

# **Pilgrimages to English Cathedrals: The popular practice of visiting choirs from the Netherlands singing choral evensong in England<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*A noteworthy trend has emerged wherein Dutch choirs travel to England to participate as visiting choirs during choral evensong in renowned cathedrals when the host choirs are on recess. New foundations have been established to organise these English cathedral music trips. The focus of this article is primarily on understanding the motivations that drive Dutch singers, especially in a (post-)secular era, to engage in the daily practice of singing liturgy in England. What is the inherent power of the cathedral music tradition in England, and how does it resonate with Dutch choirs? What do singers aim to bring back to their home country following their experiences and participation in choral evensong in English cathedrals? Finally, what might understanding the motivations and experiences of Dutch singers contribute to studies of cathedral music and religiosity more broadly?*

## **Introduction**

In the Netherlands, singing choral evensong is a popular practice. An increasing number of Dutch choirs devote themselves to singing the English liturgy. Choral evensong services attract many people – believers and non-believers alike. It seems that an ‘Anglican virus’ or, as Jan Valkestijn, former director of music of Haarlem Cathedral coined it, ‘Cathedralitis Brittanicus’, has been spreading throughout the Low Countries. Dutch historian and poet Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt dubbed it ‘Anglicitis’ (Rijken 2020, 39). A noteworthy trend has emerged wherein Dutch choirs travel to England to participate as visiting choirs during choral evensong in renowned cathedrals when host choirs are on recess. Some recent examples include visits of the Cantiago Choir Utrecht and the Schola Liturgica to Canterbury Cathedral (June 2023 and January 2024, respectively), the Marcantus Choir to Norwich Cathedral (February 2024), the Schola Liturgica to Christ Church Cathedral (August 2024) and the Dutch Choral Singers to Rochester Cathedral (August 2024). New foundations have been established to organise such English cathedral music trips. One of the first was *Schola Liturgica*, initiated by Geke Bruining-Visser and Sjouke Bruining.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a keynote lecture given for the academic conference of the Cathedral Music Trust, 20 September 2024, in Salisbury.

<sup>2</sup> [www.zingeninengeland.nl](http://www.zingeninengeland.nl)

The topic of this article is the popular practice of visiting Dutch choirs singing choral evensong in England. We will reflect on this practice from the perspective of pilgrimages in a post-secular age. The article primarily focuses on understanding the motivations that drive Dutch singers – believers and non-believers – especially in a (post-)secular era, to engage in the daily practice of singing the liturgy in England. The research questions are as follows: What is the inherent power of the cathedral music tradition in England, and how does it resonate with Dutch choirs? What do singers aim to bring back to their home country following their participation in choral evensong in English cathedrals? What might understanding the motivations and experiences of Dutch singers contribute to studies of cathedral music and religiosity more broadly?

The structure of the article is as follows: I first elaborate on the popularity of Anglican choral evensong in the Netherlands, summarising the findings of my doctoral research (1). I then build the theoretical framework for pilgrimage (2), followed by an explanation of the methodology employed in the study (3). Finally, I present and analyse the findings from the visiting choir study (4) and offer further reflections (5).

## **1 Choral Evensong in the Netherlands**

In order to better understand the popularity of visiting choir tours to English cathedrals, I will share some insights from my dissertation ‘My Soul Doth Magnify’ on choral evensong in the Netherlands (Rijken 2020; see also 2022 and 2023). This trend presents a paradox that naturally attracts attention and raises questions: the popularity of English church music, liturgy and choral travels to English cathedrals in a so-called secularised country like the Netherlands. Does this indicate a re-churching rather than a de-churching phenomenon? The central topic of my dissertation is the appropriation of Anglican choral evensong in the Netherlands in relation to the religious dynamics in Dutch culture. In my research, I focused on how choral evensong is ‘performed’ in the Netherlands and on processes of meaning-giving; that is, how participants experience evensong.

