muziekcentra dit meesterwerk te genieten krijgt ... En het is een gelukkig verschijnsel, dat men zelfs in de provincie, naast bioscoopaspiraties, toch ook heel wat voor [...] een bekend meesterwerk blijkt over te hebben.'

The author G. Keller, however, dismissed the *Passion*'s growing popularity as herd behaviour, in an article ominously titled 'Bachvereering en Bachwaardeering' ('Bach worship and Bach appreciation').⁵ Without further intellectual progress, Bach's art remained an acquired taste in his opinion, some sort of 'caviar' ('kaviaar') only truly appreciated by the upper classes.⁶ Keller's critique fell on deaf ears. On the eve of the Second World War, Willem Landré reiterated that 'sheer ostentation' ('pure aanstellerij') could not be the reason why every year 'around 50.000' ('zo een vijftig duizend') people would physically attend a performance of three hours.⁷ On the contrary, he continued, the practice of repeated performances in every nook and corner of the country had created a '*St Matthew Passion* community' ('Matthäus Passion-gemeente') of sincere admirers.⁸ In order to delineate the scope and nature of this community, the following paragraphs will move beyond the *Passion*'s heartlands of Amsterdam and Naarden and the realm of scholarly opinions.

The spread of the *Passion*

The map on the following page highlights the cities and towns in the Netherlands where, from 1870 until 1939, the *St Matthew Passion* was performed at least once, the year indicating the first performance (figure 3.1). First of all, the map makes clear that the earliest *Passion* performances took place in large cities of economic or administrative importance. In Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, a number of societies operated on a scale that enabled them to organize *Passion* performances, leading to fierce competition for audiences, particularly over the period of Easter.⁹ Competitive pricing was one of the strategies deployed: a ticket for Mengelberg cost 6,30 guilders in 1931 (52,61 euros), while the *Royal Oratorio*

⁵ G. Keller, 'Bachvereering en Bachwaardeering', *Vragen van den dag. Maandschrift voor Nederland en Koloniën*, January 1925, pp. 257-264.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁷ Willem Landré, 'De Matthäus Passion', *Caecilia en De Muziek*, xcvi(xiii) (1939), pp. 49-50 at p. 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁹ Jan-Govert Goverts, 'Matthäus-Passion. Toonkunst 's-Gravenhage, Gebouw voor K en W.', *Het Vaderland*, 11 March 1937, p. 3.

Society, performing in the Concertgebouw as well that year, only asked 1 guilder (8,77 euros).¹⁰ Advertisements in local newspapers, then, targeted specific audiences. The *Toonkunst* choir in Rotterdam, for example, would promote its *Passion* performance in neighbouring towns such as Vlaardingien.¹¹ Tellingly, by 1928 the *Royal Christian Oratorio Society 'Excelsior'*, also based in Amsterdam, had accumulated sufficient capital to organize a *Passion* tour to Paris, playing on the *TKKA*'s success, although it met with limited press coverage and significantly less French involvement.¹²

