

Article

Religion in Sound: Exploring the Relationship Between Music and Religion in the Composition *Harmony of the Spheres* by Joep Franssens

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between music and religion through a case study of *Harmony of the Spheres* by the Dutch composer Joep Franssens. Situated within the context of religious change in the Netherlands, where institutional religion has declined while spiritual and sacred repertoires remain culturally significant, this article asks how musical experience can generate, mediate, or articulate forms of religiosity. Combining musicological analysis, theories of sound and religion, and a digital ethnographic reading of YouTube listener responses, this article argues that Franssens' music opens a space for non-institutional, sonically mediated religion. The composition's slow harmonic movement, repetition, tonal affirmation, textual unintelligibility, spatial sonority, and evocation of timelessness invite immersive listening and self-transcendence. Listener responses confirm that these musical techniques are frequently interpreted through religious and spiritual language, including references to God, angels, heaven, the sublime, peace, and mystical experience. The article argues that *Harmony of the Spheres* should not be understood as explicitly confessional music, but as a form of "religion in sound": an aesthetic and performative practice through which listeners encounter transcendence, community, and an unbound spirituality beyond traditional religious institutions.

Keywords: music; religion; spirituality; sound; performance

1. Introduction

In a programmatic 2012 article, religious studies scholar Rosalind Hackett made a case for "more sonically aware religious studies." For Hackett, "the sound of the sacred" should not be overlooked in religious studies research (Hackett 2012, p. 11). Isabel Laack, who specializes in the aesthetics of religion, wrote the entry on "music" in the *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, in which she not only addresses the use of music in various religious traditions and references to religious themes in popular and classical music, but also the relevance of music to individual religiosity (Laack 2015a). In this article, we address the challenge posed by Hackett and Laack and explore the role and significance of music in relation to religion. We bring together musicology and religious studies in an analysis of the music of the Dutch composer Joep Franssens (born in 1955).

In the Netherlands, atheists and agnostics form a majority, while religious groups constitute minorities. Data from the Pew Research Center identify the Netherlands as one of the least religious countries in Europe. In the *Pew Research on Religion in Europe*, the Dutch population features a clear, religiously unaffiliated majority.¹ Yet, in many music performances, in concert halls, churches and at festivals, religious music is programmed and many



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composers deal with religious themes and topics in their compositions. Nowhere in Europe is Bach's St. Matthew Passion as popular as in the Netherlands (van den Hemel 2020). This tension between the decline of Christian institutions in particular, on the one hand, and music that takes the sacred as its subject, on the other, is reflected in the position of the work of Joep Franssens. For many years, his compositions were neglected, and his colleagues hardly took him seriously as a composer. His music was considered "too beautiful", too tonal, and old-fashioned. The journalist Mark van de Voort wrote in 2009 in the Dutch newspaper *Brabants Dagblad*:

Joep Franssens has come a long way. National funding was cut off because, according to the committees, his music did not meet "modern music standards." "Too melodious" or "too audience-oriented" were among the criticisms (...). (van de Voort 2009)²

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Franssens' music has gotten more attention, especially the composition *Harmony of the Spheres*, a work in five movements for mixed choir a cappella, with added strings in the third movement, that was recorded by the Netherlands Chamber Choir conducted by Tonu Kaljuste in 2002 and released on CD in 2003. Outside the Netherlands, this *magnum opus* has been performed many times and is highly appreciated on YouTube. The increased interest in his work may be related to the popularity of other composers within the so-called "New Spirituality" movement in music, such as Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, Peteris Vasks and Henryk Gorecki (Cizmic 2008).

For both Franssens and many of his listeners, music seems to open a door to religion. More precisely, listeners describe their experiences with this type of music in language drawn from religion and spirituality as this article will show. Franssens' sincere search for spirituality and depth in his compositions shows that new forms of religion are being sought and found beyond the culturally embedded and institutional forms. His music goes beyond the secular, moving toward an uncertain, undefined religiosity. Performances of Franssens' compositions seem to invite listeners to lose themselves in music (Hoondert 2015; Hoondert et al. 2009), and many listeners accept this invitation. The increasing attention to his work after 2000, in the Netherlands and beyond, might indicate that interest in religion and spirituality remains strong (Zonderop 2018) and that the position of religion has become part of processes of translation and negotiation (Wijnia 2018).

To understand the relation between Franssens' music and religion, we will make use of both horizontal and vertical conceptions of transcendence and the psychological concept of self-transcendence. The main research question in this article is as follows: How can we understand the musical experiences of listeners to Franssens' music in relation to religion? A possible answer lies in the concept "transversality" (coined by Calvin Schrag) in which a non-dualistic approach to transcendence is promoted. Another possible answer, using a ritual studies approach, can be found in the concept of performativity that indicates that music acts upon listeners not primarily at a cognitive level but through the body. These concepts serve as analytical lenses in the Discussion section.