Concerning the ritual appropriation of choral evensong in the Netherlands, three notions can be formulated. First, church music in England, especially as sung in cathedrals and college chapels, functions as a model in the Netherlands. We notice this in the use of English music but also in the choice of choral vestments (sometimes very literally taken directly from England). Choirs in the Netherlands try to attain the high vocal quality of English choirs by starting vocal education early for both boys’ and girls’ voices. Furthermore, the interior of an English cathedral or college chapel is sometimes copied by introducing portable choir stalls and wooden boards. One director of music explained, ‘If you do something from England, you have to do everything from England. Not half-heartedly, but all the way!’

Second, we see in the Netherlands what I call the ‘cathedralisation’ of Reformed worship. By this I do not mean the rise of churches with a bishop’s seat, but services in which the

music heard in Anglican cathedrals is copied. The cathedral liturgy is even ‘performed’ in small Dutch villages; at the very least, the aim is a cathedral-like performance of liturgy.

Third, we notice a transformation of both Anglican choral evensong and Reformed worship in the Netherlands. Choral evensong services in the Netherlands share similarities with choral evensong in England, but there are also striking differences. For instance, choral evensong is conducted in English in the United Kingdom, the vernacular language. Choral evensong was established during the English Reformation, when Latin was replaced by English. In the Netherlands, the language used in choral evensong is also English, but it is not the vernacular language. There is also a difference in the frequency of choral evensong. In the Netherlands, it is not held daily; it is staged only once a month or even less often. Thus, it becomes more of an event than a daily prayer service. In addition, the disposition of the monumental churches in the Netherlands is different. The eastward orientation of church buildings was mostly abandoned during the Reformation of the 16th century. The pulpit gained the central position, influencing the disposition during evensong. Furthermore, the organs are located at the western end of most Dutch churches.

To answer the question about the process of meaning-giving, the participants attributed six qualities to English church music and liturgy: perfect beauty; holiness; rituality; transcendence; contrasting experience; and connection. They mentioned the beauty of English church music, the liturgy and church buildings in the United Kingdom. This beauty is closely related to holiness. Attendees mention the value of sacred space, where the beauty and holiness seem to offer transcendental experiences. The use of a language other than the vernacular enhances the feeling of mystery and holiness, instead of intelligibility. The participants described an experience that contrasts with Reformed worship in the Netherlands. They criticised its focus on verbal explanation, the noisy atmosphere and, in some cases, the poor quality of the church music. In choral evensong, participants experience a connection between the people of the entire church (from Roman Catholic to the strictly Reformed), between churchgoers and non-churchgoers and between heaven and earth. There is a longing for beauty and holiness, both in the church and in Dutch culture.

## 2 Theoretical Framework: Pilgrimage

To investigate the journeys of Dutch choirs to English cathedrals from a pilgrimage perspective, it is first crucial to consider what constitutes a pilgrimage. The word *pilgrimage* is derived from the Latin *peregrinus*, meaning *per*-(through) and *ager* (field). In Dutch, another word for pilgrimage is *bedevaart* (‘prayer journey’).

According to the *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*, a *pilgrimage* is defined as ‘a journey to a holy place for religious reasons’. However, how do we deal with these ‘religious reasons’ in a secular or even post-secular age? Nearly one-third of the singers who participated in this

research were non-churchgoers, as they explained in the questionnaire. The authors of *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* advocate broadening the perspective on pilgrimage. They argue that the concept should not be confined solely to traditional religious practices but should also encompass a wider range of experiences within contemporary culture:

Whereas academic studies have tended to restrict themselves to examinations of pilgrimage found within explicitly religious contexts we extend our scope and vision to include contexts that are more clearly located in the secular world . . . In doing this we are asking whether one can consider such phenomena as pilgrimages, discussing them in the same ways and under the same terms that one would do with an historical pilgrimage located in a specific religious culture . . . (Reader and Walter 1993, 2–3)

The *Oxford Learners Dictionary* also offers a second, more secular definition: ‘A journey to a place connected with somebody/something that you admire or respect’. This is an interesting difference. The analysis of the research data will reveal that both definitions, the religious and the more secular one, are relevant to the study of visiting choirs.

