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IN THE RECORDING STUDIO

Sonic Spaces for Community Building Across Religions: The Interreligious Choir of Frankfurt

by Ruth Illman and W. Alan Smith

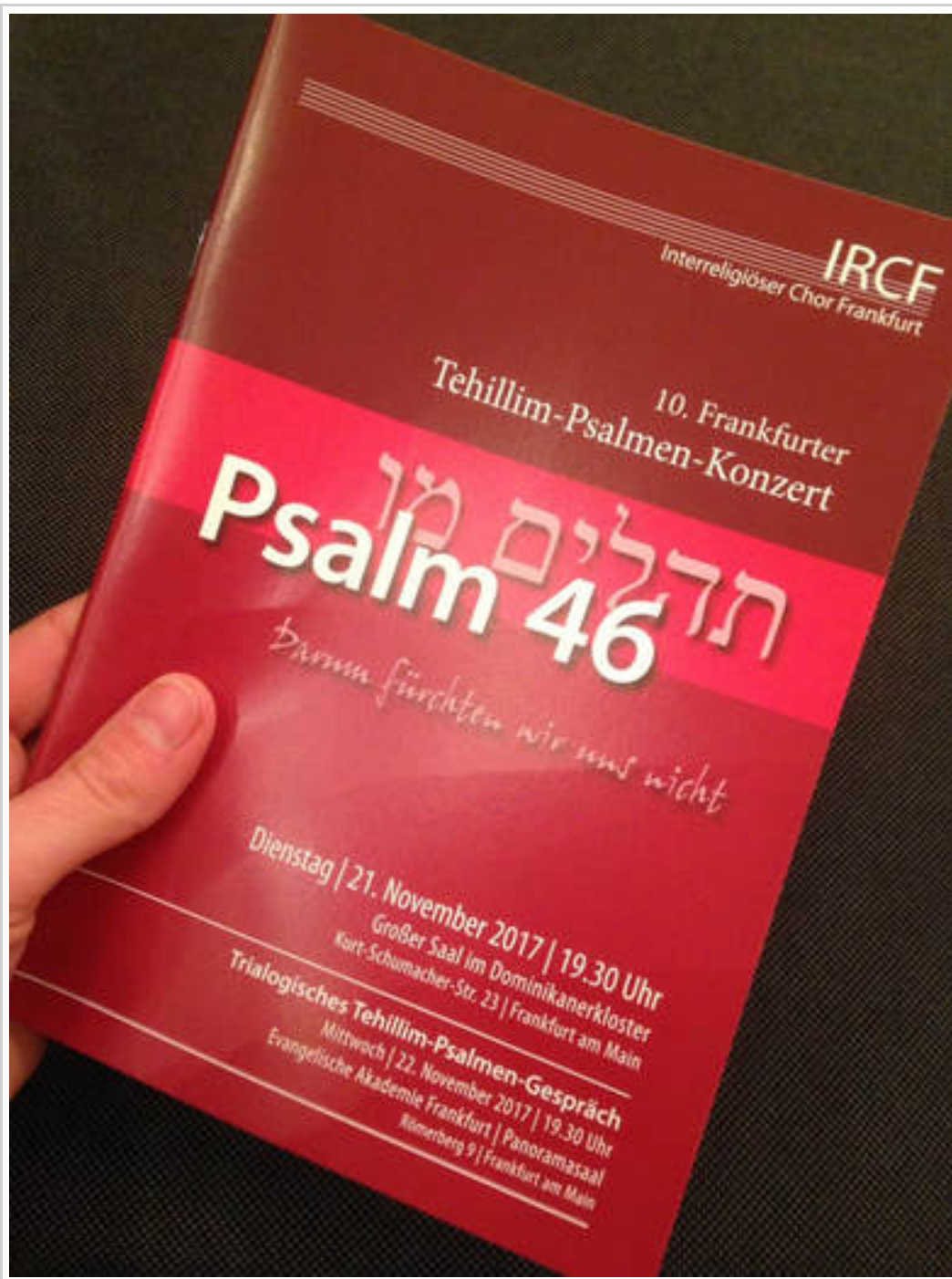
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Setting the Stage: Interreligious Sonic Space