The outline of this article is as follows. First, we briefly review relevant studies on music and the sacred, spirituality, or religiosity. Second, we introduce Joep Franssens and his oeuvre. We pay particular attention to his statements in interviews about the spirituality of his music. Third, we discuss the composition *Harmony of the Spheres*. In this part, we use two distinct approaches. In the first round of analysis, we use the score as a source of data. In the second round of analysis, we analyze listener comments posted on YouTube.³ In the fourth and final section, we reflect on the position of religion in the Netherlands and Europe, of course using Franssens' oeuvre as a starting point.

2. Some Studies About Music and the Sacred

Music in relation to religion, or more generally to the sacred (Evans 2003), is a topic in various scholarly disciplines, such as theology, cultural studies, sociology of music, philosophy of music and psychology of music. In this literature review, we discuss several studies that have influenced our thinking about music and the sacred.

In the field of religious studies, Rosalind Hackett is one of the leading scholars. Her plea for making the “sound of the sacred” a centerpiece of research (Hackett 2012, p. 11) has had a profound impact on our research. Another leading scholar is Isabel Laack, who wrote the entry “music” in the *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, and a programmatic article on transdisciplinary research in sound, music and religion, Laack discusses the epistemological debate in this field (Laack 2015b). She strives for a non-normative approach regarding religious experiences in relation to music, excluding evaluations of the beliefs and truth-claims of people.

From a musicological and critical-cultural perspective Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas discuss the emergence of spirituality in or as part of contemporary music in the late twentieth century (Sholl and van Maas 2017). In the introduction to their book, they refer to, among others, Charles Taylor, Gianni Vattimo and Jean-Luc Marion for the positioning of contemporary spiritual music. In agreement with these scholars, they point out that the boundaries between the religious and the secular have become porous. They state that “Defining a contemporary spiritual music as secular, therefore, may be just as problematic as defining it as sacred” (Sholl and van Maas 2017, p. 8), and they frame contemporary spiritual music as an “open laboratory” where composers can ask questions regarding themselves or existence as such.

In the philosophy of music, Roger Scruton is an influential scholar. He wrote many books and articles about music, including *The Aesthetics of Music* (Scruton 1999) among others. In his writings, he tries to understand and describe the experience of transcendence that may be reached through listening to good music. Scruton argues that human beings have a hunger for the transcendent: “(. . .) the desire to find comfort in the unknowable is always with us, the knowable being so devastatingly devoid of it.” (Scruton 2015, p. 83) In listening to good music, we become part of a necessary forward progression. “In successful works of music there is a reason for each note, though not necessarily a reason that could be put into words. Each note is a response to the one preceding it and an invitation to its successor.” (Scruton 2015, p. 82) Thanks to this feature, we hear music with an intentionality; the music presents an “aboutness” of its own. Scruton describes our attentive listening to this aboutness of music as follows:

It is as though it is reacting in its own way to something that we cannot know or observe since this thing is buried in that space that we cannot enter, audible, so to speak, on its far horizon, but heard only by the music and not by us. Yet we move with the music’s sympathetic movement, and it is this, I think, which gives us the impression that we have been put in touch, in some way, with the transcendental. (. . .) The polyphony of Palestrina, the plangent *Tenebrae responsories* of Victoria, the solo violin Partitas of Bach, and the latter’s *The Art of Fugue* and *Goldberg Variations* all seem to move in sympathy to some source beyond the limits of this world but which finds an echo in the ‘sacred’ space of music. (Scruton 2015, p. 83)

A book that explores music as a meaningful structure is *Thresholds* by the music philosopher Marcel Cobussen. He describes music as “meaning without language” and focuses on the embodied, first encounter with music, which occurs before or beyond explication and comprehension. It is in the materiality of music itself that its meaning can be found; here, an encounter with another world takes place, “a world on this side that

nevertheless cannot be reduced to the knowable, the nameable, the frameable, the locatable, the familiar, and so on.” (Cobussen 2008, pp. 135–36).

From a theological perspective, we have been inspired by the 2012 book by Maeve Louise Heaney, *Music as theology*. In the Foreword, the theologian Jeremy Begbie summarizes the core of this book: “[Heaney] is convinced that music is an irreducible means of coming to terms with the world, a unique vehicle of world-disclosure, and as such, can generate a particular form of ‘understanding’: ‘there are things which God may only be saying through music.’ If this is so, it is incumbent on the theologian to listen.” (Heaney 2012, p. ix). In our opinion, the same is true for non-theologians: music conveys knowledge that differs from and adds to the knowledge that we perceive via other means, like reading or watching.

3. Joep Franssens and His Position Regarding Religion

Joep Franssens studied composition at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and continued his studies at the Rotterdam Conservatory. In 1988, he concluded his study period with the Composition Prize. In the world of contemporary music, he was an outsider because of his unique, distinctive style of composition (de Groot 2001). The beginning of the 21st century was a turning point in his life as a composer. In an article in the Dutch magazine *Vrij Nederland*, we read the following:

As a conservatory student, Joep Franssens left his teacher Louis Andriessen because he could not work according to the dogmas of modern music, in which the search for the right dissonances was of paramount importance. Franssens’ music was deemed “too melodious,” and the raw emotions in his spiritual music sounded suspicious. The result: fewer and fewer commissions and grants. The world of serious music is tiny. One year on the sidelines turns into twenty before you know it. And for someone who lives for his music, that really takes a toll. Talking about it moves him deeply.