Dutch cultural historian Willem Frijhoff explains that pilgrimages ‘are more than just Catholic rituals; they are local and social variants of anthropologically based rituals, where people give meaning to the world around them by shaping space and time and ritualising their place and role within a community’ (Frijhoff 2001, 194). He pleads, referring to *Bedevaartsplaatsen in Nederland*, for a bottom-up method, asserting that the experiences shared by the pilgrims are important (Frijhoff 2001, 185). Four essential elements must be present to make a pilgrimage a pilgrimage, according to the author. First, there must be a *cult* or *rite* within a sacred space (the place). Second, the journey to that place (the ‘pilgrimage’) must have a transnational/trans-border character. Third, during the pilgrimage, there must be a religious experience involving God and/or saints. Fourth, this experience must take the form of a sacred ritual rooted in time and space, encompassing cultic objects, values, rites, and/or traditions (Frijhoff 2001, 184).

In the article ‘What is Pilgrimage?’ George Greenia describes as essential elements of pilgrimage ‘celebrating a physical location as a site of symbolic or real access to powers beyond the human realm’ (Greenia 2018, 10) and ‘displacement from one’s customary locale, daily routines and social position to undertake a voyage into liminality where social roles and constraints are elided or transcended’. Greenia argues that entering this space is both transformative and enriching, fostering a connection to values beyond the normal reach of the individual. He further suggests that pilgrimage is often anticipated as an experience capable of creating enduring memories to which one can return in later life. Greenia also highlights two additional aspects: the difficulties faced during the journey and the notion of penance. However, these aspects are not directly relevant to the field of research on visiting choirs.

To investigate new types of pilgrimage, Frijhoff identifies various dimensions of pilgrimage beyond the ecclesiastical dimension, which I also apply to visiting choir

research (Frijhoff 2001, 190–91). These dimensions include, first of all, a sacred dimension. This refers to the transcendent experience of place, space and time. Second, a social or communal dimension is required. Pilgrimages manifest as a form of cultural praxis, fostering a *communitas* of like-minded and like-believing individuals. Third, there is a cultural dimension. Pilgrimages are integrated into a pattern or group repertoire of forms, rituals, images, fantasies and meanings. Fourth, an historical dimension gives meaning to history, shaping and defining its boundaries and contours, thus creating and reinforcing a sense of identity. Finally, there is a physical dimension. A pilgrimage is an act in which the body is fully engaged – motorically, sensorily, intellectually and emotionally. Based on my doctoral research, I propose an additional aesthetic dimension closely intertwined with the sacred – perfect beauty and holiness – and perhaps a spiritual dimension.

### ***Spirituality, music and sacrality***

A pilgrimage can be seen as a *horizontal* journey, a trip to a sacred place, but also as a *vertical* journey, as every pilgrimage has a transcendental character. As the English writer Peter Stanford explains, ‘There is, whether the twenty-first-century pilgrim wants to connect with or not, a transcendent dimension that is bound up with pilgrimage’ (Stanford 2018, 16). In *Experiencing Music – Restoring the Spiritual*, June Boyce-Tillman relates the concept of a journey to the concepts of music and spirituality. She defines spirituality as ‘the ability to transport the musicker to a different time/space dimension – to move them from everyday reality to “another world”’ (Boyce-Tillman 2016, 270). Liminality offers another salient concept for reflection when Boyce-Tillman (referring to Turner) mentions ‘the stage where pilgrims separate from ordinary everyday life’. As noted in the previous section, Greenia (2018, 10) also reflected on pilgrimage as ‘a voyage into liminality’. The concept of liminality is derived from the anthropologist Victor Turner. In his article *Pilgrimages as Social Processes*, he explains that ‘a pilgrimage center (...) also represents a threshold (...) an actor (...) hopes to have their direct experience of the sacred ... or in the immaterial aspect of inward transformation of spirit or personality’ (Turner 2004, as cited in Boyce-Tillman 2016). According to McQuire (2008, 112), ‘an embodied spiritual practice (especially singing) can literally produce religious experience and sense of community’.

In *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, Jonathan Arnold explains that ‘through musical beauty, the sacred is encountered’ (Arnold 2014, 151). He further holds that music has the force to lead people beyond themselves to the transcendent and numinous. ‘Music may transport us, transcend language and definition, so that we cannot express where we have travelled from or to, but we know we have experienced something profound and meaningful’ (Arnold 2014, 153). It is important to pay attention to the transformative power that lies in rituals, as in the case of sacred music.