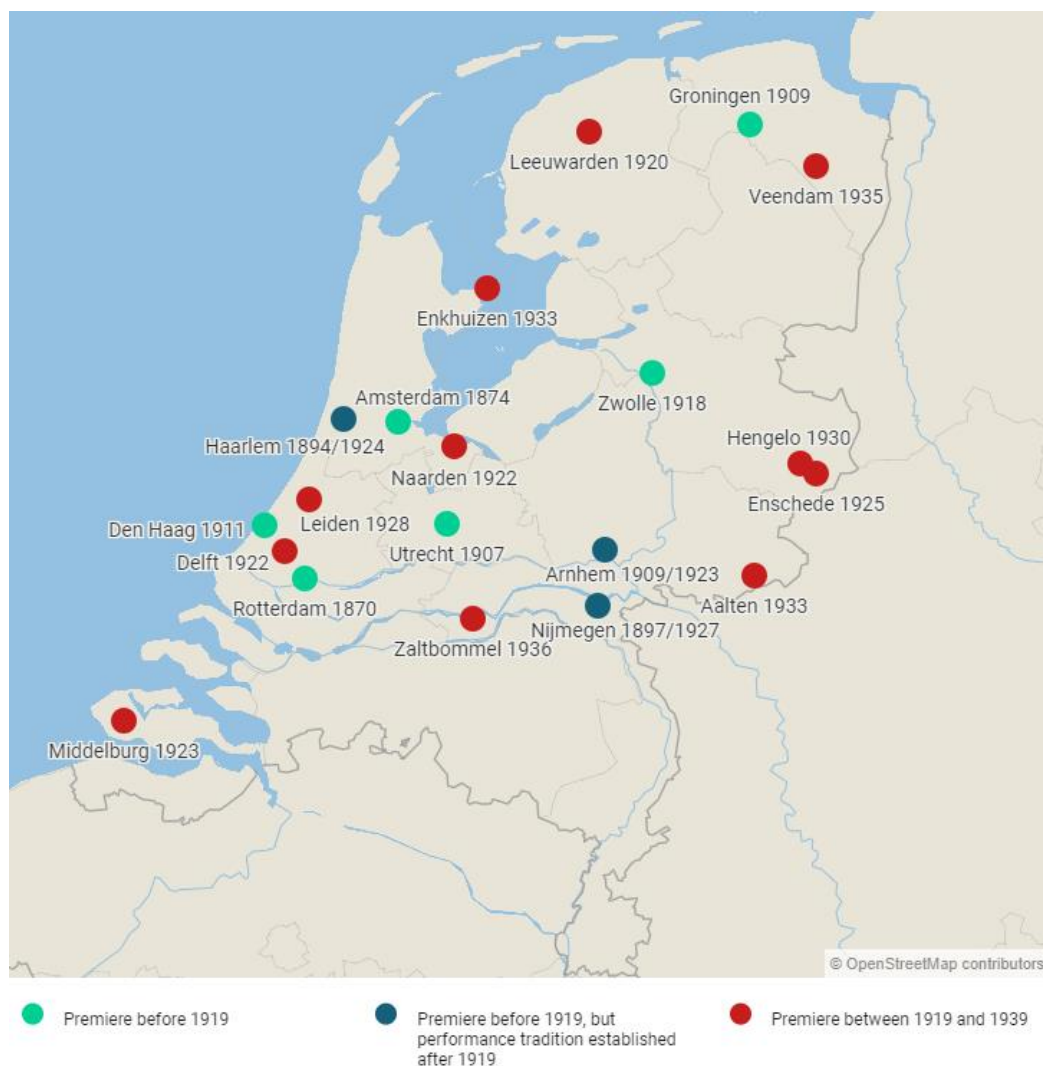


Figure 3.1: St Matthew Passion premieres in Dutch cities until 1939.

¹⁰ 'Matthäus-Passion', *De Telegraaf*, 29 March 1931, p. 15; 'Kon. Oratorium Verg. Matthäus-Passion', *De Telegraaf*, 13 February 1931, p. 16.

¹¹ 'Toonkunstitvoering te Rotterdam', *Nieuwe Vlaardingsche Courant*, 11 March 1927.

¹² 'Excelsior te Parijs. De Matthäus Passion.', *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 16 April 1928.

Secondly, the map shows that the interwar years witnessed a great upsurge in premieres, which extended to a number of small towns as well. Furthermore, a few cities that had hosted occasional performances before the First World War now established a tradition of performances. In Arnhem, for example, the imposing conductor M.A. Brandts Buys and his local *Toonkunst* choir developed a unique *Passion* aesthetic, which made them the pride of the province.¹³ A very lengthy discussion in the *Leeuwarder Courant* (*Leeuwarden's Current*), on the occasion of the first *Passion* performance in Frisia's capital, not only praised the local choral society's courage to take on such a challenging work of music but also expressed the hope that local performances would bring this 'intellectual property of the entire world' ('geestelijk bezit van de geheele wereld') to culturally underprivileged parts of society.¹⁴ That the author's hope was not in vain becomes apparent from an arousing anecdote related by star soprano Jo Vincent in her memoirs:

Yes, I have once experienced, in a church that was, that a little farmer secretly lit a cigar. (It was not in Naarden, no little farmers over there!) I saw it, looked at him sternly and shook my head in disapproval. He immediately put the thing away, extinguished. After fifteen minutes he looked at me; his right cheek showed a swelling, apparently from a chew of tobacco: benevolently he pointed me to the protuberance, with something pleading in his eyes: could he? I now nodded approvingly: yes he could, although it was not nice...¹⁵

Vincent's words are imbued with the urban elitism typical of the audiences in Amsterdam and Naarden. Clearly, local performances were more inclusive: even 'little farmers' attended, probably exhorted by the local clergy. Unlike the intellectual establishment featured in the previous chapter, these religious men were close to their people. The devout reflections they

¹³ Hansje Heinen, 'Historisch overzicht' and Margreet van Rooijen, 'De Matthäus-Passion' in Wim Schampers ed., *100 jaar Toonkunst Arnhem. Een bloemlezing uitgegeven ter gelegenheid van het honderdjarig bestaan van 'Toonkunst Arnhem' op 13 april 1996* (Arnhem 1996), pp. 12-46 and 46-70.

¹⁴ Z., 'Concordia. Matthäus-Passion', *Leeuwarder Courant*, 1 April 1920.

¹⁵ C.G.J. Bos, *Zingend door het leven. Mémoires van Jo Vincent* (Amsterdam 1955), p. 63: 'Ja, ik heb het eens meegemaakt, in een kerk nog wel, dat een boertje heimelijk een sigaar aanstak. (Het was niet in Naarden, daar komen geen boertjes!) Ik zag het, keek hem ernstig aan en schudde afkeurend het hoofd. Hij stopte onmiddellijk het ding, gedooft, weg. Na een kwartier keek hij mij aan; zijn rechterwang vertoonde een zwelling, blijkbaar afkomstig van een tabakspriem: goedmoedig wees hij mij op de uitpiling, met iets smekends in zijn ogen: zou dit mogen? Ik knikte nu goedkeurend: ja dat mocht, al was het niet fijn...'

wrote in local newspapers, prior to the performance, resemble sermons.¹⁶ It is therefore all the more likely that they also praised the *Passion* during their Sunday services. The performance itself, then, was seen as a special kind of service in these communities.