But now the tide has turned. The new generation of musicians, such as the young piano virtuoso Ralph van Raat, does understand Franssens’ music and has added it to his repertoire. Late last year, *Grace* premiered at the Concertgebouw’s Saturday Matinee (...). “Now no one can ignore Franssens anymore,” concludes NPS host Hans Haffmans solemnly. Joep Franssens himself still can’t believe it. (Maseland 2009)⁴

Franssens’ oeuvre comprises pieces for various chamber music formations, solo works for piano, flute, violin and other instruments, orchestral compositions, and vocal music. He gained acclaim for the five-part cycle for choir *Harmony of the Spheres* (1994–2001, revised in 2011), as well as his orchestral works *Sanctus* (1996–2009), *Grace* (2008), *Bridge of Dawn* (2004–2011) and *Piano Concerto* (2015).⁵

During his lifetime and in his compositions, “harmony” seems to be a key word. Thus, he juxtaposes the anti-authoritarian attitude of the 1960s and its continuing effects in the late 20th century with the “harmonious society”, in which connection, contemplation, and sharing of knowledge dominate (Thijssen 2012, p. 47). As a composer, he develops his own style, opposing avant-garde music which is often dissonant and complex. Together with other composers, he searches for a new simplicity. The term “New Simplicity” was introduced by Wolfgang Becker in 1977. In 1978 a working group emerged, in the context of summer courses in Darmstadt, striving to bring music back into contact with the audience, from which the avant garde had broken loose, and to create a new musicality that was romantic, accessible, reverent to tradition. Other labels assumed are New subjectivity, New

interiority, New romanticism, New sensuality, New expressiveness, New classicism and New tone (Mănăllescu 2020).

Religiosity

As a derivative of the aforementioned New Simplicity, the so-called New Spirituality emerged, a movement in which simplicity and the search for depth converge. Internationally, this movement is associated with composers such as Arvo Pärt (1935) (Hillier 1997; Shenton 2012), John Tavener (1944–2013) (Dudgeon 2003), Peteris Vasks (1946) and Henryk Gorecki (1933–2010) (Thomas 1997). In the Netherlands, the main representatives of the New Spirituality movement are Franssens, Daan Manneke (1939) (van der Leeuw and Arts 2009) and Coen Vermeeren (1962). Pärt broke with modernism in the 1980s, in which complexity, constructivism and sound research dominated. He put religion and emotionality in their place. This started with the pieces *Fratres* and *Tabula rasa* (both composed in 1977), in which he created space for contemplation. We characterize the music of the composers belonging to the New Spirituality movement as “affirmative music” with a religious connotation: it consists of comprehensible, tonal harmonies and does not intend to alienate the listener. Communication with the listener is key (Cobussen 2007), next to a framework that links the compositions to religion or spirituality. As a composer, Franssens maintains a radically anti-modernist aesthetic, as he explained in an interview: “The music of Boulez and Stockhausen disgusts me, as does the critical, sceptical undertone of modernism. I am for *Begeisterung*, for enthusiasm, engagement, hedonism for my part, and the abundance and the generosity of Catholicism.” (Voermans 1999)⁶ Michael van Eekeren summarizes the musical principles of the New Spirituality as diametrically opposed to those of modernism: repetition and stasis versus developmental form, tradition and identification versus innovation and experiments, communication versus individualism, tonality versus atonality, intuitive simplicity versus academic complexity, and spiritual narrative (form + content) versus rational abstract (form = content) (van Eekeren 1999a).

The biographies of composers associated with the New Spirituality movement show that they place themselves, implicitly or explicitly, in a religious tradition. Their music is to a greater or lesser extent an expression of their religiosity. Joep Franssens distinguishes himself in this regard by taking a more religiously neutral position. He says: “I did not have a religious upbringing. I am not Russian-Orthodox like Pärt, or Catholic like Gorecki. I stay away from everything to do with the institutionalization of religion. But there is something. There is more than we can perceive.” (van Eekeren 1999b)⁷ Although Franssens does not show any adherence to a specific religion, he does indicate that his music is “spiritual”. Some of his compositions have titles that refer to religion, e.g., *Sanctus* (1996) and *Grace* (2008). In other compositions, Franssens makes use of religious texts (e.g., lyrics by Hildegard von Bingen in *Bridge of Dawn*, 2004–2011), philosophical texts (e.g., Spinoza in *Harmony of the Spheres*) or texts from non-western religious traditions (e.g., the Bhagavad Gita in *Bridge of Dawn*).

In several interviews, Joep Franssens articulated what inspires him. Nature is an important source of inspiration. In an interview in the Dutch newspaper *Dagblad van het Noorden*, Franssens says:

In nature, everything is interconnected and flows as one. Nature is a window into your own wholeness. I believe that the purpose of being human is to strive for wholeness—to overcome the limitations and shortcomings of your own ego and connect with the whole. From there, you can connect with the universe and with your surroundings. (van Schaik 2009)⁸

Franssens understands religion not as an institutional power or source of dogmatic knowledge, but as a means of connecting people. Religion is derived from *religio*, to connect, Franssens said.