Frijhoff distinguishes between three different types of sacredness or holiness. First, there is 'the holy', by which he means holiness in a broad sense: the generally sacred or numinous. Second, there is 'the saint'. He explains that this is holiness in a more formal, narrower sense: ecclesiastical holiness. Third is secular variations of sanctity, such as exemplars, icons and idols, that is, holiness in a derivative sense (Frijhoff 2011, 196; Post 1999, 104). This third type embodies an ideal, as idols are revered by their followers. There is often an overlap between the categories. For instance, in Salisbury Cathedral, we find the sacred, the saints and perhaps the cathedral choir – which, due to its high standard, can be considered a model figure, an icon for Dutch choirs. In relation to these aspects of the sacred, Paul Post refers to the concept of *topolatry* introduced by the German cultural scholar Gottfried Korff (Post 1999, 105). Topolatry means a tendency towards the idolatry (revering) of places, and it is interesting how idolatry and topolatry coincide in the relationship between a holy person and a holy place. Post explains that historically, holy places are linked to a myth – namely, that the sacred became personified in an individual, such as Cunera at the Dutch city of Rhenen or Bernadette at Lourdes (Post 1999, 108). According to Post, in our postmodern society, people have difficulties with the personal dimension of a holy person; holy places are now less associated with holy persons but more with 'there must be more between heaven and earth' and with model figures or icons (1999, 108). This appears to be related to the role of English choirs as a model for Dutch choirs, keeping in mind that in a time of post-secularisation, we may observe changes in norms, values and the attribution of meaning, and these changes are fluid.

### 3 Visiting Choir Research

In order to explore the experiences of choral singers, we carried out ethnographic research. This included participant observation at rehearsals and during trips with choirs, along with interviews with more than 30 key informants, who were singers, organists and music directors. To investigate the experiences of choral singers before, during and after their travels to English cathedrals, we created a questionnaire specifically for choral singers in 2023 and 2024. Respondents aged 16 and older who travelled with a choir to England to sing in a cathedral were invited to complete the questionnaire. In this article, we also used findings from choral evensong research in 2019–2020. In total, more than 200 'visiting choir singers', directors of music and organists were included in the research.

#### *Key figures*

Before we examine the findings, let us first focus on two key figures: Willem Barnard (1920–2010) and Geke Bruining-Visser (1966–). Barnard, an influential Dutch minister and hymn poet, was one of the early pioneers in the field of travel to English cathedrals. Bruining-Visser is a Dutch conductor and musicologist and the founder of the first organisation in the Netherlands to arrange choral trips to British cathedrals.

After the Second World War, in 1949, Barnard travelled to England for the first time and experienced the beauty of Anglican church music in the United Kingdom. He published his experiences in England in a travel diary (1975, 2009), stating that travelling to England was like an ‘exodus’ for him:

In the summer of 1949 we were in England for the first time, somewhere up in the North, between Sheffield and York, ... where a huge meeting took place, something like what later in Germany would be called a ‘Kirchentag’. But done the British way, which was a revelation to us. ... We were forever won over by an England, Anglican at its Sunday best. To me, those fourteen days meant the beginning of an exodus. From then on, I gradually began to appreciate the liturgy.

In an interview in March 2009, a year before he died, Barnard talked about the unforgettable experience during choral evensong in English cathedrals:

I’ve been to England many times. I felt very much at home with the Anglicans. If you ever attend evensong in a cathedral like Canterbury’s or Salisbury’s, it’s unforgettable. I felt enormously attracted to it. Compared to this, I found that our Reformed churches were mainly talk and chatter.<sup>3</sup>

A central figure in the *visiting choirs* movement is Geke Bruining-Visser.<sup>4</sup> From the 1990s onwards, she began organising choir trips to England and Wales (and Ireland), together with her husband Sjouke Bruining. Bruining-Visser grew up in a Reformed family, but as a child, she experienced Anglican liturgy in England, which made a deep impression on her. In an interview, she talked about the foundation and its aim: to promote the singing of English church music, both in the Netherlands and England:

Of course we wanted to bring English cathedral music to the Netherlands – that is also important. But we also want to introduce people here to Anglican liturgy, to music within its Anglican context. That is the goal of our trips.

