



THE FRANKFURT TEHILLIM-PSALMS-PROJECT

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I want to thank you very cordially for inviting me to give this talk. It is a great honour and responsibility to be able to speak to this group – above all for me as a musician whose medium is more the sung word. But the Frankfurt Tehillim-Psalms-Project has to do not just with music, but with multiple sounds of many disciplines – a linguistic-musical and religious polyphony.

After seven Tehillim projects all together in about 3½ years, preparing this talk was a good opportunity to look back. I once again became aware of how complex the various aspects of the project are and what great opportunities it brings with it for interfaith dialog also using artistic means. I am very interested and am looking forward to your feedback and perhaps also to suggestions for further development.

A brief Description of the Project

Over a period of several months of rehearsing, the Frankfurt Interfaith Choir (IRCF) studies various Jewish and Christian musical settings to a chosen Psalm. In the closing concerts that are combined with conversation, the music enters into dialog with a rabbinic and a Christian interpretation of the Psalm. The artistic leadership is with Daniel Kempin, hasan in the Egalitarian Minyan of the Frankfurt Jewish Community, and me, a Protestant cantor working freelance for the past five years.

In my explanations, I shall refer mainly to the last project with Psalm 104. I have brought a few program brochures as well as excerpts from concerts on CDs, which you are welcome to take with you or buy, as the case may be.

1. Musical Points of View

When doing research for the Tehillim projects, there is every time an astonishing variety of the most varied musical settings to the Psalms. When you think about it exactly, this is not surprising, since the Psalms have a history of effectiveness that spans thousands of years, both in Judaism and in Christianity. Even if only the last centuries are in our musical field of vision – or it might be better to say “field of hearing” – the abundance of compositions is impressive, for example from Nussach to contemporary synagogue music. Some settings are present in the general consciousness or in liturgical practice, others prove to be hidden or (almost) forgotten treasures. Sometimes settings

of Psalms are also found in unusual surroundings, such as for example with the last project with Psalm 104 – I'll come back to that right away in greater detail.

But first to the treasures: Much has been forgotten and buried in the synagogue music of 19th century Reform Judaism. In the Frankfurt City and University Library of all places the Freimann collection is to be found, a large and important collection of synagogue music. Much has been digitalized. We find things there for almost every Tehillim project. For Psalm 104, we found a setting by Samuel David (1836-1895) who from 1872 on was "*Directeur de la Musique des Temples Consistoriaux*" [Director of Music for the Consistorial Temples] in Paris. Because we are fortunate enough to have a music publisher in the choir, we are led over and over again to new editions by means of which the pieces are hopefully again made accessible to a larger public.

But in the Christian domain as well there is a lot to be discovered again. For example, with Psalm 104 I came upon an unedited Telemann cantata. Unfortunately, it had too many parts and was too long, otherwise, perhaps after centuries, we would have brought it to resound again. Other compositions on the side-lines of the normal repertoires could be included in our programs, such as musical settings to the Psalms by Arvo Pärt (*1935) and Andreas Romberg (1767-1821) who set Moses Mendelssohn's rendition of the Psalm to music.

Now to the Psalms in unusual surroundings: The Aton-Hymn in Philip Glass' opera "Akhnaten" leads into verses from Psalm 104 and thereby shows clearly the close relationship between the two poems that are separated by about 900 years and a continent. In the most recent concert, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann explained the connection as follows: Still during the lifetime of Akhnaten in the 14th century BCE, this central text for the new religion introduced by him had been sent to other countries, but not with the intention of missionizing; rather, in order to inform about the new line of thinking in Egypt and thus to avoid diplomatic faux-pas. Already when the Hymn to the Sun was re-discovered at the end of the 19th century, people recognized its closeness to Psalm 104; some even thought the Psalm was a translation of the hymn.

In a commentary, the choir singer Charlotte Brombach explained the complex connection as follows:

"Hold on tight. We'll now beam ourselves just more than 3000 years back. And at the same time, we'll come to the present, we'll travel by train through America ... Thus, an Egyptian pharaoh also has a word to say in our interfaith dialog ... Akhnaten as precursor of monotheism? No one less than Sigmund Freud drew a connection from Akhnaten to Moses. But there are many differences between the Aton faith and the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The discussion around Akhnaten continues and is controversial. It even goes so far as to question whether with the monotheistic religions a new form of violence came into the world ...