Particularly interesting is the case of Enkhuizen, a small fishing town (around 9.000 inhabitants in 1930) in North-Holland.¹⁷ In 1933, the local choral society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by organizing a performance of the *St Matthew Passion*, which attracted nationwide attention.¹⁸ The locals contracted famous soloists, invited an orchestra from Utrecht, and set up extra bus services from surrounding towns and villages.¹⁹ The performance, however, not only brought 2000 men and women together in a physical sense but also spiritually: a Lutheran clergyman opened the evening and a Reformed clergyman said a closing prayer.²⁰

Local enthusiasm for the *Passion* was not limited to performances. Musicians, musicologists and music critics supplemented their income by giving lectures in all parts of the country. One of the names that repeatedly features in contemporary accounts is that of Abraham Alt, an organist from the Frisian town of Bolsward. He delivered lectures in cities such as Enschede but also in small towns, such as Vorden and Leens (around 4.000 inhabitants), where he was invited by the local association of housewives.²¹ Another symptom of the *Passion* fever were the temporary committees created to support local *Passion* performances. In Middelburg, for example, a city in the southwestern province of Zeeland, yearly performances had started in 1923, thanks to the efforts of conductor J.H. Caro, but after the fifth, in March 1927, the local choral society faced a deficit of 500 guilders (almost 4.000 euros).²² Only a few months later,

¹⁶ Bisschop Boele, 'Matthäus Passion. (Ingezonden.)', *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 1 April 1919; P. Lugtigheid, 'Matthäus-Passion.', *De Noord-Ooster*, 2 April 1935.

¹⁷ All population figures are taken from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, *Bevolking der gemeenten van Nederland op 31 December 1930, volgens de definitieve uitkomsten der elfde algemeene volkstelling* ('s-Gravenhage, 1932).

¹⁸ 'Matthäus Passion te Enkhuizen.', *De Telegraaf*, 24 April 1933, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; 'Onverkorte uitvoering van Bach's 'Matthäus Passion'', *Westfriesch Dagblad*, 15 April 1933.

²⁰ Jac. Scholten, 'Uitvoering 'Matthäus Passion'', *Westfriesch Dagblad*, 21 April 1933.

²¹ 'Leens.', *Maandblad van de Nederlandsche Vereeniging van Huisvrouwen*, November 1924, p. 246.

²² 'Voor een Bachvereeniging in Zeeland', *Middelburgsche Courant*, 29 June 1927.

fifteen locals, both men and women, formed an association in order to raise money for performances of the *St Matthew Passion* in Middelburg.²³ Within a month, another hundred joined the ranks. Even though the association's success turned out to be short-lived — a deficit of 269 guilders (2121 euros) persisted in 1928, after which the *Passion* disappeared from Middelburg's stage — its very existence demonstrates that the love for the *Passion* inspired individual initiative, also on a local level.²⁴

Rather different was the Bach committee from Enschede, an industrial town in the eastern region of Twente. Its four members were not concerned with organizing or sponsoring local *Passion* performances but sought to fan *Passion* sentiments by bringing western musicians to the east. In 1925, the *NBV* accepted the invitation to give two *Passion* performances in Enschede's Great Church (Grote Kerk). These were eagerly anticipated: '27 and 28 March for many of us will belong to the most beautiful and best days of their lives, days of such a self-forgetting ecstasy that only the highest art can bestow upon humankind.'²⁵ And indeed, after the two sold-out concerts, the committee thanked the *NBV*'s musicians and governors for the unforgettable experience.²⁶ The president, Professor Gunning, replied: 'In Twente with its industry so many other than spiritual values apply, and therefore we are so genuinely happy that one realizes here, too, that one cannot live by bread alone', paraphrasing Matthew 4:4.²⁷ This image of the *NBV* as the provider of spiritual welfare to a needy, culturally immature periphery pervaded press coverage, even in the colonies.²⁸ In doing so, the national media

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ 'De Bachvereniging', *Middelburgsche Courant*, 23 October 1928.

²⁵ E., 'De Matthäus-Passion', *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant*, 12 March 1925: 'Den 27 en 28 maart a.s. zullen voor velen onzer tot de mooiste en beste dagen van hun leven behooren, dagen van zulk een zelfvergeten vervoering als alleen de hoogste kunst den mensch brengen kan.'

²⁶ W.F., 'De Matthäus-Passion. Uitgevoerd door de Nederlandsche Bach-Vereeniging, in de Groote Kerk te Enschede, op 27 en 28 Maart 1925.', *Twentsch Dagblad Tubantia en Enschedesche Courant*, 30 March 1925.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 'In Twente toch met zijn industrie gelden zooveel andere dan geestelijke waarden en daarom zijn wij zoo van harte blij dat men ook hier beseft, dat men bij brood alleen niet leven kan.'