She added:

To be immersed, for a week, in such a cathedral is such an intense experience. We would like everyone to have the opportunity to have this experience. To stand in the choir stalls, being on edge for an hour, or experiencing a Sunday with first Matins, then Eucharist and then Evensong.

In the 1990s, they had to send a cassette tape to a cathedral and wondered, ‘Is the quality good enough?’ According to Bruining-Visser, the standards of acceptance were rather stringent. Interest in singing in English cathedrals has since grown, and the foundation now organises both summer and winter choir trips annually, often alongside one or two weekend trips in the spring and autumn. The choir, the *Schola Liturgica*, has now sung in many cathedrals. Prior to each trip, two to six rehearsals are held in the Netherlands. It is

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished part of an interview with Willem Barnard, March 2009, for the *Nederlands Dagblad*. Published with the kind permission of Renata Barnard.

<sup>4</sup> She studied musicology with a specialisation in church music at Utrecht University, composition at the Sweelinck Conservatorium in Amsterdam and conducting at the Prins Claus conservatorium in Groningen.

noteworthy that non-churchgoers and atheists also join the choir trips. As Bruining-Visser explained, 'Even if you don't believe, you just participate in everything. You are not here as yourself, but as a representative. You are performing monastic work.' She noted that it is important to make contact with cathedrals at an early stage, sometimes up to five years in advance.

Reflecting on singing Evensong in various cathedrals, she explains, 'It's the same everywhere, but it's different everywhere.' She emphasises that it is not about showcasing how well the choir can sing but rather about ensuring that the services continue, that the praises are sung, and that the psalms are prayed. 'Even if there is no one in the church, it still goes on.' She said that singers sometimes had to get used to this. However, this aspect of continuation made them realise that they are not singing for the audience. She learned an important phrase from the late David Gedge, former master of music of Brecon Cathedral, who would point upwards and say, 'There is always someone listening'. Bruining-Visser continued:

The aim of our tours is to teach people what liturgy can be. We instil respect for the liturgy. It's a big difference from Reformed services in the Netherlands. . . . In England, it is a service with a centuries-old tradition. Evensong has a natural place, even in parish churches. The major difference is that everyone adheres to a fixed liturgy, which allows space to seek depth during the service. We have lost that calmness in the Netherlands. A fascinating paradox: when you adhere to a strict liturgy, you do not experience it as restrictive, but rather as a liberation.

#### 4 Analysis

To answer the first research question, "What is the inherent power of the cathedral music tradition in England, and how does it resonate with Dutch choirs?" singers were invited to select all the reasons that were important to them for participating in a choir tour to sing in English cathedrals from a list of 25 potential reasons, plus another question option: Is it because of the music or the prayer? Interestingly, one of the most frequently chosen reasons was that 'singers consider it an honour to sing in English cathedrals'. There appears to be a connection here with the second definition of pilgrimage as 'a journey to a place connected with somebody/something that you admire or respect'. The connection with history, tradition and heritage, alongside the high musical standards, repertoire and cathedrals were also frequent choices.

These were the 10 most frequently chosen reasons:

1. Because I am affiliated with a choir that is making the trip (74%)
2. Because I consider it an honour to perform in an English setting (68%)
3. To feel connected to history, tradition and heritage (62%)
4. Due to high musical standards (61%)
5. For the musical repertoire (59%)
6. Because of English cathedrals (57%)



7. For the social aspect (*gezelligheid*) (48%)
8. Because of beauty (45%)
9. To sing praises to God (44%)
10. Because I am an Anglophile (38%)

In addition, 45% of the choir singers stated that singing evensong in an English cathedral exceeded their expectations, while not one (0%) indicated that the experience was less beautiful than expected. Regarding mode of transportation, 66% of the singers travelled to England by ferry, while only 13% opted to fly. One-third of the singers reported that it was their first time participating. The vast majority expressed that they were trying to go and sing in English cathedrals as often as possible. A few respondents indicated that they had already taken part in a visiting choir tour (as many as 27 times). All singers had sung in an evensong service, with some also participating in the Eucharist and others additionally singing matins.