Now Philip Glass, who was born in 1937 of a Jewish family in Baltimore and later became a Buddhist, and who is one of the representatives of minimal music, wrote three operas about men who in his eyes, by their visionary ideas, effected changes in intellectual history: Albert Einstein ('Einstein on the Beach'), Mahatma Gandhi ('Satyagraha') and 'Akhnaten', with its première in Stuttgart in 1984 ... Between Akhnaten and minimal music there are about 3000 years. Ancient Egypt gives the text for present-day music."

So much on the complex but certainly entertaining entanglements of part of the program at the last Tehillim concert on May 28 of this year.

One important element in the concert programs is also the commissioning of compositions. One of these compositions could already be heard here in Haus Ohrbeck at the Psalms concert three years ago. The Israeli Alon Wallach, who lives in Stuttgart and does musical settings, wrote a piece with Psalm 91 for the IRCF. In 2015, the hasan Jack Kessler from the USA also wrote a choral composition for us for the Hebrew Psalm 90, with the voice of a cantor.

The Iraqi composer Saad Thamir, who lives in Cologne, went an entirely new route with his composition of Psalm 104. Together, we developed the idea of placing the Psalm parallel to verses

from the Quran, whereby the Psalm verses resound in an Ottoman translation and the Quran verses could come very close to the audience because of their translation into German. The Ottoman language, which is closely related to today's Turkish, was until 1918 the official language as well as the literary language of the Ottoman Empire, so to speak the "English" of the entire Arab world. The composition was introduced by a recitation of the Quran. The première took place in the Jewish community centre in Frankfurt and was received very positively. The enthusiasm was surely also due to the fact that the audience felt how in the intense interfaith musical togetherness, a social utopia of being with one another in a peaceful and dialogical way came closer, at least artistically, and could be touched aesthetically.

Even if the musical discoveries do not seem very spectacular when we first look at them, as for example the Reform songs of the Psalms, if one looks more closely and recognizes the connections, a whole "sermon" that is highly relevant can unfold.

The choir singer, theologian and publisher Helwig Wegner-Nord expressed this as follows in his commentary on the Reform Psalm Pasticcio in the Tehillim 104 program:

"Migration – so wandering – and music have a lot to do with one another. For migration is a characteristic of culture. And also of religion. From the Jewish people's Exodus to the expulsion of Syrian Christians now during these months – when people begin to walk, they take their religion, their culture, their music with them. And perhaps this light baggage is the essential food on their journey.

What we're going to sing in a minute can be heard as an example of musical migrations. As our point of departure, we take the 16th century, the time of the Reformation also in Switzerland ... The 'Genfer Psalter' [Geneva Psalter] (later also known as the 'Huguenot Psalter') was created and was published as a book in its complete form in 1562. The texts had then been translated from their Latin version into French and had been put into verse form ... So the Geneva Psalter also has a history of migration. It did not remain in Geneva. We find it for example in Amsterdam after a Calvinist council had replaced the Catholic city government there in 1578. We owe the French version to Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, and we shall hear it right away as the first example. But the journey continues: At the latest since the 17th century, when 200,000 Huguenots had to flee from persecution, people sang from the Geneva Psalter in Ireland and Denmark, in South Africa and in North America. And in England, where around 50,000 Reform Christians found asylum. The old Geneva melody of Psalm 104 of the year 1548 gave rise to a new polyphonic movement in Great Britain. This was due to the composer John Dowland, who was at first himself a migrant in Germany, Italy and Denmark, before he was given employment at the royal court in England.

The German version of the Psalm, as we shall hear it in a minute, has its origin with Jürgen Henkys, the Protestant theologian and song poet who died last year. His line of text, *„Nie soll ein Mensch die Welt in Feuer tauchen!“* [Never should a human being dip the world into fire!] is an echo of the threats of the 20th century.