The *Interreligiöser Chor Frankfurt* is an ambitious amateur German choir, working under the leadership of two visionary cantors, one Jewish and one Christian. Together, they intend to transform not just the lives of the singers in the choir, but of the surrounding society as well by showing how respectful dialogues can be built in and through music. Since its founding in 2012, the choir has rehearsed and performed two concerts per year—

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10th Tehillim-Psalmen Concert, program booklet, 2017, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 21 November 2017, photo courtesy of Ruth Illman

each of which has been devoted to the vision of “learning, tradition and respect” that inspired the creation of the group.¹ The core of the interreligious commitment of this choir is the *Tehillim-Psalmen-Project*, which has now produced ten concerts in its brief history. For each event, the cantors--*hazzan* Daniel Kempin and cantor Bettina Strübel, representing Jewish and Christian (Evangelical, or Lutheran) communities, respectively—select a psalm that will be the focus of the musical, educational, and dialogical work of the choir for that concert. The psalms were selected as the focal point of the choir’s repertoire because this collection of scripture takes advantage

of a direct Jewish/Christian textual connection, while also not creating much of a problem for the Muslims who participate in the project.² Ruth Illman attended the November 21-23, 2017, occasion of the choir’s attention to Psalm 46—well known as the text behind Martin Luther’s influential hymn, *Ein Feste Burg* (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”), an appropriate choice in a year that celebrated the 500th anniversary of Luther’s contributions to the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Approximately 250 persons attended the event.

This event featured a concert performance of ten choral settings of Psalm 46, ranging from the 16th through the 21st centuries and representing works by Jewish composers such as Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894) and a piece composed in Yiddish for the concert by the Argentinian Sephardi-Jewish musician Daniel Galay (born in 1945). Noted Christian composers such as Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706), Hugo Distler (1908-1942), and Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739), traditional Anglican and Reformed settings of the Psalm, and the famous hymn by Luther were performed, as well. The text of the Psalm appears in the program book in German, English, French, Swedish, Latin, Hebrew, and Yiddish.³ In addition, Syrian/German musician Samir Mansour (born in 1967) contributed his newly composed choral piece based upon the final two Surahs from the Qur’an—which featured a recitation of the Qur’anic text by a young Muslim

woman, Dilruba Kam. (The two cantors stated they had never heard women reciting the Qur'an in a public setting previously.)⁴ Many in the audience commented on the extraordinary experience of hearing the Qur'an recited so beautifully in a female voice. Each hymn was introduced by a member of the choir, each of whom gave the background for and reflected upon the pieces being sung and the theological ideas underlying the development of the program.⁵ This brought substantial depth to the concert and showed how deeply ingrained in the lives of the participants the process of developing and performing the concert had become.

The choir is composed of approximately fifty mostly amateur singers from the Frankfurt area—only the featured soloists and instrumentalists have been paid in the choir's history. Each concert is a free-standing event; there is no standard roster of singers or instrumentalists. Many of the singers are involved professionally with music. Others are pastors, educators, lawyers, medical doctors, students, and entrepreneurs. Choir members represent the Evangelical Christian (German Lutheran) community of Frankfurt predominantly, but the composition of the choir has also included persons from other Christian denominations as well as both Orthodox and "Liberal" Jews and Muslims. As both Kempin and Strübel admit, participation in the choir from the three religious traditions has been self-selecting—only those members of the religious communities who are "liberal" or "progressive" in approaches to their faith would be likely to commit to such a project. While many of the singers participate in religious communities regularly, some are self-consciously secular. At the same time, since some singers are committed to a religious tradition, efforts have been made to adjust rehearsal schedules to avoid conflict with standing religious holidays and festivals.

The concert was followed by a public panel discussion the day following the concert, held at a different location than the concert event. Three scholars—a Protestant professor of Old Testament, a Jewish biblical scholar, and a Muslim scholar of Islamic philosophy—organized the panel and led a discussion of theological topics related to Psalm 46. Attention was given to the images of God described in the psalm and the significance of those divine images for each of the three "Abrahamic" faiths.⁶ Many members of the choir chose to participate in the panel discussion and were active in the conversation that developed in this session.

A third piece of the choral concert experience was the remarkable interview Illman was able to conduct on November 23, 2017, with the two cantors whose vision and energy had both organized and maintained the project for five years and ten concerts. Among the values each leader identified as key to the success of the project were the relationships that developed among the diverse members of the choir through singing, discussing, and reflecting theologically on the biblical text. Kempin shared that he now considers Strübel his "third wife."⁷ (When asked what his second wife would be, he said, "My guitar!")

Psalm 46 is among a small handful of psalms that may be considered easily recognizable—along with Psalms 23, 121, and 100, and a handful of others.⁸ Walter Brueggemann claims the psalm is a crucial one, given our cultural situation of dismay and anxiety. The disappearance of old structures and signals of cultural order causes us to experience the world as falling apart.

A keen sense of God's powerful protective presence permits us to experience and embrace even that disorder with freedom and equanimity. Much may fall apart, but we are not finally in jeopardy. God is faithful. God is present. God is powerful. Nothing else matters in the face of that sure reality.⁹ David Bailey suggests Luther considered this text a significant one because in his reflections in the midst of excommunication, threats on his life, an uproar throughout Europe among his vocal supporters and his numerous denouncers, and even the development of bloody wars in the wake of his ecclesiastical "protests," "Psalm 46 gave him strength, and the hymn he composed based upon it he sang every day to remind himself" of the protective presence of God.¹⁰ Arie Folger analyzes the structure of the psalm and discusses a history of its rabbinic interpretation. He concludes the basic intent of Psalm 46 was to "instill confidence in the worshiper that Israel will ultimately prevail, and that the nations will have to recognize this by force of circumstance."¹¹

Psalm 46 as Sonic Space

Among Parker Palmer's many contributions to the field of practical theology has been a provocative image he has used to describe the task of teaching: "To teach is to create a space where the community of truth is practiced."¹² The work of practical theology attempts to do just that. Practical theology engages in practices that create spaces in the experience of persons and communities where individuals are enabled to dialogue with one another as fellow subjects. Palmer insists that community is the "essential form of reality, the matrix of all being . . . [W]e know reality only by being in community with it ourselves."¹³ At the center of community is a subject, and a subject is available for relationship; an object is not."¹⁴ As Ruth Illman and W. Alan Smith claim, "The kind of community Palmer describes is a community of truth in which 'truth does not reside primarily in propositions.' Rather, truth is the 'Secret . . . that sits in the middle and knows.'"¹⁵ Finally, Palmer believes a "community of truth" does not exist in an absolute or pure form; it exists only when it engages in the praxis in which knowledge, understanding, and personhood are transformed.¹⁶

The Psalm Project has proceeded as an effort to create such a space in the interreligious and musical community of Frankfurt, Germany. In their discussions concerning the recent performance by the IRCF, Kempin and Strübel emphasize that the work of this community has focused on the presentation of a concert, rather than engaging in an interreligious worship setting. While the original context of the psalm was most likely a liturgical one, the cantors described this event as liturgical, but outside of a "service."¹⁷

Jordi Savall, the Spanish musician who has composed for, performed with, and led interreligious orchestras for decades, was cited by Kempin and Strübel as a model of the use of music for achieving interreligious engagement. Savall has stated, "Music becomes the indispensable means of achieving a genuine intercultural dialogue between human beings from very different nations and religions, but who nevertheless share a common language, of music, spirituality and beauty."¹⁸ In Savall's opinion, one may not make music together with others for whom one does not feel sympathy and friendship.¹⁹ Similarly, Kempin and Strübel believe music provides the opportunity for the members of the choir to live together through

the rehearsals and performances, learning from one another, respecting one another, as well as respecting the differences in the religious traditions represented in the choir.²⁰