### ***Experiences***

What exactly appealed to the singers? In response to this question, many respondents highlighted various elements that attracted them to singing in English cathedrals. In analysing the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and interviews, we found six keywords of interest. We will connect these findings with the dimensions of pilgrimage, as mentioned by Frijhoff, along with the extra dimension of aesthetics.

First, the keyword **beauty** is related to the aesthetic dimension. A recurring theme was the seriousness with which church music is approached in cathedrals. As a director of music explained:

For the Anglican Church, choral music lies at the heart of worship. As an outsider, you wonder about this: new choral music daily, sublimely sung. It *works transcendently*. Music helps people to experience that there is 'something greater'. For this reason, very much attention is paid in the Anglican Church to a fine-tuned liturgy with music of high quality. For a while you are lifted up above daily reality.

The quality of English organs was also highlighted as an important factor.

Second, the keyword **transcendence** is related to the sacred/spiritual dimension. The cathedral was described as a sacred space with a unique, inspiring and transcendent atmosphere. As one respondent explained, 'It moves me. It uplifts me. It's awe inspiring'. Another singer recalled emotions that ranged from 'overwhelming on the first day to not wanting to leave by the last day', further noting, 'It felt like a foretaste of Heaven'. Many respondents reflected on the profound spiritual impact of participation in evensong. Some remarked that the experience directly 'strengthens their faith', while others described it as 'nourishing my spiritual life'. The act of participating in the liturgy was often seen as a

form of ‘spiritual recharging’. As another respondent stated, ‘[G]reat is the mystery of faith’. Thus, the spiritual dimension was highlighted.

Third, the keyword **tradition** is related to the historical dimension. When asked about the experience of singing evensong in English cathedrals, many singers mentioned that being part of an ancient tradition was a particularly special experience. The deep-rooted tradition was repeatedly mentioned as a key factor. As one respondent explained:

The experience was profoundly moving for me. I felt connected to the generations before me who, for centuries, have sung praises to God. It was as though I had been given a foretaste of heaven, where, together with the angels, I will one day sing before God’s throne.

Another singer echoed this sentiment: ‘Every time when I have the privilege of singing in these “sacred places”, I am moved. To be part of a centuries-old tradition, even for a brief moment, touches and nourishes my own spiritual life. It lifts me up.’ When asked where they preferred to sing evensong, either in England or the Netherlands (if they did so there), the majority of respondents expressed a preference for England. Specifically, 60% indicated that they favoured singing evensong in England, while only 1% preferred the Netherlands. The reasons given for this preference also reflect a deep appreciation for the tradition and context in which evensong is sung in England. Many respondents emphasised the authenticity of the tradition and liturgy in England. ‘In England, it is an authentic tradition’. One respondent explained:

In England, you can feel being closer to the source. Here in the Netherlands, it feels somewhat like an imitation ‘we do as if’, whereas in England, it is more true. There, it is palpably part of a real tradition with which everyone is familiar. It is performed naturally, without constantly focusing on the ‘how’ or ‘why’ of the ritual itself. This is what makes it a genuine ritual action, one in which one can lose oneself and be immersed.

A director of music explained:

[I]n England, in the cathedrals, I feel as though I am dwelling on a high mountaintop very close to heaven. And I stay there. Once I have to return by ferry from Dover, it is like descending from the mountain, down, back to daily life. It makes me sad.

Fourth, the keyword **rituality** is related to the cultural dimension. Several respondents noted the rituals during the services, appreciating the rich liturgy, the variety of music and the daily practice. Moreover, many interviewees explained that during their travels to England, they experienced the richness of rituals: ‘In English cathedrals, rituals form a much more integral part of the liturgy than in our own services’. A participant explained that the procession marks a transfer to another world:

Well, I like the beginning of evensong very much. It is beautiful when they start to sing at the other end of the church. There is tranquillity ... It feels like a transition. You move away from daily trivialities into another world.