Migration and music – the melodies of the Geneva Psalter wandered still further, among other places to the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century. And the 5th verse with Arab percussions immediately gives an impression of how it might have sounded. The person responsible for the leap to Constantinople was Wojciech Bobowski, who was born in Poland and raised as a Protestant. He became a church musician, studied music and on the Crimea was taken captive by the Ottomans. When they noticed how musically talented the Polish prisoner was, he became court musician in Constantinople, composed and also translated the Bible into the Ottoman language. This includes our Psalm 104. He converted to Islam and then called himself Ali Beg Ufki. In the composition by Saad Thamir we are singing the Psalm verses of the Hebrew Bible that were translated into the Ottoman language by Ali Beg Ufki.

People wander and meet one another. They bring their language, their religion, their culture, and their music with them. Nothing and no one thereby remains the same as before. On no side."

It is an exciting moment when in the course of rehearsals the vocal, musical and exegetical process becomes a musical collage. In the concerts, this experimental form of expression, in which one can see that the whole choir has personally appropriated the Psalm in a committed way, calls forth a strong and very positive echo in the dance of the other musical settings to the Psalms.

2. Theological Points of View to the Tehillim-Psalms Project

In principle, two aspects are to be noted here:

1. the theological conversation or the scientific discussion during the concert and
2. the discussion of the Psalm and of theology during the choir practices.

To 1: Two or three moderated sections of conversations with competent guests on the significance, interpretation and history of effectiveness of each Psalm in Judaism and Christianity, and on their liturgical or biographical connections, are a fixed part of the Tehillim concerts. Among others, these guests included Rabbi Elisa Klapheck from Frankfurt, the Marburg theologian Gerhard Marcel Martin, the Judaic scholar Hanna Liss from Heidelberg, the Judaic scholar Elke Morlok from Mainz, the Old Testament scholar from Frankfurt Melanie Köhlmoos, Martin Stöhr from Bad Vilbel, who is especially connected with Christian-Jewish dialog, and the Egyptologist Jan Assmann. Annette Boeckler was also one of the speakers at the 2015 *Kirchentag* [Church conference] in Stuttgart, together with the Marburg theologian Reinhard Kessler. Where the conversations are concerned, this was a high point in the history of the Tehillim concerts.

In the concerts combined with conversation, the more or less 400 listeners receive insights into the significance of the Psalms, their interpretation and their place from a Jewish and a Christian point of view. Precisely the principle of dialog thereby sharpens the contours of the individual positions. However, it is extremely important that the conversations be close to the public, for not all who come to a concert have experience in dialog or bring with them previous knowledge. Some come simply for the music. But when the attempt to speak to the audience is successful, the listeners go home again not only exhilarated by the music, but also enriched intellectually and sensitized to the interfaith level.

Bringing word and music together – which is basically an almost liturgical form – is one of the great aims of the Tehillim project. Again and again we experiment with the concrete planning of the concerts, for the rapid switches between the intellectual discussion and the sensory experience of the music are not always successful. But perhaps this also shows the utopia of bringing together the intellect and the senses, whereby even in the failure, both parameters come out of the encounter changed in a positive way.

It would really also be to be desired that Islam be given a place in the conversational part. However, already now there is not enough time for a deeper dialogical discussion. Thus at present we want to give Islam the word in every project in the form of music – in the form of commissioned compositions, collages or improvisations. This part of the program is to be deepened through commentary – at least three students of Islamic theology sing in the choir!

To 2: It can be seen as a progressive model of doing theology when very normal people enter into theological debates. This is exactly what happens during the rehearsal phases of the IRCF, for the musical work is accompanied by constant theological work.

In every Tehillim project, the attention of those singing is focussed each time for several months on one Psalm. The musical light shed on the Psalm from various sides and at various times, and the musical settings in various languages and translations also awaken a theological interest in those who are singing. Through different translations and also through Daniel Kempin's informative explanations of the horizons of significance of the Hebrew text, the singers are shown the different interpretations, and with them the veil that every translation also lays over the original text. During this decade of the Reformation, which Protestant Christians are living at present, it is for example over and over again enlightening to see how freely and unconventionally Luther often translated; for example when he translates "*limnot yamenu ken hoda*" as "teach us to consider

that we must die”, and not as “teach us to count our days”. What is beautiful is that such realizations occur very simply and without pretensions during the choir rehearsals.