Like many others who reflect on the art form of music, the participants in IRCF believe music is uniquely capable of allowing persons to engage in a spiritual experience. It is well known that Luther saw music as secondary in value as a means of grace only to scripture and the verbal preaching of the gospel. Alejandro Garcia-Rivera describes music and other art forms as “living theology” and states, “theology lives in the music, imagery, and cultural symbols of those who must live out that which ‘textbook theology’ attempts to understand.”²² Jeremy Begbie has said that music is especially adept at enabling persons to access the spiritual dimension of human experience of the holy.²³ Frank Burch Brown states that music’s meaning, “lacks the conceptual precision of verbal language. Yet music is both more refined and more powerful than mere words when it comes to giving voice to the inner and ‘felt’ meaning of thoughts, especially once those thoughts are uttered within the orbit of musical expression.”²⁴ Kempin has said one can gain a deeper knowledge of theological and interpersonal truth when one sings than when one simply hears words about theological, doctrinal, and spiritual claims. When discussing the choir’s rehearsal for and performance of Mansour’s Arabic reflection on the Qur’an, Kempin emphasized the moments when the religiously diverse members of the choir sang Allah. There is something visceral and tactile about taking the words and the music, especially from another religious and/or cultural tradition, into one’s own mouth, tasting the vision of the “other,” listening carefully to the other voices, and creating something new again in performance. It becomes a physical and emotional experience and can become very personal.²⁵

Music as Dialogue

Savall refers to music as a “dialogue of souls,” where we “communicate with music, with art, with love and with other things that include spirit and sensitive contacts within the person.”²⁶ Kempin claims that the advantage of musical dialogues is the richness they create, especially for the singers who immerse themselves in a thoroughgoing and durable dialogue process as they prepare for each concert.²⁷

Richard Viladesau argues that one could regard the arts as theological texts that might be read and exegeted as one might a biblical text. In referencing Wasily Kandinsky’s provocative move of turning art’s “gaze” from that which is external to the self to gazing into the self, Viladesau addresses the “gaze of the other” that he sees inherent in the arts:

To the extent that we respond to this call positively, the other becomes for us not merely a function of our own existence or an object within the horizon of our minds, but another mysterious ‘self’ over against our own. . . . Dialogue is thus an event of purposely and freely uniting separate persons and is, therefore (implicitly, and to different extents) a potential act of

love. . . . Every true assertion is meant to contribute in some way to the other's being.²⁸

In the IRCF project, dialogue occurs at multiple levels. The most immediate is the dialogue inherent in music and musical performance. Even in what seems to be a solo performance, the singer or instrumentalist is carrying on an inner dialogue with another voice. That voice may be a poem, a biblical text, an inner yearning, a sound from nature, or the call of God—but there is inherently an “other” to which one is responding.

Martin Hoondert observes that singing together creates a certain kind of intimacy, a mutual bond of understanding and a sense of belonging: “Sound makes you engage with the other.”²⁹ Thomas Turino also addresses the “participatory values” in choral singing and claims that singing in a choir can enhance an in-depth sense of community, facilitating a participatory dynamism that bolsters engagement and feelings of belonging.³⁰ In each of the compositions performed in the concert, the focus of the choir has been on the interaction of the singers with the music, the audience’s interaction with the musicians as well as the music itself, and the music’s interaction with the biblical text. The guiding question for rehearsal as well as performance has been, “How do we do this work together?”³¹

Savall claims that, “[a]s a musician, the first thing you have to learn is dialogue.”³² In the performance of music, the differences brought to the task by each musician and his or her individual voice contribute to the richness of the art form. Yet, it is also true that, by committing one’s own “claim to truth” to the shared project of the performance, a new, creative voice emerges—that of the choir and its instantiation of the musical composition. In Savall’s vision of dialogue,

we are all different, but through music we can communicate without losing our individuality. Thus, neither difference nor similarity is seen as an essential quality but as far ends on a common relational scale of profound striving for the common good. Both poles are needed, but for Savall, it is a musical journey between them that counts as transformative principle of dialogue.³³

The compositions themselves represented each musician’s theological and exegetical dialogue with the text of Psalm 46—each greatly influenced by the understanding of God characteristic of the history of interpretation in which the composer was nurtured. As Kempin and Strübel stated, the rehearsal process for the concert was not limited to learning and repeating each musical voice’s parts. Rather, much of the rehearsal time was devoted to placing each musical piece within its own historical and religious setting. While not claiming to be theologians, Kempin and Strübel led the members of the choir in discussions of the text itself, with exegetical input from their theological partners. They insisted the rehearsals were not just “choir practice.” To the participants in this project, music cannot be regarded as just a nice ornament on the real theological work that would take place in the academy or in the cathedral, synagogue, or mosque.³⁴

A second level of dialogue occurred in the fellowship, intentional theological and musical work, shared meals, and commitment to interpersonal sharing that constituted formal rehearsals and less formal conversations around tables and circles of chairs. The early twentieth-century French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, emphasized the alterity that exists when one recognizes the worth in the Face of the other.³⁵ What is truly distinctive in Levinas's discussion of the other is that he insists on the other as a live, flesh-and-blood subject, rather than allowing the other to slip into an intellectual, conceptual object. Levinas emphasizes that the other to whom one relates and from whom one begins to identify one's own identity is always present as an actual person—a person with a Face.³⁶ When one relates with the Face of a specific, identifiable other, it becomes impossible to objectify or generalize that person.

Levinas contends that the Face of the other serves as an epiphany and that, "It is precisely because the You is absolutely other than the I that there is, between one and the other, dialogue."³⁷ The intimate relationship with the Face of the other actively, dynamically calls the self into relationship: "in the fact of summoning, of summoning me . . . to the unresolved alternative between Being and Nothingness, a questioning which, ipso facto, summons me."³⁸ Richard Osmer comments on this sense of being summoned by the Face of the other as characteristic of practical theology and emphasizes the surprising, unexpected nature of that summoning by describing the experience as one of being "brought up short" by the experience.³⁹ Bonnie Miller-McLemore claims that the arts, like practical theology, arrest one's attention, suspend one's self-absorption, help persons pay attention to truth claims external to ourselves, and help connect persons to the particularities of the other as other.⁴⁰

The procedural character of the Psalm Project encourages each participant to ask about her or his own emotional approach to what is being said within the psalm itself, and especially as the psalm is interpreted musically by the wide variety of composers over the course of several centuries. Kempin and Strübel describe the dialogue made possible by the project as "interweaving" the lives of the participants, without losing each person's individual identity.⁴¹ On occasion, Bibliodrama was also employed. Thus, the singers enacted the texts, not only by reading and analyzing them intellectually, but also by embodying them and trying them out in social settings. The dialogical approach of the choir is far-reaching and the engagement and commitment to interreligious dialogue seems to be the core value motivating the members of the choir to take part in the project.

The third level of dialogue present in the Psalm Project is its interreligious character. Kempin and Strübel claim that one of the more valuable aspects of the work of the choir has been the realization that every religion has a similar emphasis on ethics, primarily because each relates with God. The interreligious commitment behind the project has been demonstrated by the close collaboration of Kempin and Strübel. Each has done exhaustive research on the psalms as well as the selected musical repertoire related to the psalms. They have also met extensively with two Muslim singers over the course of the project, and these two conversation partners have contributed ideas for Muslim musical selections.

The regular scheduling of a day of theological reflection on the psalm chosen for each occasion in connection with each concert has been an intentional choice by those organizing the events, with approximately forty participants present and actively involved in the discussion, including several members of the choir from the preceding night. The triologue, in this case, among the leaders of the three faith traditions, discussed various topics related to Psalm 46, most prominently the images of God described in the psalm and their roots in, connection to, and significance for each tradition.