The Dutch composer and musicologist Rokus de Groot analyzed Franssens' compositions to understand how spirituality, a rather vague label according to De Groot, is translated into music; in other words, he tried to pinpoint Franssens' compositional strategies (de Groot 1999). Although De Groot does not use *Harmony of the Spheres* for his analysis, his observations are valuable and applicable to *Harmony*.

According to De Groot, Franssens tries to stage an overwhelming sense of presence of something monumental and intellectually difficult to grasp. The central technique is what De Groot calls affirmation. Franssens often concentrates on a single musical object: one pitch, one chord, one melodic curve, or one repeated pattern (see also Hobson 2010, pp. 20–24). These repeated patterns are embedded in a continuous flow of music; Franssens avoids cadences, sharp breaks, and conventional phrase endings (see also Hobson 2010, p. 66). Instead of developing contrasting themes, the music repeatedly confirms the same sonorous world that is built from accessible harmonic and melodic materials: diatonic writing, consonant sonorities, and major triads. De Groot sees this as part of the affirmative character of the music. The music does not hide its beauty behind modernist complexity or alienation.

The sense of presence is not simply transparent. De Groot's second key idea in his analysis of Franssens' compositional strategies is veiled presentation. Franssens often makes the source and boundaries of sounds hard to identify. Voices may be blended with instruments so that the listener cannot clearly tell whether a sound is vocal or instrumental. Text may be present, but not intelligible as language. Entries of voices or instruments are faded in rather than accented; endings are blurred rather than clearly marked. As a result, the listener cannot easily determine where a melodic curve begins or ends. The musical object is strongly present, yet its outline escapes analytical control. De Groot therefore sees a paradox in Franssens' technique: the music is affirmative, but what it affirms is often indeterminate. It overwhelms the listener with fullness, continuity, and consonant sounds, while simultaneously preventing the listener from grasping the sound as a clearly traceable object. This is crucial to its spiritual effect. The music seems to point toward something present, but to what it refers remains open. As such, Franssens' music is an invitation to surrender to the sound. For De Groot, this is where the spiritual ambition of the music becomes most evident. Franssens composes situations in which the listener may experience awe, spaciousness, and a temporary loosening of individual self-consciousness.

4. Harmony of the Spheres

Harmony of the Spheres is Franssens' most extensive choral work. It consists of five symmetrically conceived movements, scored for SSAATTBB chorus with the addition of a full string orchestra for Movement III. It took the composer seven years (1994–2001) to compose this hour-long work, using texts from the 17th-century philosopher Benedict De Spinoza (1632–1677). Franssens explains the content of *Harmony* as follows:

Harmony of the Spheres expresses a holistic worldview. The various spheres of life can exist in harmony with one another, just like the different notes within a single chord, while still retaining their own individuality. The middle section is about God. Where people treat one another with sincere friendship, there the divine is present. At least, that is how I have interpreted Spinoza's writings. (Spel 2002)⁹

In what follows, we use two approaches to gain insight into the meaning of *Harmony of the Spheres*. First, we address the composition itself and analyze the work from a musicological perspective, responding to both Hackett's and Laack's plea for a sonically

inspired approach to religious studies. “Meaning” here refers to the so-called intrinsic meaning that is the result of an interplay between compositional means and the listener’s possible reactions to these (Koopman 1999). The guiding question is as follows: What kind of responses does the music evoke when we listen to it intensely? Second, we analyze *Harmony* from the perspective of the listener and address listener reactions on YouTube, analyzing how listeners phrase their (emotional) responses to this composition.

4.1. Approach 1: Analysis of the Score

Harmony of the Spheres has been thoroughly analyzed by David Hobson in his dissertation: *Joep Franssens’ Harmony of the Spheres: A Conductor’s Analysis* (Hobson 2010). As said, *Harmony* has a symmetrical structure. Parts I and V employ a modulation principle of progressing through the circle of fifths. Movements II and IV use only two or three modulations; the middle movement rotates around the same key (three flats) the whole time. Franssens uses excerpts of Spinoza’s *Ethica* (published posthumously in 1677). The selection of texts corresponds to the symmetrical structure of the composition. The two outside movements I and V describe people and their relationships with other people. Movements II and IV depict autonomy and freedom. Movement III deals with the nature of the divine. Hobson writes: “By juxtaposing themes of God’s nature, human nature, and human communion, the listener gains a glimpse of Spinoza through the lens of Franssens.” (Hobson 2010, p. 11) It is important to note that the way the text is set in *Harmony* prevents understanding. Franssens elongates the syllabification of the text to such an extreme that individual words are no longer intelligible. It might be that in and through his composition, Franssens explores the *idea* behind the text, but from the composition itself, without additional clarification, the listener just hears slowly developing sounds, sung by a choir (with added strings in part III) with no clear meaning as reference to realities outside the music. The duration of the composition, the unintelligibility of words that are sung and therefore present as content, the expanded tonality (exploring the whole universe of tonalities), and the slowly progressing chords lead, or might lead, to an experience of spaciousness and timelessness. One feature of *Harmony* is Franssens’ use of the circle of fifths, allowing the tonality to constantly shift. Through this circle-of-fifths technique the pitches constantly alter, which leads to an undeniable sense of the music progressing towards something (Hobson 2010, p. 44). The sympathetic listener becomes part of this movement towards an unknown future. In the booklet accompanying the CD *Harmony of the Spheres*, performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, Tõnu Kaljuste, conductor, the reviewer writes that Franssens seems to explore “a territory in which present, past and future no longer constitute dialectical antitheses, but different realisations of a timeless, creative power.”¹⁰ The sound itself may recall Renaissance polyphony, albeit in an entirely new incarnation, and might, as such, evoke religious connotations in the listener. We recognize in *Harmony* the same compositional techniques as described by Rokus de Groot and the intention to create a composition that invites one to a spiritual journey, whatever that route might be.