²⁸ H.R. [Herman Rutters], 'De Mattheus Passion te Enschede.', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 31 March 1925, p. 9; 'Kunstleven in Holland'.

completely ignored Twente's flourishing choral culture, including the first *Passion* performance by locals, in 1930.²⁹

All in all, the sources paint a diverse picture of the *St Matthew Passion* community. Local notables, clergy and ordinary music lovers cherished Bach's masterpiece as much as the country's elites. The distinct religious character of the performances attracted an audience that would normally never go to a concert. This does not mean, however, that participation in the *Passion* was spread equally across all areas of the Kingdom — a point to which I shall return after a soloist intermezzo.

Soloists: connecting the dots

Skilled musicians were in high demand. Enkhuisen contracted an orchestra from Utrecht, whereas Enschede invited the entire *NBV*. The vocal soloists, however, lived a truly peripatetic lifestyle, performing the work all year round from Amsterdam and Naarden to Groningen and Middelburg. If the *St Matthew Passion* was a social glue of inclusion, these soloists applied it. Entire Dutch generations grew up hearing and reading about the same singers. Mengelberg indeed represented the Palm Sunday *Passion* tradition; but, because the soloists performed everywhere, they came to personify the *Passion* itself. In 1924, an *NRC* reviewer wrote that Mengelberg was assisted by the 'well-known faithful who provide the desired continuity'; fourteen years later, Theo van der Bijl called them the 'faithful paladins' ('trouwe paladijnen').³⁰ Baritone Willem Ravelli once made such an impact, that a Mennonite from Leeuwarden dedicated a sonnet to him:

Was that still singing? No, it was confessing ... The voice of one of God's blessed ...
We thank you for what you have given us ... Your singing lifted our yearning heart to
Him: moved by your gift we knelt for a while, in front of Christ's cross in Jerusalem.³¹

²⁹ Frans Oude Sogtoen, 'De Matthäus Passion. De ontwikkeling van een traditie in Twente 1930-1995' (Bachelor's thesis, Open Universiteit, 2003), p. 72.

³⁰ 'Matthaeus Passion.', *NRC*, 16 May 1924, p. 1: 'bekende getrouwen die de gewenste continuïteit verlenen'; Theo van der Bijl, 'Matthäus-Passion. Hoogtij der muziek.', *De Tijd*, 12 April 1938.

³¹ L. Bonga, 'Na de Mattheus-Passion.', *De Zondagsbode*, 28 March 1937, p. 1: 'Was dat nog zingen? Neen, het was belijden ... De stem van één van Gods gebenedijden ... Wij danken u voor wat g' ons hebt gegeven ... Uw

Ravelli's predecessor Thom Denijs perhaps enjoyed even more popularity. According to *De Hollandsche Revue (The Holland Review)* every Dutchman, regardless of age, profession or background, knew this world-famous singer for his *Passion* performances.³² Even after his death he brought people together: during a high-profile memorial service in 1936, secular, Christian and socialist singers united to sing chorales from the *St Matthew Passion*.³³ The service was led by Louis van Tulder, nicknamed the 'Dutch Evangelist', who in an interview from 1950 claimed to have sung the *Passion* 500 times.³⁴ Van Tulder had studied with soprano Aaltje Noordewier-Reddingius, the most illustrious of all *Passion* singers. Between 1890 and 1929, she sang the *Passion* 163 times, twenty-five of which were with Mengelberg, including the performance in Paris.³⁵ She also took on the soprano part in the *NBV*'s first performance in 1922. She was revered in smaller towns as much as in the large cities.³⁶ On the occasion of her sixtieth birthday, the *Algemeen Handelsblad* honoured her with a full-page portrait with photos and stories (figure 3.2).³⁷ The accolades not only concerned Noordewier's exceptional vocal talents but also the fact that, unlike many colleagues, she had always stayed in the Netherlands, although she could have had a brilliant career abroad. 'Our Aal' ('Onze Aal'), as she was called affectionately. Unsurprisingly, a birthday sonnet published in *De Kunst* was titled 'Matthaeus-Passion' ('St Matthew Passion').³⁸

zingen hief ons hunk'rend hart tot Hem: Bewogen door uw gave knielden w' even, Voor 't kruis van Christus in Jeruzalem.'

³² 'Karakterschets Thomas Denijs.', *De Hollandsche Revue. Maandblad voor christendom en cultuur*, January 1926, pp. 141-150 at p. 144.

³³ 'Thom Denijs herdacht.', *De Tijd*, 27 May 1936.

³⁴ Jos. Vranken, 'Bach's Matthäus Passion', *De Telegraaf*, 3 March 1932, p. 9; Louis van Tulder interview, 1950, [<https://soundcloud.com/louisvantulder/interview-opgenomen-met-louis>] (last accessed on 24 June 2019).

³⁵ Johan Krediet, 'Vocale solisten bij uitvoeringen van de M.P. o.l.v. Willem Mengelberg', *Mengelberg en zijn tijd*, March 1999, pp. 11-19 at p. 11.

³⁶ Bisschop Boele, 'Matthäus Passion.'

³⁷ Tine Lepoutre et al., 'Mevr. Noordewier-Reddingius 60 jaar.', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 31 August 1928, p. 9.

³⁸ N.H. Wolf, 'Verzen van Ernst Krauss', *De Kunst*, September 1928, p. 518.

MEVR. NOORDEWIER-REDDINGIUS 60 JAAR.

Morgen vierd zij ook haar overrijp jubileum als zelfstandig handteekster.

ERKENNTLIJKHEID EN HULDE!

WITTE herinnering zijt gij ons niet vergeten van den Gouden Jubielen-Dienst, die u op den 21sten Augustus 1928, te Amsterdam, in de zaal van de Vereeniging van de Vrouwen van de Noordewier-Reddingius, heeft plaats gevonden. Het was een feest van groote belangzamen. Het was een feest van groote belangzamen. Het was een feest van groote belangzamen.

Wij hebben u niet vergeten van den Gouden Jubielen-Dienst, die u op den 21sten Augustus 1928, te Amsterdam, in de zaal van de Vereeniging van de Vrouwen van de Noordewier-Reddingius, heeft plaats gevonden. Het was een feest van groote belangzamen.



Mevrouw A. Noordewier-Reddingius.

WOORDEN VAN DANK.

Voor mij blijft de herinnering aan het Noorderwiel als een licht dat ik heb mogen genieten.

VORMAERT met de hoop op de toekomst, met de hoop op de toekomst, met de hoop op de toekomst. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

een schijnbaar makkelijker bestaan. Wat het Noorderwiel, wat het Noorderwiel, wat het Noorderwiel. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.



Aaltje Noordewier-Reddingius.

AALTJE AAN DE PIANO.

Met haar muziekmeester. Met haar muziekmeester, met haar muziekmeester. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.



Mevrouw de Haan-Mastgraaf.

De herinnering aan Aaltje.

De herinnering aan Aaltje. De herinnering aan Aaltje, de herinnering aan Aaltje. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

Duitsche taal.

Duitsche taal. Duitsche taal, Duitsche taal. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

THE REPORT.

„NOORWAARDELIJN“

„NOORWAARDELIJN“... Het Noorderwiel... Het Noorderwiel, het Noorderwiel. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

De taal van oprichting.

De taal van oprichting. De taal van oprichting, de taal van oprichting. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

De eerste plenaire vergadering.

De eerste plenaire vergadering. De eerste plenaire vergadering, de eerste plenaire vergadering. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

Naar het woord van de heer... Naar het woord van de heer, naar het woord van de heer. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

„Onze Aal“.

„Onze Aal“... „Onze Aal“, „Onze Aal“. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

Aaltje Noordewier op 17-jarige leeftijd.

HET FEEST VAN MEVR. NOORDEWIER.

HET FEEST VAN MEVR. NOORDEWIER... Het feest van mevrouw Noordewier. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

„Als ik niet meer in de hel heb...“

„Als ik niet meer in de hel heb...“... „Als ik niet meer in de hel heb...“. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.

De eerste plenaire vergadering.

De eerste plenaire vergadering. De eerste plenaire vergadering, de eerste plenaire vergadering. Het is niet meer dan een woord, dat ik u nu zeg.



De eerste plenaire vergadering van de Noordewier-Reddingius op 21 Augustus 1928.

Figure 3.2: Festive portrait of Aaltje Noordewier in the Algemeen Handelsblad, 31 August 1928.

The musical skills attributed to these singers seem to approach the divine, as if they had some kind of mystical spiritual understanding of the *Passion*. One critic compared Noordewier to an angel, while *De Hollandsche Revue* defined Thom Denijs's interpretation, matured through years of study, as the key to the *Passion*'s inner meaning.³⁹ Choral societies had to book them years ahead in order to secure their cooperation. Jo Vincent, Noordewier's successor as *Passion prima donna*, was well aware of her status. Her condescending description of people in 'typically Dutch' ('oer-Hollandse') towns, who stared at her and whispered her name, reveals that the lustre of *Passion* performances was also due to the presence of celebrity soloists.⁴⁰

Marginal areas?

Noordewier and her fellow soloists travelled north, west and east but only rarely south: the map shows that the *Passion* was not performed in the province of Drenthe, nor in the southern provinces of Noord-Brabant and Limburg, both of them predominantly Roman-Catholic. No source addresses this omission directly. Perhaps a lack of interest among the local Catholic clergy contained the *Passion* within urban centres. In Limburg's capital Maastricht, for example, Henri Hermans, 'founder of Limburg's music scene', made plans for a *Passion* performance, but his choir dissolved before he could start on the project.⁴¹ Nonetheless, admirers from Brabant, Limburg and also Drenthe seem to have attended performances in surrounding provinces. Local newspapers from the south featured advertisements for performances in Rotterdam, and newspapers in Drenthe featured advertisements for performances in Groningen, as well as background stories about the *Passion*.⁴² In these provinces, too, the large train stations sold combined tickets comprising a return journey to

³⁹ 'Bach's Matthäus-Passion', *De Maasbode*, 6 April 1927; 'Karakterschets', pp. 144-145.

⁴⁰ Bos, *Zingend door het leven*, p. 52.

⁴¹ Hans van Dijk, *Henri Hermans: de grondlegger van het Limburgs muziekleven* (Hilversum, 2002), p. 35.

⁴² 'Toonkunst Rotterdam', *Bredasche Courant*, 5 March 1937; 'Matthäus Passion.', *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant [PDAC]*, 2 April 1919; 'Matthäus Passion.', *PDAC*, 6 April 1936.

Amsterdam and a seat in the Concertgebouw.⁴³ Those living in or close to the southern city of Breda also had the cheaper alternative of attending lectures, organized by Protestant churches.⁴⁴

The *St Matthew Passion* community in the south gained considerable impetus when in 1938, the Catholic conductor Frans van Amelsvoort merged his two choirs into the *Zuid-Nederlandsche Bachstichting* (South Dutch Bach Foundation). Van Amelsvoort wanted to ensure the continuation of the yearly *Passion* performances that he had started two years earlier in Zaltbommel, a town just north of Brabant.⁴⁵ The establishment of the *Bachstichting* was a master move. Eager to be associated with cultural progress, local officials happily agreed to act as chairmen, whilst business figures from the region, notably the Philips family, made generous donations.⁴⁶ The media attention was overwhelming: in the five weeks leading up to the *Bachstichting*'s first official performance in 1938, no less than five articles appeared in Brabant's provincial newspaper.⁴⁷ Indeed, this region, 'completely devoid of a *Passion* performance', was actively targeted: the *Bachstichting* also arranged for trains from the south to make an extra stop at Zaltbommel's station.⁴⁸ All of the efforts paid off. One year later, newspaper reporters exalted Zaltbommel as the Naarden of the south: 'Well, after Amsterdam came Naarden and after Naarden: Zaltbommel. Large crowds from the south of the Netherlands have made the pilgrimage to St Martin's Church in recent years.'⁴⁹ Zaltbommel's *Passion* tradition would continue until 1956. So, despite the lack of performances in certain regions of the Netherlands, the people living there were not necessarily excluded from the *St Matthew Passion* community. On the contrary, concert organizers went to great lengths to entice these

⁴³ 'Spoor-entreebiljetten voor Mattheus Passion', *Bredasche Courant*, 13 March 1939, p. 3.

⁴⁴ 'Matthäus passion.', *Bredasche Courant*, 23 March 1929; 'Ginneken. Ned. Herv. Gemeente. Matthäus Passion.', *Bredasche Courant*, 15 April 1930.

⁴⁵ 'Oprichting van de Zuid.-Ned. Bachstichting', *Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en 's-Hertogenbossche Courant [PNHC]*, 26 February 1938, p. 1.

⁴⁶ 'Matthäus-Passion te Zaltbommel', *PNHC*, 10 March 1938, p. 4.

⁴⁷ On 10, 17, 19 and 30 March and on 1 and 5 April 1938 in the *PNHC*.

⁴⁸ 'Oprichting': 'geheel verstoken van een Passionsuitvoering'; 'Zuid-Nederlandsche Bach-stichting. Matthäus Passion te Zaltbommel.', *PNHC*, 1 April 1938.

⁴⁹ 'Jaarlijksche Bedevaart naar Zaltbommel.', *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant*, 23 March 1939.

potential audiences, already familiar with the *Passion* through radio broadcasts, newspaper articles and occasional lectures.

This still leaves one part of the Netherlands undiscussed, namely the overseas territories, where the *Passion* community had its own distinctive dynamics. In Surinam, the Antilles and the Indies, radio stations broadcast fragments of the *Passion*, though never an entire performance.⁵⁰ Being the largest and most profitable colony, the Dutch East Indies received the greatest influx of Dutch migrants, who started various art and music clubs. East Indian newspapers reported extensively on cultural developments in the motherland — the Catholic-Protestant polemic, for example, was discussed with sardonic vigour — and kept Dutch migrants posted about the newest gramophone releases.⁵¹ The vast scale of the colony prevented large numbers of people from convening for talks or lectures on Bach's masterpiece, so they used the radio instead. In 1934, the governor of East-Sumatra had the 'privilege to point others the way to experience the same happiness'.⁵² Two years later, Mengelberg himself could be heard on the radio of the colony expounding his views on the *Passion*.⁵³ Several music societies included choral parts of the *Passion* in their concerts, until, in 1938, a certain Lies Kehlenbrink conducted Bach's masterpiece from beginning to end.⁵⁴ The importance of this event can hardly be exaggerated. To my knowledge, the performance in the Koningin Wilhelminakerk (Queen Wilhelmina Church) in Buitenzorg (now Bogor) was the first performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in the Southern Hemisphere, the first in the Eastern Hemisphere and the first led by a

⁵⁰ 'Phohi uitzendingen.', *De West. Nieuwsblad uit en voor Suriname*, 11 April 1938; 'Programma van de Curom.', *Amigoe di Curaçao*, 15 May 1937; 'Radio-Nieuws.', *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 15 April 1930.

⁵¹ M. Vierhout, 'Nieuwe Geest.', *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 29 April 1939; 'Gramafonplaten te Medan verkrijgbaar', *De Sumatra Post*, 5 April 1930.

⁵² 'Causerie over de Matthäus-Passion. Gouverneur Van Suchtelen voor de Nicro.', *De Sumatra Post*, 31 March 1934.

⁵³ 'De Matthäus Passion. Voordracht prof. dr. Mengelberg. Het wezen van Bach.', *De Indische Courant*, 24 April 1936, p. 2.

⁵⁴ 'Protestantsch Gemengd Koor.', *Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad. Staat- en letterkundig dagblad van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 31 March 1936, p. 2; 'De Matthaëus Passion. Uitgevoerd in de Wilhelminakerk te Buitenzorg', *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 9 April 1938.

female conductor. Just one newspaper mentioned it, in a review that perfectly captured colonial attitudes to the Dutch tradition of *Passion* performances.

Everything falls short. Conductor, choir, soloists. The mere lack of an orchestra sends cold shivers down the spine of anyone who had the pleasure of experiencing a *St Matthew* in Europe last year. And the position of the musically gifted woman, who said: ‘No, I will not go here, next Easter I will be in Naarden in the church’, is very understandable.⁵⁵

This comparison, which seems rather unreasonable to present-day readers, exposes a clash between the purpose of music in the colonies and the divine character ascribed to the *Passion*.

On the one hand, the Dutch wanted to preserve their identity in foreign parts: ‘in her *Buss und Reu* aria, [the alto] made us forget, for a moment, that we were in the Indies’; but, on the other, they felt that a masterpiece like the *Passion* should only be entrusted to trained professionals.⁵⁶

The performance thus was bound to fail: ‘During the moving *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*, the light went out because of a blown fuse. Of course this caused a painful interruption of the atmosphere ... Finally, the performance was ended by candlelight and piano accompaniment.’⁵⁷

Conclusion: reciprocal relations

The discourse generated by Mengelberg’s *Passion* performances affected aspiring conductors as well as eager choral societies. They came to regard the *St Matthew Passion* as the perfect synthesis of art and religion. For small towns, performing the *Passion* became a source of local pride, something which distinguished them from others. At the same time, however, this civic ritual confirmed their membership of a nation-wide *Passion* community. Because Amsterdam and Naarden ruled supreme within the community, every *Passion* performance, whether a

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: ‘Alles schiet te kort. Dirigente, koor, solisten. Alleen al het ontbreken van een orkest doet iemand, die verleden jaar in Europa nog een Mattheaeus (sic) mocht medemaken, de koude griezels over den rug loopen. En het standpunt van de zeer muzikale dame, die zei: ‘Nee, hier ga ik niet heen, volgend Paschen ben ik in Naarden in de kerk’, is zeer begrijpelijk.’

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: ‘in haar *Buss und Reu* aria deed [de alt] voor een oogenblik vergeten, dat wij in Indië waren’.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: ‘Tijdens het aangrijpende: *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* ging het licht uit door het doorslaan van een zekering. Natuurlijk gaf dit een pijnlijke verbreking van de sfeer ... Ten slotte is de uitvoering bij kaarslicht en pianobegeleiding beëindigd.’

unique celebration or part of a longer-standing tradition, constituted an act of simultaneous imitation and contestation.

More importantly, the *Passion's* popularity had a basis broader than just the choral societies. People outside these networks raised money, educated their peers, or performed managerial duties. In other words, the *St Matthew Passion* community united a top-down hierarchy of intellectuals and their following with a strong bottom-up current from local centres. *Passion* performances, then, provided a platform for the local and the national to meet: the presence of the 'little' farmer was the *raison d'être* for the celebrity soloist.

Conclusion

Mengelberg's tireless efforts and international fame made his *Passion* performances 'world events', monumental feats of Dutch musical culture, eagerly embraced by a divided population. The sources make clear, after all, that many intellectuals between the two World Wars worried about society's (perceived) disintegration and moral decline. In response, they found in the *St Matthew Passion* exactly the opposite values: universality and civilization. The *Passion* was new to the Dutch scene, and had no owner other than the man who had composed it. Therefore, it could operate above the cleavages traditional to Dutch society, welcoming strikingly different interpretations. Notwithstanding the vehement confessional polemics of the age, spokesmen from every pillar celebrated the *Passion* as the epitome of musical literacy and national harmony.

Jos van Veldhoven (born 1952), conductor of the *NBV* between 1983 and 2018, has written that '[Bach's commentary] on Jesus's suffering and death for many has become an impressive concentration of metaphors that encompass almost every human being's complete state of mind. The *St Matthew Passion* has now become a church itself: a church for everyone'.¹ Van Veldhoven was referring to recent years; but, as this thesis has shown, a *St Matthew Passion* community — a church if you will — had already come into existence during the interwar years. The reverential national discourse not only inspired local conductors and local choral societies to perform the *Passion* themselves but also motivated local clergy and elites to support these efforts. Nevertheless, local performances always contained national characteristics, such as the omnipresence of 'home-grown' celebrity soloists, who acted as mediators between the earthly and the divine, or the unavoidable comparison with Mengelberg

¹ Jos van Veldhoven, 'Zoals de componist het heeft bedoeld. Overwegingen van een dirigent', in Dirksen, *De geheimen van de Matthäus-Passion*, pp. 124-137 at p. 137: '[Bachs commentaar] op het lijden en sterven van Jezus is voor velen geworden tot een indrukwekkende concentratie metaforen die vrijwel het complete zielenleven van iedere mens omvatten. De Matthäus-Passion is nu zelf tot kerk geworden: een kerk voor iedereen'.

and later also with the *NBV*, the two authorities that dictated performance standards. All these performances, lectures and broadcasts enabled large swathes of the population to become members of the *St Matthew Passion* community, and thus to share and participate in a national musical culture that fostered emotional identification. In other words, the *Passion* gained popularity because it resonated with the hopes and needs of a broad spectrum of the Dutch population at the time, both the intellectuals and the ordinary citizens. It did not encounter serious resistance: indifference at most, notably among the Catholic clergy. The bottom layers of society, unable to voice their opinions, fall outside the spectrum as well.

The enthusiasm for the *Passion* calls attention to a number of more general aspects of Dutch interwar history. The Netherlands were so small that many local *Passion* performances were included in national newspapers. Hence, talking about them created a mental map of the *Passion* community. Tellingly, the journalists in question were often themselves actively and professionally involved in the network of choral societies, as conductors, board members, teachers, or in some cases even as the partner of a soloist. Further research in private archives could map these networks and complement my argument with personal stories.

Crucially, communication within or between networks could not have taken place without decent roads, railways and public transport services. The country's small size and good infrastructure enabled soloists to travel comfortably to small towns and enabled townspeople to attend *Passion* performances in a surrounding city or further away. If physical obstacles still restricted cultural involvement, technology offered a solution in the form of the radio and gramophone. This thesis has provided a first glimpse into the scope of this device, revealing many elements worthy of more detailed exploration, such as the sales history of the commercial record.

Finally, the Dutch *Passion* tradition may be compared with other more or less similar national music traditions, most obviously G.F. Handel's *Messiah* in the United Kingdom, or

Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* in Japan.² Beyond the realm of music, the comparison could even be extended to sports games and national celebrations.³ Each type of civic ritual, of course, has its own dynamics and specificities, but all are public manifestations, scripted to a certain degree, which serve to foster unity whilst permitting diversity. This is, however, not the place to launch sustained comparative analysis, though that indeed would be very welcome. More modestly, this work on the *St Matthew Passion* suggests that the content of the masterpiece is much less important than a matrix of circumstances which enabled it to acquire such prominence. If anything, the interwar *Passion* performances in the Netherlands display the interdependence of national identity, social differentiation and individual initiative.

² Calvin R. Stapert, *Handel's Messiah: Comfort for God's People* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2010); Rachel Cowgill, 'Disputing Choruses in 1760s Halifax: Joah Bates, William Herschel, and the Messiah Club' in Rachel Cowgill and Peter Holman eds., *Music in the British Provinces, 1690-1914* (Aldershot, 2013), pp. 87-113; Yano Jun'ichi, 'Why Is Beethoven's Ninth So Well Loved in Japan?', *Japan Quarterly*, xxix/4 (1982), pp. 475-478; Chiho Yuchi, 'From a POW camp to esteemed music halls nationwide: Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 marks 100 years in Japan', *The Japan Times*, 30 May 2018.

³ Susan Birrell, 'Sport as Ritual: Interpretations from Durkheim to Goffmann', *Social Forces*, lx (1981), pp. 354-376; Mike Cronin and David Mayall eds., *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Immigration and Assimilation* (London, 1998); Chaney, 'A symbolic mirror'.

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Figure 1.1: Poster announcing the performances by Mengelberg, the *TKKA* and the *Concertgebouworkest* during their tour to Paris in 1924. Scan copied from *Mengelberg en zijn tijd*, March 1998, p. 11.

Figure 2.1: Religious denominations in the Netherlands in 1919 and 1939 as percentages of the total population. Figures extrapolated from Wijnand Advokaat, ‘Het bestand der kerken’, *INDEX*, i (1999), pp. 1-4 at p. 3.

Figure 2.2: Johan Schoonderbeek’s funeral displayed his wealth in life. Photo copied from Schmidt, *Het Geheim*, p. 12. Photographer unknown.

Figure 2.3: ‘MDCCCIC To Willem Mengelberg from all who for 25 years cooperated under his supervision on the yearly performances of Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* - Amsterdam MCMXXII’. Triptych depicting the *Lamentation of Christ* and two scenes from the *St Matthew Passion*, by W.A. van Konijnenburg (1868-1943), gouache, width 150 cm, Het Concertgebouw N.V. Amsterdam. Photo by Georg Wellmann, copied from Giskes, ‘De weg naar Mengelbergs’, p. 37.

Figure 3.1: *St Matthew Passion* premieres in Dutch cities until 1939. Map created on www.datawrapper.de using personally collected data. I do not claim that the map is 100% complete and free from errors.

Figure 3.2: Festive portrait of Aaltje Noordewier in the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 31 August 1928. Scan downloaded from www.delpher.nl.