Praxis and Musical Practices

Joyce Mercer identifies a central feature of practical theology as “praxis or the mutual engagement of theory and practice for the sake of emancipatory action in the world . . . [that] creatively develops alternative visions and practices for human actions that work toward justice and the reign of God in particular situations of struggle.”⁴² Likewise, Bonnie Miller-McLemore states that practical theology is “a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities.”⁴³ Practical theology operates within what Miller-McLemore calls a “living human web” of relationships “through ministries of compassionate resistance, empowerment, nurturance, and liberation.”⁴⁴

Many scholars who work in theology and the arts have also called attention to an alternative vision presented by the arts. Robin Jensen claims that, when one attends to a work of art, one has an identifiable reaction to it and that “we are slightly or significantly different for having had the viewing, or the hearing—for having paid attention. Maybe only a single atom of our consciousness has shifted; maybe a landslide has taken place in our souls. . . . Still, something happens.”⁴⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah contends that it is our practices, not doctrinal or philosophical principles, that enable persons to live together.⁴⁶

Savall’s vision of music as “transformative practice” in interreligious contexts is based, in part, on his belief that one of the responsibilities accepted by musicians is that of building bridges among religious communities that are frequently separated by doctrinal and theological claims.⁴⁷ “The musical interplay becomes a powerful and moving image of the reciprocal and respectful dialogue that tears down walls of estrangement.”⁴⁸ Music can become, for Savall, a “dialogue of souls”—a genuine dialogue where we “communicate with music, with art, with love and with others things that include spiritual and sensitive contacts within the person.”⁴⁹ By weaving together musical dialogue with social and political issues the members of the choir may be able to achieve solidarity with one another.⁵⁰ Kempin and Strübel believe this is one of the most important issues of the day.⁵¹

Participants in the five years of the Psalm Project have been surprisingly loyal to the enterprise. How would one account for the apparent success of the project? A starting point for the answer may be a clear sense, among the participants as well as the wider community of Frankfurt, that there is a desperate need for the kind of interreligious dialogue that has been

practiced within the IRCF and the Psalm Project. Kempin and Strübel have said, repeatedly, that music—and especially choral music—can state political, social, and religious truths that have proven impossible to air, as well as be heard, through other forms of communication.⁵² The intentional commitment to connecting with one another that has been modeled by the process adopted by the IRCF has transformed the individuals who have participated in the choir itself and, it is hoped, the audience from the wider community as well.

Perhaps the nature of the rehearsal process itself is a key to this transformation. Even in an amateur, volunteer choir like this one, making good music requires a kind of listening one does not find in general conversation. To be a productive member of the tenor or alto section, one must work on one's own musicality and commit to understanding not only the lyrics, but also the reference to—in this case—the text of the psalm. Each singer within the choir must listen to the others within her or his own section. But he or she must also listen to each of the other sections of the musical ensemble with equal diligence to make sure the musical lines coming from one's own mouth are not only accurate and expressive, but are also in solidarity with the totality of the vocal "claim to truth" intended by the composer and elicited by the conductor.

Kempin and Strübel express hope that the sensitivity to the voice of the other, the sincerity of the dialogue that has developed among the participants of the choir, and the openness to listening carefully to the religious, cultural, and personal other in the choir and in the wider community will have wide-ranging effects in the city of Frankfurt. The solidarity among the partners in this project is crucial. Kempin compares the potential of this model of interreligious and musical dialogue to dropping a stone in still water and watching the impact of that small entrypoint grow with ever-increasing rings of influence until the entire body of water is affected.⁵³ Brueggemann reminds us that the crucial message of Psalm 46 is that, in the face of all forms of adversity, God is faithful, God is present, God is powerful.⁵⁴ In an era of explosive danger, enmity, anger, and hatred—especially among the three faiths represented in IRCF—the level of trust and commitment to the worth of the other modeled by this small choir project in Germany may offer a brief glimpse into the reign of God each faith tradition holds sacred. The arts in general, and in this case, music specifically, may speak a word of truth to power that has not been heard through other approaches. May it be so.

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