4.2. Approach 2: Listeners’ Experiences

As part of the analysis, the total number of 122 top-rated comments were analyzed under the video “Joep Franssens-Harmony of the Spheres”.¹¹ At the time of writing this article (June 2026), the piece could be found posted on the YouTube channel “Dutch Composers” which had 9.97K subscribers. The video was made available in November 2012; it has 768,071 views and a total number of 428 comments. The video contains the full cycle of five movements, performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir with Tõnu Kaljuste as a conductor at Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, recorded in 2002.

The comment section of the piece contained a broad range of appreciative reactions, likes, and comments. Although most listeners encounter this performance individually, the digital space has become an outlet for listeners to exercise their musical expertise and connect with fellow admirers of Franssens' artistic genius. The range of upvotes per reaction varied from 0 to 102. The broad and interactive participation signaled high interaction among the users in the comment section as individuals were bound by mutual understanding and appreciation for the piece.

The admiration of *Harmony of the Spheres* extends far beyond the composer's homeland borders with some of the languages of the comments including English, Russian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, and French. The linguistic range, as well as the upvotes on the comments written in different languages, demonstrate a wide international scope of the audience attracted by the video.

In terms of data analysis, the current set collected for this research gives a substantial sample of Franssens' audience.¹² The selection of the cases validates the choice of the digital ethnographic research method. Namely, both the number of comments and their international spread give us a useful impression of the experiences generated by this online performance.

After an in-depth analysis of the materials, we can conclude that most of the top-rated reactions clustered around a set of experiences. The categories were classified based on the content of the message which applied to several themes. For instance, some of the criteria for categorization included a reference to the composer, fellow commentators, oneself, God, or the YouTube channel. Stylistically, many of the reactions included exclamation marks, caps lock font, short sentences such as "Wow!", or "Thanks!", and links to the specific time in the video they liked. In this way, users employed the technological means available to them to share their admiration for the piece. In total, this research identified personal (51 comments), aesthetic (86), religious (39), emotional (17), referring to the artist and/or a piece (43), grateful (23), indicating inspiration (3), and interactive (11) types of comments.

Most of the reactions were categorized as belonging to multiple categories at the same time. For instance, elaborate comments such as this one, "Sounds very Renaissance, it doesn't take away from the remarkable, sublime beauty of this cycle. First time hearing and I like it a lot", have been identified as personal ("first time hearing and I like it a lot"), aesthetic ("remarkable", "beauty"), religious ("sublime"), and referring to the artist and piece ("beauty of this cycle", "sounds very Renaissance").

Personal comments typically described users' actions and feelings in the moment when they listened to Franssens' composition. For example, one user writes: "I'm deeply moved. . . moved nearly to tears". Other instances include fans' comments: "I am speechless", "I am stunned; Until today I had been unaware", "I simply couldn't stop hearing", "The whole work is very appealing", and even comments as elaborate as "I don't know how to return to the world; seriously afraid to leave my house right now. worried the first loud unexpected sound I hear will give me a heart attack".

Reactions including personal appeal have often received the highest number of upvotes by individuals. Seeing someone describe what they have experienced makes users exercise a technological affordance provided by YouTube, an upvote, to show that they recognize the similarities.

Comments that dealt with aesthetic experiences typically contained such keywords as "amazing", "perfect", "beautiful", "wonderful", and "deep" as a way to express listeners' fascination with the artist's work. Some described *Harmony of the Spheres*, among others, as "color and sound blending together into a new concept" and "the composition glistening with charm and beauty".

Religious reactions were categorized based on the fact of whether or not listeners referred to a range of biblical creatures and being in spiritual states in the comment section. Individuals discussed angels, the dimensions the piece takes them to, spiritual ways, souls, divinity, and sublimity of the music. One of the comments with a total of five upvotes reveals a truly eye-opening experience:

About a month ago I was woken up by a beautiful sound that sounded far away. I first thought (its angels singing) but it was just like this but I do remember hearing harps. I had to look it up come to find out Music of The Spheres. I am so grateful that God gave me the chance to listen to the natural beauty at least once in my lifetime. And thank you for making this to remind me of how beautiful God is.

Another user added that the piece is in fact “divine art” and that “it’s like entering some kind of Heaven where all heroes go when they die”. Individuals also raised fundamental existential questions, “Really get to the heart of what it is to be a human, or non-human”, and revisit the themes of time and space: “as if I were being transported into a cosmic vapor of invention and nostalgia”. Among other deeply spiritual reactions, listeners refer to the piece as “a true marvel”, “sublime peace”, “shelter of peace”, “sublime”, “a specially deep feeling”, “this mystical music”, and “ethereal spiritual music to soothe the soul”. Some of the reactions under the video indicate inspiration felt through the music. Except for simply “feeling inspired”, several listeners take it a step further describing the experience as inspiring “hope in the midst of chaos and noise”.

Emotional comments described how individuals feel while they listen to the piece. They express their fascination by both metaphorically and directly describing their state. In this way, some commenters state that they were “moved nearly to tears”, or that “Harmony of the Spheres—written for heartstrings apparently”. Listeners have expressed their appreciation of the music by stating “love it”, “wow!”, “love this!”, and “I am excited”. Exclamation marks and caps locks are commonly used in this section to reflect positive emotions.

Some listeners expressed their expertise in what concerns the artist and his music. In the comment section, they shared their knowledge about the piece: “the ending of movement 3 is absolutely perfect”, “important minimalist composer”, “glad that Tonu Kaljuste has discovered Franssens music, perfect for the ECM label”, and “the fourth movement is my favorite of all the five unaccompanied movements”. By referring to the musical scene, the listeners indicate their status as people in the know as opposed to many of the bystanders discovering the piece with the help of the platform’s algorithmic affordances.

Another characteristic of the artistic section is that users’ reactions become highly comparative. Individuals try to relate their experience of the sound and find common references for their artistic evaluation: “Sounds very Renaissance”, “I put this piece next to ‘Te Deum’ and ‘De Profundis’ by Arvo Part in my favorite choral music pile. I am excited to think of all of Franssens’ work I’ve yet to be astounded by”, “The composer alludes to the main theme of Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring”, and “elements of medieval choral music”. The users interacting with these types of comments need to have deep knowledge of classical music to understand the specific details referred to by others; for instance, “gregorian chant of the future. vivaldi composed a piece anticipating minimalists”.

Few comments address Franssens personally: “Joep, dit is een juweel van een compositie”, “Joep, I am so happy to read all these delighted fans of yours”. Others refer to the musical talent of the composer: “What a gift you have sent us Joep Franssens”, “Franssens music makes you see what you hear”, “That music from Franssens is a shelter of peace”. This particular section of the artist-referring comments creates a tight and dynamic

parasocial bond with the composer through the efforts of the fans who acknowledge his gift and listeners who might know him in person.

Interactive reactions feature individuals greeting each other, posting questions under the video, as well as sharing their favorite moments in Franssens' piece with fellow users. Some of the questions asked in the comment section are: "Can someone please tell me how to pronounce his name phonetically?", "What does harmony of the spheres mean? Like does anyone know how he came up with this?", and "Is there anyone who could possibly share lossless of this amazing work with me? Would be greatly appreciated". The indications of favorite moments usually feature additional comments such as "40:55 complete beauty" or "Listen from 4:36". The section proved to be the most dynamic one as listeners gathered together to practice the exchange of information on the piece.

Overall, the comment section on YouTube of Franssens' *Harmony of the Spheres* facilitates a digital space for a diverse, interactive, and spiritual community. United by the appreciation of the piece, listeners shared their experiences of the music in a personal manner by describing their feelings, opinions and admiration. Individuals participated in a dynamic information exchange by sharing religious and artistic points of reference for others to pick up.

5. Reflection: A Musical Understanding of Religion

The increasing appreciation for Franssens' music, his anti-modernist style of composing, and the consciously sought exploration of spiritual, cosmic dimensions of existence, which is recognized by his fans, lead to a new understanding of religion in the 21st century and the relation between art and religion. One might argue that art is not in the service of religion nowadays but has itself become religion. In this final part of the article, we reflect on the results from the two analytical approaches, exploring in-depth the relationship between music, spirituality, and religion. From a musical-analytical perspective, we would like to highlight two elements: identification and performativity. Subsequently, we reflect on the directions music gives us from the notion of "transcendence".

5.1. Identification and Performativity: A New Epistemology

As noted above, one of the aims or desired results of the anti-modernist style of composition is communication with the listener. Franssens composes music that is new and at the same time familiar, and in this way he resists the experiences of alienation and misunderstanding that many compositions of contemporaries evoke. The analysis of the comments related to the YouTube video of *Harmony of the Spheres* revealed that listeners identify with his music, and this identification leads, for some of them, to deep, existential experiences. Philosopher Erik Heijerman has explained this experience as follows:

That identification can be so complete that the boundaries between us and the music can disappear. Then we lose ourselves in the music, and it seems to confront us with another world in which we can become completely absorbed. That is an experience of transcendence, of becoming absorbed in something that transcends us as finite beings. The desire to transcend our own selves is one of life's most fundamental themes. Music offers us the opportunity to do so. (Heijerman 2009, p. 45)¹³

The identification with the music is closely related to the performativity of the music in which the role of the body and the senses is key (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Marcel Cobussen, specialized in auditory culture and music philosophy, distinguishes between cognitive listening to a composition, on the one hand in which interpretation and finding meaning outside the music itself are key, and listening to music as "an event which grips my body" (Cobussen 2008, p. 130) on the other. The analysis of the musical structure of *Harmony*

of the *Spheres* shows that Franssens creates a kind of spaciousness and timelessness. This invites listeners to stay with the music, even to surrender. The aboutness of the composition is not outside the music but is the materiality of the music itself. In other words, the music does not re-present, but presents, as we have seen in the analysis of Franssens' compositional strategies by Rokus de Groot. This presence is referred to by Rokus de Groot in one of his publications as immediacy. "Music appears to make it possible to experience the immediacy of being present" (de Groot 2003, p. 18)¹⁴. Cobussen calls this encounter with music "spiritual" (Cobussen 2008, p. 133): it is an experience of the materiality of music through the body and senses, an encounter that takes place beyond (or before) reflection, structuring, and interpretation and leads to a deconstruction of the opposition between subject and object. The embodied, physical experience of the music leads to a strong focus on the music or sound itself. From a psychological perspective, we might call this a state of "flow", where you can do only one thing, and that is listening as an experience of being absorbed by the sound. Psychologist William James (1842–1910), founder of transpersonal psychology, refers to this kind of state as a "unitive experience", which is an experience of unity with the environment, other people, and the universe (Shusterman 2000, 2018), experiences that we recognize in the responses by listeners in the comments on YouTube. The Canadian liturgist and musician Becca Whitla pleads for a new epistemology in relation to singing and other ways of "musicking" (Small 1998), another way of knowing that she refers to as "sentipensar": a thinking that is felt (Whitla 2017). In relation to music, we can refer to this epistemology as "acoustemology": a way of getting to know realities (epistemology) through sound (acoustics). The emotional and spiritual comments as responses to the YouTube video testify to the relevance of *sentipensar*, as the emotional exclamations are often combined with references to spiritual notions. Listeners describe Franssens' composition as a "shelter of peace" and add both emotion words like "wow" and "excited" and religious terms like "angels" and "sublime". It turns out that the embodied experience of being with the music and being immersed in the *Harmony of the Spheres* is, by many listeners, expressed in religious or religious-like language.

5.2. Transversality and Community

What can we infer from Joep Franssens' music about religion in Dutch culture? In our opinion, two elements emerge from the analysis of *Harmony of the Spheres* and listeners' reactions to it. The first observation is the vibrant community of listeners, visible and traceable in the comments related to the YouTube performance of *Harmony of the Spheres*. As said, individuals share religious and artistic points of reference for others to pick up. Community building exercised among listeners in the comment section has become evident in appearing frequently through active collaboration, responses, likes and upvotes. The digital space of YouTube facilitates a community of interest and functions as "affinity space", to use James Paul Gee's concept (Gee 2004; Gee and Hayes 2011). In the comments we can recognize Durkheimian effervescence (Collins 2004), but in a new form, a new space, and without the embodied co-presence of all participants. But the effervescence as such is an embodied, performative, and for many of the listeners a transformative experience. In the digital environment of YouTube, we see a new type of religious or religious-like community emerging. Perhaps the difference with a religious community, gathered at one place such as a church, is not as great as it may seem at first glance.

The second observation begins with the embodied experience of the materiality of the music or, in Rokus de Groot's words, the surrender to the sound. In the brief analysis of the score, we have tried to point out how the compositional strategies of *Harmony of the Spheres* leads, or may lead, to an experience of spaciousness and timelessness. Some listeners, it turns out, connect this listening experience with religious connotations, or at least they use

religious language to make sense of the listening experience. The immersive experience of the music leads the listener to a transpersonal experience, reaching beyond the self. Other listeners describe their listening experience in emotion words and exclamations. It seems that in the listening experiences the separation between immanence and transcendence is dissolved; the horizontal and vertical dimensions flow into each other. Calvin Schrag synthesizes this in the concept of “transversality” in which the spatial metaphors of verticality, related to transcendence, versus horizontality, related to immanence, are abandoned in favor of a “diagonal orientation” (Schrag 2007). Schrag quotes the German philosopher Martin Heidegger to describe this ascending, diagonal motion: “Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy can the essence of divinity be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought and said what the word ‘God’ is to signify.” (Schrag 2007, p. 215). Ferdia Stone-Davis applies the concept of transversality to music. We quote her at length:

The music event relies upon the destabilization of inside and outside, involving the commingling of sound and the human body. (...) The music event is also simultaneously universal and particular (in some sense eternal and temporal), since it occurs in time but has its own time. (...) Moreover, the music event is immaterial and material: it is produced through physical means and yet when heard as music is not simply an event in physical space. It is a movement within a space of its own. (...) Music issues a call to which responses are made, forming a point of orientation and offering interconnection on the horizontal plane whilst remaining resistant to appropriation (...). (Stone-Davis 2015, pp. 4–5)

Joep Franssens offers a new gateway to spirituality and religion, i.e., music that encourages listening and invites to immersion in the materiality of the music. He thus stands in an international movement that seeks depth and spirituality through the means of music, in a way that fits the marginalized position of institutional religion in Dutch society. It is not the music that is typically Dutch, nor Franssens’ fans—he reaches an international audience. What is notable is that Franssens does not identify with any specific religious tradition, unlike fellow composers such as Pärt, Tavener and Gorecki. He keeps references to religion vague; nowhere do his compositions become explicitly religious. Just as listeners meander from aesthetic and emotional experiences to the more or less religious ones, Franssens’ music represents an unbound spirituality found in sound.

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Notes

- ¹ See www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/religion-in-europe/ (accessed 29 June 2026).
- ² Original Dutch text: “Joep Franssens heeft een lange weg afgelegd. Landelijke subsidiestromen werden stopgezet omdat zijn muziek volgens de commissies niet aan de ‘moderne muziek maatstaven’ voldeed. ‘Te welluidend’ of ‘te publieksgericht’ luiden (...) de oordelen.”
- ³ This second round of analysis was conducted by the second author; all other sections were written by the first author, who bears final responsibility for this article.
- ⁴ Original Dutch text: “Als conservatoriumstudent vertrok Joep Franssens bij leermeester Louis Andriessen, omdat hij niet kon werken volgens de dogma’s van de moderne muziek, waarin vooral het zoeken naar de juiste dissonanten belangrijk was. Franssens muziek werd ‘te welluidend’ bevonden en de braakliggende emoties van zijn spirituele muziek klonken verdacht. Het gevolg: steeds minder opdrachten en subsidies. Het wereldje van de serieuze muziek is piepklein. Eén jaar op de reservebank worden er voor je het weet twintig. En dat gaat iemand die leeft voor zijn muziek niet in de kouwe kleren zitten. Het praten erover emotioneert hem. Maar nu is het tij gekeerd. De nieuwe generatie musici, zoals de jonge pianovirtuoos Ralph van Raat, begrijpt Franssens muziek wél en zet het op zijn repertoire. Eind vorig jaar ging *Grace* in première bij de Zaterdagmatinee van het Concertgebouw (...). ‘Nu kan niemand meer om Franssens heen,’ concludeert NPS-presentator Hans Haffmans plectig. Joep Franssens zelf kan het nog niet geloven.”
- ⁵ Information retrieved from Joep Franssens’ website: www.joepfranssens.com (accessed 5 April 2022).
- ⁶ Original Dutch text: “Ik walg van de muziek van Boulez en Stockhausen, net als van de kritische, sceptische ondertoon van het modernisme. Ik ben voor *Begeisterung*, voor enthousiasme, engagement, hedonisme van mijn kant, en de overvloed en vrijgevigheid van het katholicisme.”
- ⁷ Original Dutch tekst: “Ik heb geen religieuze opvoeding gehad. Ik ben niet Russisch-orthodox zoals Pärt, of katholiek zoals Gorecki. Ik blijf weg van alles wat te maken heeft met de institutionalisering van religie. Maar er is iets. Er is meer dan we kunnen waarnemen.”
- ⁸ Original Dutch text: “In de natuur is alles met elkaar verbonden en gaat alles op in een stroom. De natuur is het venster op je eigen heelwording. Ik denk dat het de bedoeling van de mens is, dat je streeft naar heelheid. Dat je je beperkingen en de tekortkomingen van je eigen ego overkomt en verbinding maakt met het geheel. Van daar uit kun je verbinding maken met het universum en met je omgeving.”
- ⁹ Original Dutch text: “*Harmony of the Spheres* geeft uitdrukking aan een holistisch wereldbeeld. De verschillende sferen van het leven kunnen met elkaar in harmonie zijn zoals de verschillende noten binnen één akkoord, en daarbij toch hun eigen indivi dualiteit behouden. Het middendeel gaat over God. Waar mensen elkaar met oprechte vriendschap bejegenen, daar is het goddelijke aanwezig. Dat is althans hoe ik Spinoza’s teksten heb geïnterpreteerd.”
- ¹⁰ John Borstlap in booklet accompanying the CD *Harmony of the Spheres*, performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir, Tõnu Kaljuste, conductor.
- ¹¹ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLkmMEEiNBk (accessed on 26 June 2026).
- ¹² Throughout the research, users’ personal information was taken seriously. Any identifiable information, such as people’s YouTube usernames, profile pictures, or any other sensitive details they shared about themselves in the comment section, was neither saved nor interpreted as a part of the current research.
- ¹³ Original Dutch text: “Die identificatie kan zo volledig zijn dat de grenzen tussen ons en de muziek kunnen verdwijnen. Dan verliezen we onszelf in de muziek, en lijkt zij ons te confronteren met een andere wereld waarin we volledig kunnen opgaan. Dat is een ervaring van transcendentie, van een opgaan in iets dat ons als eindige wezens overstijgt. Het verlangen ons eigen ik te overstijgen is een van de oerthema’s van het leven. Muziek levert daar een mogelijkheid voor.”
- ¹⁴ Original Dutch text: “Muziek blijkt de sensatie mogelijk te maken van de onmiddellijkheid van aanwezig zijn.”

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