But I don't want to conceal that because of lack of time, there is over and over again a conflict of interests between “the work of the choir over against interfaith conversation”. One consequence of this conflict is a separate evening at the beginning of the work phase, when the choir looks at the Psalm with bibliographical and bibliodramatic methods. And by the way, in the IRCF, along with Jews, Christians and Muslims, many people sing who are no longer bound to one religion. However, the human existential questions that come to word in the Psalms interest them just as much, and precisely the interfaith and supra-denominational view speaks to them and includes them. For the person who is unambiguously rooted religiously, the discussion with other positions brings about that they become more aware of their own positions and stimulates them to differentiate and expand these.

3. The Frankfurt Interfaith Choir (IRCF) – Social and Societal Points of View

The project phases, which last several months, demand that the Jewish feasts and holidays be taken into consideration and thus that over and over again, the regular time for rehearsals on Wednesday evenings be changed. Christians also have to learn that, unlike the Christian Sunday, Shabbat is really holy for Jews and cannot be used for rehearsals. Thus the concerts usually take place on a Monday – a more unusual day for concerts – since this day makes it possible for all who are involved (choir, orchestra, soloists) to have a general rehearsal on the previous Sunday, so closer in time to the concert. Thus the IRCF is also an interfaith group in which it goes without saying that the religious feasts of the Jewish and Muslim singers are taken into consideration, meaning that people wish one another “chag sameach” and “Ramadan karim” and indeed sometimes take part in shared celebrations.

Many other points could be mentioned with which the singers in the IRCF develop a sense of one another. Here are two examples:

- the uninhibited speaking of the name of God, which is foreign to the Jewish people among us.
- the Christological interpretations of individual verses of the Psalms, which can often be found for example in Martin Luther's song poems and through them in cantatas by Bach. What do the Jewish and the Muslim members of the choir sing when it says in the final chorale of the Bach cantata BWV 187, in deviation from the text of the Psalm (Psalm 104): “We greatly thank and ask him that he give us the understanding of the Spirit so that we understand this rightly, always walk in his commandments, and without ceasing make his Name great in Christ; thus we sing the *Gratias*” (verse 6 of the song “*Singen wir aus Herzensgrund*” [Let us sing from the bottom of our hearts] by Hans Vogel (1563)? Or when in a composition by Heinrich Schütz a Christian doxology is added to the pre-Christian Psalm? After intensive debates, the choir experiments with omitting, re-writing or picking up again the Hebrew text of the Psalm, so that the result might be a Hebrew Bach chorale.

4. The Tehillim-Concert – Effect on the Public

The Frankfurt Tehillim concerts are very well visited with about 400 people in the audiences, whereby one can say that above all the advertising through members of the choir is always very effective.

Many visitors are mainly interested in the music, others are interested in the woman rabbi or the theologian or in the project's dialog-oriented concept. The fact that the format of the event is a

mixed format – music *and* theological discussion, splits the audience. Thus there are over and over again responses saying for example, “too much conversation” and “too little music”, or also “too scientific, too high-flown”. It is a balancing act to get this all into the right proportion, whereby the way the spoken parts are received also depends greatly on the speakers’ “presence on stage”. What is to be remembered is that all the listeners get an impression of two possible forms of dialog: dialog by way of art and dialog by way of conversation. In the ideal case, they can experience how both forms complete and enrich one another.

Over and beyond this, the continuation of the Tehillim-Psalms projects or concerts is effective. Daniel Kempin says about this:

“Our work of dialog radiates slowly but constantly onto the work in our communities. Even if within Judaism the desire for real interfaith dialog is still very fragile – the project is perceived by the community leadership (a greeting at the concerts in the Jewish community centre), by the community newspaper, and by means of the invitation to the Jewish community centre.”

5. Issues around Space and Finances

Keyword Space: In Frankfurt, the Tehillim concerts take place alternately in the auditorium of the Jewish community centre and in a large Protestant conference room. Note that they are not in churches, since as far as possible we avoid religiously marked spaces. Unfortunately, in Frankfurt the Westend Synagogue is not possible as a place for performances because of its excessive acoustics. However, we also believe that a Tehillim concert would not easily be possible there if for no other reason than that the choir is mixed.

When other cities ask us to come, we have reached the compromise that we will only appear in a church when no other space is available and otherwise the concert cannot take place. Singing together in a space that is marked by Christianity, possibly even under a cross, is difficult, and we try to avoid it.