One interviewee exclaimed, 'Beautiful! Such a beautiful turning point, precisely under the tower, and then walking into the chancel . . . It had something . . . you could almost say . . . meditative!' Against all expectations, the rituality in the procession induced in her a meditative feeling. The structure of the services, starting and ending with the dean's involvement, was also seen as significant. One respondent reflected on the sense of being both blessed and dismissed, which added a meaningful dimension to the experience.

Fifth, the keyword **togetherness** is related to the social dimension. The research revealed the community-building effect of a choir trip. This is perhaps even stronger because it involves the daily singing of choral evensong together. 'Music plays a crucial role in social bonding', Jonathan Arnold (2019, 101) explains in his book *Music and Faith*. 'Singing in a choir appears to foster musical and social cohesion'. Furthermore, the hospitality in the cathedral towards the singers was mentioned. Several singers also mentioned the experience of being part of a worldwide church: 'It was very inspiring to share a spiritual experience with people from all over the world'. A minister in the Netherlands explained:

The Netherlands has become quite small owing to Reformed Orthodoxy. People have grown weary of ecclesiastical disputes. They are now presented with a language that intuitively connects them to a vast, organic past. It is like a lifebuoy for them, showing that Christianity is larger than in the Netherlands.

Sixth and finally, **intensity** is related to the bodily dimension. Several singers mentioned that the experience was very intense and required hard work. They expressed admiration for the English choirs who sing evensong day in and day out: 'It's also mentally taxing. You absorb so many impressions that you can only begin to process them on the journey back'. Many described the choral trip as a unique form of holiday on which one brings something and receives something in return.

### ***What was brought back home?***

The second research question was, "What do singers aim to bring back to their home country following their experiences and participation in choral evensong in English cathedrals?" When asked what elements they would like to bring back from their experiences in England, respondents identified a range of practices that they found particularly meaningful. The attention given to cathedral music was a notable highlight, as was the presence of cathedral choir schools, which play a central role in fostering musical excellence. Several respondents appreciated specific rituals, such as the reading of the Gospel in the midst of the nave, the act of bowing to the altar and the role of the vergers in services. The tradition of everyone saying 'Amen' aloud was also seen as an impactful communal gesture. Some respondents expressed admiration for the professional singers in English cathedrals, noting their absence in Dutch church choirs. They also mentioned the frequency of daily prayer, which added a sense of devotion to the practice. The inclusion of humour in sermons was also noted as a valued aspect. Additionally, the use of the processional cross was appreciated, with one respondent

reflecting on how the singing during the introit procession, combined with the cross and candles, created a special atmosphere:

In England, the singing during the introit processional gives a special feeling, the processional hymn behind the cross and candles ... This cross and candle event is not so often copied in the Netherlands. I think it is an Anglican tradition which is considered too Roman Catholic from the Reformed point of view ... I think they do not even have those attributes in the Reformed Church.

We will elaborate on this in the final section.

Several respondents also mentioned aspects of the experience that were less appealing to them in response to one of the questions. One common concern was the practical issue of the distance to the toilets in some cathedrals. The antiphonal disposition of the choir was occasionally noted as difficult because singers were not accustomed to it. They were also not used seeing people walk about during the singing, for instance, the vergers and ministers walking towards the ambo or back. Some participants said that the clergy were sometimes difficult to hear, while other singers were a bit nervous, feeling rather uncertain because of the rules.

## 5 Reflections and discussion

In this concluding section, I will reflect on several noteworthy findings from the fieldwork. The key concepts include identification and depersonalisation, authentic tradition, resonance, cathedralisation and Catholicisation.

### *Identification and depersonalisation*

The aspects of a 'model' and idolatry are important elements in this research on visiting choirs. Dutch choristers have an enormous admiration for the cathedral choirs in England; they feel it is an honour to walk in their shoes both literally and figuratively, similar to visiting the football stadium of their favourite football team. English cathedral practice functions as a model for Dutch choirs. There is what might be described as a clear identification with English choirs, primarily due to the exceptionally high vocal quality for which they are known. This identification mirrors findings from research on dress in evensong services (Rijken 2020, 123). Dutch singers expressed a desire to wear the same attire as the English choirs, akin to wearing the football jersey of a favourite player.

At the same time, we observe a process of depersonalisation when the choir sings in the cathedrals. As Geke Bruining-Visser noted in her interview, singers are taught that it is not about receiving applause from the audience. At times, hardly anyone is present. Choirs would love to send or post selfies and videos, but photography and video recording are not permitted during evensong, as it is a prayer service. This creates a fascinating paradox. Perhaps this tension reflects the dichotomy between the first and second definitions of

pilgrimage mentioned in the theoretical framework. It highlights a transformation of religiosity while simultaneously generating renewed attention towards religiosity through this transformation.

### ***Authenticity***

The experience of tradition was an intriguing aspect of singing choral evensong in England. The choristers suggested that liturgy in England is perceived as a more authentic tradition. However, evensong itself is derived from the Roman liturgies of vespers and Compline. As McQuire (2008, 42) explains in *Lived Religions*, 'In practice, no religion is uninfluenced by its cultural and historical setting'. This raises the question of how one might authentically perform the Liturgy of the Hours in the Dutch context. McGuire (2008, 204) also reflects on authentic traditions: 'Diverse received traditions both inspire and constrain further developmental changes and inventions, some of which may later be viewed as continuations of an ancient tradition'. She refers to this as the 'social construction of tradition'.

### ***Resonance***

An interesting phenomenon is that the choristers described the pilgrimage as crossing a border to a foreign country and 'coming home' in the cathedral liturgy and music. We could explain this as 'everything falling into place'. Perhaps a good concept to help reflect on this is the term *resonance*. In his book *Resonance*, Hartmut Rosa reflects on choral singing from the perspective of resonance:

When everything comes together, choir singers experience a kind of 'deep resonance' both between their body and their mental state and between themselves and their fellow singers, as well as the formation of a collectively shared physical space of resonance (in church or in the concert hall, etc.). (Rosa 2016, 64)

According to Rosa, these resonant relationships explain why choral singing is so popular. The experience of deep resonance may similarly explain the appeal of choir tours to English cathedrals.

### ***Cathedralisation and Catholisation***

It is noteworthy that the singers described having this experience of coming home in a cathedral, which serves as the mother church of a region. In my dissertation, I discussed the concept of what I call 'cathedralisation', whereby even village churches in the Netherlands express a desire to perform English cathedral liturgy. However, when examining the responses to which elements singers wished to take home with them, it is striking that many are not specifically tied to a cathedral. Instead, they are rooted more in the Anglican or Catholic tradition, with many of these elements also found in parish churches. Without the singers perhaps realising it, their appreciation for overseas liturgy represents a (re)discovery of Catholic rituals. In this sense, we might cautiously speak not

only of ‘cathedralisation’ but also of a form of ‘Catholisation’. This raises the intriguing question of how such elements might be integrated into a Reformed context at home.

### ***Final remarks***

The final research question was: “How might understanding the motivations and experiences of the Dutch singers contribute to studies of cathedral music and religiosity more broadly?” We observe a transformative pilgrimage where the high vocal quality of the English choirs functions as an attractive model for Dutch choirs. For Dutch singers, it is an honour to sing in the cathedrals. For this reason, singers wish to participate in choir tours. Here, the second, more secular, definition of pilgrimage seems applicable to the aims of the singers: ‘A journey to a place connected with somebody/something that you admire or respect’. However, during the choir trips, the Dutch choral singers, believers and non-believers, loved to sing evensong in English cathedrals and they were touched by the music and cathedral liturgy, the tradition of daily prayer and the rituals. They described transcendental and religious experiences. They want to come back another time to have that experience again. So, indirectly, in this second instance, the first definition also becomes relevant: ‘a journey to a holy place for religious reasons’.

The data of the research disclose a tendency towards a changing religiosity: post-secular pilgrimages. Additionally, the experiences of Anglican cathedral liturgy seem to involve discovering aspects of Catholic liturgy. That is what singers wanted to bring back home to their Reformed congregations.

The high vocal standard of cathedral music and liturgy in England appears to serve as an inspirational model for Dutch choirs, motivating visits to English cathedrals and, as a significant factor in post-secular pilgrimages, functioning as a vehicle for spiritual, transcendent, and religious experiences.

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