This compromise which we have reached was very painful and took a long time. However, precisely the situations of conflict effect a sensitization to the desire of the other – and when things go well, this sensitization leads to a deeper understanding and a drawing closer. In the discussion described above, for example, I became aware of many aspects of the “majority-minority” theme, and I learned to listen more intensively and to perceive better the other position.

When there are no solutions and the concert is to take place anyway, we have to look for compromises. Whereby the boundary between compromise and renouncing must be defined and negotiated over and over again.

What is very nice is that the rehearsals take place in various places in Frankfurt: when no reconstruction work is going on, the IRCF has its home in the rooms of the Protestant Academy. At the moment, the choir rehearses mainly in three different Protestant community centres. Unfortunately, the rooms of the Egalitarian Minyan are too small for the entire choir, but we already have the tradition that rehearsals for the individual parts take place there. Thus the members of the choir also get to know the Jewish space and experience for example how it feels when you have to pass a security gate in order to reach the place of rehearsal. By the way, at the last concert in the Jewish community centre, this circumstance led to the concert beginning half an hour late – the public stood in a long line before the security controls, which had been intensified because of the present situation.

The rooms for rehearsals (and also the times of rehearsals!), which change quite often, demand of all who are involved that they be awake to a certain extent and also attentive, but ultimately they prove to foster the community spirit.

A word on the finances: the entrance fees do not cover by a long shot the costs of the project; these costs are each time in the 5-cipher domain: in addition to the fees for the orchestra and the soloists, there are the costs for directing it, the extensive preparations for the concert, advertisement, etc. Fortunately, there have been and are subsidies, usually of Protestant origin, but these have to be applied for each time. Thus in addition to the extensive organisational preparations and those having to do with the contents – for example, many pieces have to be reworked and adapted to the circumstances – there are each time also financial questions that take a lot of energy. Even though an association that was founded two years ago actively supports us in this, solid and sure long-term financing of the project would be very much to be desired – for example by way of a project office.

6. Summary and Prospects

Because of its complexity, the Frankfurt Tehillim-Psalms project over and over again brings those leading it to the edge of despair, but – when it is successful – it also brings a great sense of happiness to those involved.

In spite of all difficulties, the Tehillim project shows that music stimulates and enriches interfaith dialog – and both have a considerable potential for development. At a time when in many present-day political discussions the question regarding apparently necessary cultural and religious boundaries is discussed, here what people have in common is lived and experienced very concretely.

One dimension of the development is pointing towards inter-cultural openness. Thus there was a triological collage in November 2015 in which, to the sounds of the choir, an Eritrean Jewish man and an Ethiopian Christian woman presented Psalm 121 in their mother tongue. In the end, the throne verse from the Quran was recited without accompaniment.

For the next project as well, with Psalms 42 and 43, we plan on inviting an African choir that is in Frankfurt and thus to place next to the interfaith polyphony also a cultural one. Other possibilities for connections exist in other formats, such as for example interfaith workshops for singing. The interfaith and intercultural range is perceived by Frankfurt's multi-cultural urban society, and thus various invitations have come about, as for example to a multi-religious celebration of unity on the 25th anniversary of German Unity in Frankfurt's *Paulskirche* [church of St. Paul], and recently to the opening of an exhibition in Frankfurt's House of the Bible: "*Fremde. Heimat. Bibel.*" [Strangers. Home. Bible].

Thus the interfaith polyphony is being joined ever more by an intercultural polyphony – a necessary vision for the future in the face of present-day societal developments.

"You place my feet in a broad space". The choir singer Frances Schwarzenberger-Kesper ends her statement about the IRCF on the choir's homepage with this quotation from Psalm 31, and it will also be the conclusion to this talk:

"I'm singing in the IRCF because I want to further stimulate interfaith dialog and very concretely to give it more space personally as well as in society. I value the choir's very lively and intensive work on the Hebrew and German musical settings to the Psalms from very different musical periods, which our two choir directors, the cantor Bettina Strübel and the hasan Daniel Kempin make possible. I particularly like the friendly atmosphere on the part of the members of the choir among themselves with each one's background, whether they be of a Jewish, Christian or Muslim shading. In the IRCF I can see what opportunities multiplicity brings to the shared artistic work, exactly according to Psalm 31:9: 'You place my feet in a broad space'."

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff