The Untidy Playground: An Irish Congolese Case Study in Sonic Encounters with the Sacred Stranger

Helen Phelan

Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, Castletroy, V94 T9PX Limerick, Ireland; helen.phelan@ul.ie

Abstract: This paper explores the proposal that music, and particularly singing, has unique properties that render it amenable to encounters with "the other" or the sacred stranger. Drawing on the deconstructionist works of Kristeva and Derrida, as well as the postmodern hermeneutics of Kearney and Caputo, it explores current debate concerning the nature of "the sacred" in contemporary life and the erosion of the theistic/atheistic divide, while proposing a deepening of the debate through the inclusion of the performative. As philosophical and theological discourses embrace this aporia, it does so against the backdrop of unprecedented human migration. The concomitant cultural and social disruption throws up new questions around the nature and experience of religion, spirituality and the sacred. This paper explores these questions in the context of a Congolese choir called *Elikya*, which was established by a group of asylum seekers in Limerick city, Ireland, in 2001. In tracking the musical life of this choir over the last decade and a half, including two musical recordings and numerous liturgical, religious and secular performances, it suggests that the sonic world of the choir both performs and transcends these descriptors. Using a three-fold model of *context*, *content* and *intent*, the paper concludes that musical experiences such as those created by *Elikya* erode any easy divisions between the religious and the secular or the liturgical and the non-liturgical and provide sonic opportunities to encounter the sacred stranger in the untidy playground of creative chaos.

1. Introduction

When we think of the many ways that our contemporary world attempts to address the seismic upheavals occurring across the planet in the face of human migration and dislocation, singing may not be the first activity that comes to mind. Nor might we immediately think of it as a performance of "the sacred". This paper explores the proposal that music, and particularly singing, has unique properties that render it amenable to encounters with "the other" or the sacred stranger. The paper introduces this proposal through an engagement with philosophical and theological discourse concerning the nature of the sacred. Drawing on the deconstructionist works of Kristeva and Derrida, as well as the postmodern hermeneutics of Kearney and Caputo, it explores current debate concerning the existential crisis in Western European culture and possible responses to a search for meaning in a world which many agree has moved beyond a metaphysical god but also beyond secularism.

Much contemporary philosophy and theology attempts to locate what emerges "after" God and "after" secularism, in a re-imagining of the sacred. For many, this is found in an engagement with the imagination through poetry, literature and art. In this paper, the deepening of this engagement through the inclusion of the performative is proposed as a means of anchoring the sacred in somatic, culturally expressed experiences. This proposal is grounded in an exploration of one performative phenomenon called *Elikya*—a Congolese vocal ensemble established by a group of asylum seekers in

Limerick city, Ireland in 2001; its musical life is tracked over the last decade and a half, including two musical recordings, numerous liturgical, religious and secular performances and several ethnographic interviews with members, colleagues and supporters. Using a three-fold model of *context*, *content* and *intent*, the paper concludes that musical experiences such as those created by *Elikya* erode any easy divisions between the religious and the secular or the liturgical and the non-liturgical and provide sonic opportunities to encounter the sacred stranger in the untidy playground of creative chaos.

2. Towards a Renewed Encounter with "the Sacred"

There is a significant preoccupation among postmodern philosophers with a sense of existential crisis in contemporary, European culture. Kristeva (1993, 2009) suggests that the root of this crisis is located in our need to believe, while living in a society, which actively questions or denies the existence of God. The "God is dead" crisis has its roots in Hegelian metaphysics but its most popular articulation in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1891/1999). The proposal that the God of Christianity does not exist creates an ethical and existential crisis for a culture built on the values and morality embedded in Christian tradition. Kristeva suggests that the resulting secularisation of Western culture has not provided an adequate response to this crisis. If God is dead, so too is secularism as an alternative proposal. In an essay on dance and postmodernity, she suggests that secularism is as culpable in the rise of fundamentalism as religion is:

> If dance or rather dances in the plural have always accompanied religious rites and their offshoots, if men and women's dancing is inseparable from the experience of this *Homo Religiosus* which is *Homo Sapiens*, how is it possible to dance if God is dead? In saying "God is dead" I am referring to an event that happened in Europe—and nowhere else—which cut ties with religious tradition. An unprecedented event whose way was paved by the Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition. But "God is dead" also means that some use religion as a political tool if not a political weapon, as in the case of religious fundamentalism. (Kristeva 2013, p. 3)

Neither religion nor secularism appear capable of answering to the dual desire in humans to both believe in something that gives life meaning, as well as to understand the world around us through our intelligence and experience. The cognitive dissonance and psychic disturbances created by the inability to answer to these simultaneous needs are at the heart of the crisis.

In his later writings in particular, Derrida also confronts this crisis through a growing engagement with political and ethical issues (Derrida 1993, 2000, 2002). His writings on conditionality and unconditionality attempt, if not to bridge the gap between belief and pragmatism, to at least suggest that the optimal human condition resides in the "always already" space between the possible and the impossible. His writings on justice, for example, suggest that irreconcilable points of view must always aspire towards the impossible, unconditional acceptance of the other (De Ville 2007). Publishing and lecturing on topics such as human democracies, as well as peace and reconciliation, he notes that unconditional forgiveness is only possible in the face of the unforgiveable (Caputo et al. 2001). Conditional forgiveness is an act of the law, while unconditional forgiveness is the forgiveness of the unforgiveable; "it is only possible in doing the impossible" (Derrida 2001, p. 33). It is the relationship between the conditional and the unconditional which is central; one should not exist without the other. Limiting forgiveness to the law allows for the possibility of justice, but justice is too limited a construct to house the unforgiveable. Forgiving the unforgiveable requires the unconditionality of love:

> *... on the one side*, the idea which is also a demand for the *unconditional*, gracious, infinite, an economic, forgiveness granted to *the guilty as guilty*, without counterpart, even to those who do not repent or ask forgiveness, and *on the other side*, as a great number of texts testify through many semantics refinements and difficulties, a conditional forgiveness proportionate to the recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks forgiveness. And who from that point is no longer guilty

through and through, but already another, and better than the guilty one. (Derrida 2001,
pp. 34–35)

It is his writings on migration and hospitality, however, that provide the fullest treatment
of this paradoxical dualism. The topic is addressed in the publications, *On Cosmopolitanism and
Forgiveness*, and *Of Hospitality*, which examine the issue of refugees within a European context.
Encounters with "the other" or "the stranger" depend on this same double-stranded helix of conditional
and unconditional hospitality: the strand of relative, political, law-based hospitality and that more
aspirational 'absolute' hospitality, on which he claims real hospitality must rest. It invites a complex
sense of relationship; an engagement not only with those with whom we have something in common,
but also towards those whom we might feel a sense of hostility or even fear. Etymologically speaking,
hospitality is linked not only to the host, the hospital, the hostel and the hospice, but also to hostility
and the hostile.

Hospitality depends on a tacit, experiential engagement with the other. The stranger or the
foreigner is a familiar figure in Western literature, philosophy and theology. Plato's interrogative
xenos; Paul's Hellenistic cosmopolitanism; medieval *peregrini* and *advenae*; Marco Polo's accounts of
the marvels of the East, and the good savage of Romanticism are all aspects of a complex, inherited
projection of the other (Kristeva 1991). Derrida suggests that, at the turn of the millennium from the 20th
to the 21st century, the stranger has been re-cast against a backdrop of global migration, unprecedented
in its scope and character. The lecture entitled "Foreigner Question" (*Question d'étranger*) admits that the
"question" of the foreigner preoccupies contemporary Europe but equally reminds the listener/reader
that the foreigner him/herself is a question posed at the host society:

... before being a question to be dealt with, before designating a concept, a theme,
a problem, a programme, the question of the foreigner is a question of the foreigner,
addressed *to* the foreigner ... But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me
in question. (Derrida 2000, p. 3)

The migrant holds up a mirror to the host, in this case, the European post-Christian host, and
asks for hospitality, a place at the table. An inability to welcome the stranger often hides a fear that the
stranger may expose our own existential impoverishment.

In inviting this philosophical discourse into the theological domain, scholars such as Caputo and
Kearney attempt to, "leave behind the reductive options of secular and religious fundamentalisms"
(Zimmermann in Kearney 2016, p. 2) by suggesting that there is an emergent space opening up in the
return to God "after God". This, Kearney suggests, is neither a theistic or an atheistic space but one of
anatheism—a return to God, not as a metaphysical reality but an imagined presence, often conjured
by poets and writers and artists (Kearney 2001, 2011, 2016). Caputo seeks a "theopoetics", arguing
that God is best approached poetically rather than rationally (Caputo 2006). His radical hermeneutics
resists any teleological end to the infinite playfulness of interpretation (Caputo 1997, 2001) and this
space of not-knowing, but ever seeking, is what Kearney calls "the sacred".

The sacred is distinguished here from both the spiritual and the religious. Religion is understood
as a set of creedal truths, shared ritual traditions and institutionalized codes of behavior. Spirituality is
something quested after without any necessary affiliation to a religious belief or practice. The sacred,
suggests Kearney, is somewhere between the two, as it is also between God and the secular. It is
not something we seek but something we find. It is already there, all around us in the natural and
experiential world: "We do not cognize the sacred, we re-cognize it" (Kearney 2016, p. 16). It is through
the sacred that we encounter the sacred stranger. The uncertainty of not knowing what we should
believe, or what we should do to live good lives, can sometimes shut us down in fear and anxiety.
It can also, however, be a creative space, allowing for the possibility of what and who may be. In this
space, every stranger becomes a sacred guest to whom we extend the hospitality of a shared journey.

Kearney and others are acutely aware that they are writing against the backdrop of the largest and most
significant migration crisis in recorded history (*Global Trends*, The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR). The crisis

of Western European Christian culture must dialogue with a human tragedy of global proportions. It must find a space between faith and reason, between a metaphysical God and secularism, to encounter the other, if both are to find hospitality, justice and a sustainable home.

3. Beneath Interpretation

What might be the nature of the sacred? Is it a place, an experience, an idea, a belief? Kearney and Caputo rely strongly on the apophatic traditions of mysticism, locating it in poetry, artistry and the imagination. Some theologians, however, wonder whether this sufficiently accommodates the culturally specific, *performative* nature of human experience. Drawing on a number of key, classic texts in liturgical theology, for example, we are reminded that our being in the world is a necessarily embodied phenomenon and we ignore or underestimate the body and its performances at our peril. Tracy (1981) notes that ritual and liturgy are key to any substantive experience of God in the world. These experiences ground the imagination, not only in the conceptual world of thoughts, dreams and ideas, but in the sensorial realities of sound, gesture, touch, smell and sight. Foley (1995) has focused this discussion on the sonic dimensions of ritual, arguing for a theology of sound. If, as Kristeva notes, dance is inseparable from the cultural and ritual experiences of *Homo Religiosus/Homo Sapiens*, Foley argues that the intrinsic nature of sound to all human experience (through the human circuitry of sounding and hearing) demands that it be given a key place in theological discourse. Uzukwu (1997) proposes similar arguments for understanding African orientations in Christian worship (1997) where theological understanding emerges from embodied, communal, ritual experiences.

The nub of this argument is that the sacred, while highly imaginative, must also be intensely performative. The sensorial, instinctive, unconscious aspects of human performance push at the boundaries of the hermeneutic foundations on which the sacred is built. It urges us to ask whether there is human experience and knowledge beneath interpretation and if so, how this might contribute to our experience of the sacred (Shusterman 2000). If the sacred both welcomes and emerges from our encounters with the stranger, how might this hospitality be performed? It is not coincidental that these questions concerning performative experiences and somatic intelligences are coming not only from philosophers, linguists and cognitive scientists (Johnson 2007; Gallagher 2005; Shusterman 2000, 2008) but overwhelmingly from performing artists (Bannerman et al. 2006; Bartleet 2009; Barbour 2011; Crispin 2009). Long seen as the vehicles for the artistic expressions of composers, choreographers and writers, performers have a growing sense of the intelligence of their bodies, not only in interpreting work, but in generating new insights. This body intelligence, often referred to as "body schema", involves the nervous and muscular systems, over which we have only the smallest amount of conscious control. It suggests that the body's intelligence does not manifest solely or even primarily in that which we can consciously interpret but at the deeper levels of instinct, motor-sensory response and genetic memory.

The ongoing marginalization of these intelligences can be seen in the dominant metaphors of post-modern philosophy. The proposal that experience is a *text* and encounters can be interpreted through inter-textual processes akin to those we use in analyzing and interpreting literature, demonstrates the depth of adherence to literary and language-based models of cognition even for the most foundational articulations of experience. It is not that these approaches exclude the body, but they privilege the hierarchy of interpretive interplays articulated through analytical, cognitive processes.

This "hegemony of textualisation" is challenged by a performative understanding of experience as "embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised and co-experienced" (Conquergood 2002, p. 147). Such knowledge is always local and always personal. Western philosophical and related theological traditions may be articulating the Western European existential crisis but may be less reflexive in recognizing the role they play in perpetuating it. Among the proposals explored in this paper for redressing this emphasis on the cognitive and the imaginative, is the inclusion of the performative, and the recognition of its necessary cultural grounding.

4. *Elikya*: A Sonic Case Study

The performative explored here involves the sonority of music, particularly singing. Its cultural grounding emerges from the disruptions of migration, as a group of Congolese musicians find themselves seeking asylum in Ireland and forming a choir. Called *Elikya*, the Lingala word for "hope", the choir was established in 2001 and has grown through a number of different manifestations, members and musical events in the sixteen years since. As an academic, activist, and sometime member of the choir, I have interacted with *Elikya* as colleague, friend, singer and scholar. Through a series of interviews with past and present members of the choir, friends and supporters, as well as an analysis of their musical output based on two professional recordings produced by the ensemble, this paper explores the proposition that *Elikya* is a case study—a sonic manifestation—in the performance of the sacred. *Elikya* traverses the old spaces claimed by liturgies, religions, secularisms and spiritualities with equal ease. Most importantly, it facilitates sonic encounters with the sacred stranger. Through performance, it opens up experiential encounters between cultures, beliefs and the pragmatic experience of migration in the world.

In order to explore this proposition further, I am drawn to two distinct but related triangulations of musical and ritual processes. The first was proposed by Rice (1987) in his seminal publication "Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology". Drawing on Geertz (1973) interpretation of symbolic systems, Rice proposes a tripartite understanding of musical processes as historically constructed, socially maintained and individually created/experienced. In other words, music is contextualized by where it comes from; maintained according to the values of communities of practice; and created (and experienced) by individuals within these communities. Similarly, in the 1972 Post-Vatican II document of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the liturgy "Music in Catholic Worship (1972)", the value of the musical processes and repertoires in liturgical celebration is proposed as determined according to a three-fold judgment based on musical, liturgical and pastoral considerations (Irwin 2004). I have combined these two models to create a new model, exploring *Elikya*'s musical processes under the headings of *context*, *content* and *intent* (See Figure 1).
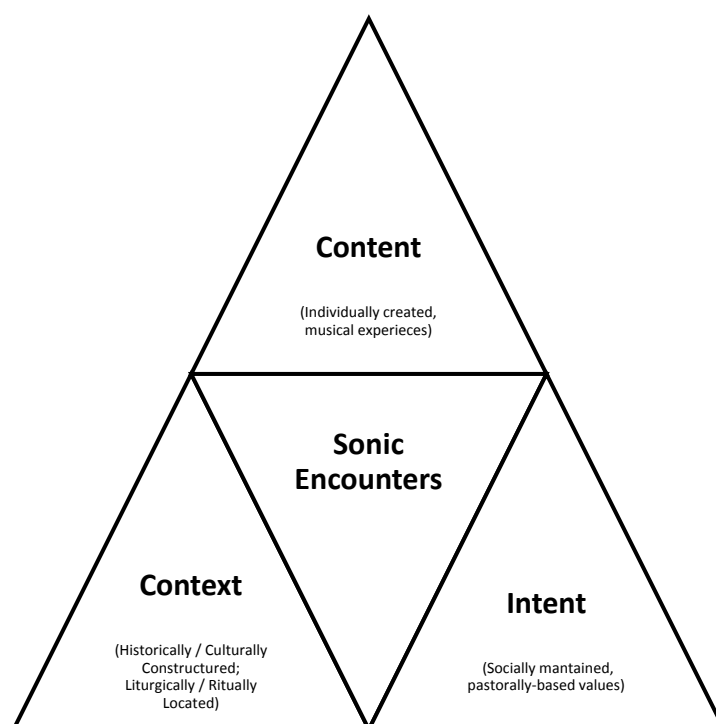

Figure 1. A Three-fold Model of Sonic Encounter.

Through an analysis of the descriptions offered by key protagonists concerning musical context (origins; the Catholic liturgy; other Christian contexts; other sacred contexts; other secular contexts) musical content (Catholic liturgical songs; African "Gospel" songs; African/Congolese Rumba/Soukous music) and musical intent (spiritual; musical; educational; social), it becomes clear that although these aspects of the sonic experience are named as discrete, they are experienced as a creatively performed flow. The secular is embedded in the religious, the religious in the liturgical. Religious songs are performed in pubs; popular, secular music, in churches. Political pragmatism flows into religious ritual, spiritual searching and pedagogical motivations. All of this is experienced and performed through singing and music-making.

4.1. Context

The founder members of *Elikya* all come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and came to Ireland as asylum seekers. One of the founders recalled being in a hostel in Dublin, and receiving a letter from the Department of Justice notifying him that he was being sent to Limerick city. He had heard worrying reports about Limerick. Its reputation as a tough city, often referred to in the media as "stab city" because of high rates of violence, had percolated into the hostel. He recounts his reaction to this news:

> *I was advised by people that Limerick was a tough place and I said, no, there is no tough place in the world. Everywhere, you can meet nice people and bad people. And because this is a Catholic country, we could sing in their churches and we will see if they are tough or nice.*

He had sung in the Catholic church choir in the DRC since he was a young boy and continued to sing popular music as an adolescent. As an adult and a politician, he noted how effective music was at opening doors:

> *I found out that every meeting started with music. Everywhere I went, I started with music to open the door. When I came to Ireland, I told people I was a politician. Some believe me, some don't. So I decided that everywhere I go, I will start the meeting with music then people will come back to me and find out who I am.*

Elikya was established in Limerick city in 2001. The choir was supported by the *Sanctuary* cultural initiative, operated by the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick; as well as by the Augustinian church in Limerick city. The Augustinians provided rehearsal space while the university provided funding for their first recording. *Elikya* sang regularly at the Sunday Mass at the Augustinians, singing their first Mass on Mission Sunday, 2001, as well as performing at numerous festivals and community events throughout the city and country (Phelan 2003, 2017).

While committed to singing in the Catholic liturgy, the liturgical context in Ireland was very different to what most of the members were used to in Africa. One founder member noted that, "*The shock was that it was too quiet. Those people–to wake them up was the thing.*" Another founder member recalled his first experiences of an Irish Catholic Mass:

> *The first impression was funny because I'd never been used to that kind of Mass—no choir—it was very funny—and very quiet—but sometimes when we are singing in some Masses we feel sometimes that we are back home because we can sing.*

An African colleague and musician who also came through the asylum process, describes coming to Limerick and finding the Augustinian church:

> *I went into this church—I can't remember where it was—and I said no, I am in the wrong place, God help me—and the second Sunday I came right down to the city centre and there was a church—and I felt a calling to go into that church and it changed my life—I had the feeling that this is where I belong—a sense of community and a sense of welcome . . . but it was fascinating that first Mass because it was nothing like I had ever witnessed. I didn't understand anything, not even the 'Our Father' which I grew up saying every morning.*

The home provided by the Augustinians was both pragmatic, in terms of rehearsal space and liturgical. While the liturgy was Catholic, the people flowing into the Augustinians during these early years of asylum-seeking in Limerick were from every country and faith. As one of the priests in the community noted:

Every possible group and every possible background—religious and non-religious, Muslim—every persuasion you could think of under the sun would be in an out and no one asked who you were, what you were or if you believed or didn't believe but they were welcome.

From the beginning, the core of *Elikya* consisted of musicians from the DRC but it has always also had members from other parts of the world. Students from the University of Limerick as well as other musicians living in Limerick from the Americas, Europe and Africa have joined the choir over the years. Its earliest home was liturgical but from its inception, it also performed at community festivals and offered educational workshops. Increasingly, it was also in demand from other churches to perform at their events or rituals. *Elikya* has never refused an invitation to sing, as one founder member explains:

In my culture, as a Christian, even for traditional cultures, to sing for God is to pray twice. Any religion—I can sing for Muslims, Baptists, for Catholics. It is the message . . . if you sing for peace—this was the first idea.

In 2010, the choir recruited a new artistic director. The director had a background both as a singer in Catholic church choirs, but also as a professionally trained musician. Educated in the *Institut National des Arts* in Kinshasa, he was attracted to *Elikya* because of the seriousness of its commitment to music:

It was the sense of having people doing music seriously. My previous experience was with a band working in Dublin. Back then, we were really, really young and the mind set was, 'I'm going to do music because this is something I really, really love'. But then as the years were going on, our music had to become something serious, not just something we were doing.

As a professional musician, he immediately *recognized* the difficulty of maintaining a choir which consisted exclusively of volunteers, many of whom were still in the asylum process and therefore, in very unstable life situations. He recognized *Elikya* into a number of groups and sub-groups. At the core, was a group of three, professional musicians who formed a musical band:

Being in the music industry before, I had an idea of what needed to be done. That's when we started working with some friends I brought in . . . I wanted to make it easier . . . managing Elikya *as it was before was almost impossible for me. I came up with a plan: the choir is big, why don't we make it as a band first . . . then we have a core group . . . if there are three people we can reply on we can start attracting different people.*

From this point onwards, the musical standard of *Elikya* starts to consolidate. There are increased invitations to also play in secular, paid venues. *Elikya* becomes an important conduit for other Congolese musicians to come to Ireland. In 2016, for example, Felix Manuaku Waku, best known as Pépé Felly, is invited to Ireland by *Elikya*. Pépé Felly is known internationally as one of the foremost guitarists in Congolese popular music. In 2015, the choir began a new relationship with the United Methodist and Presbyterian Church in Limerick. Again, the relationship was both pragmatic in terms of rehearsal space, but spilled into other community and liturgical spaces. As the church's minister notes:

We see the members of Elikya as part of our community. We may not see them for a while but that does not mean that they are not connected with us—like family. They have used our spaces for rehearsal, they have joined in the congregation on a Sunday sometimes and jammed with the young people afterwards. We also hosted what I think was a really important evening of music for them when Pepe Felly came to play with them.

Elikya is also invited to sing in Pentecostal liturgies in Dublin and Limerick: "*We sing in Dublin now in different churches but more in African settings—in Limerick here and everywhere else we try to go to different churches.*"

While *Elikya* are very specific in the descriptions of their music (as will be discussed further in the following section) as liturgical or religious or secular, they are very fluid in the context in which this music is performed. They are happy to play and sing Catholic liturgical music at secular concerts if invited and equally, to play secular music in liturgical spaces:

> *At the performance with Pepe Felly, I was surprised by the pastor . . . she said it was not a good acoustic, do it in the church . . . we told her we would be doing secular music and she said that is not a problem.*

One of the university students who sang with *Elikya* noted that,

> Elikya *often perform in secular settings but in these situations, they bring the "spiritual" with them and catapult it at their listeners by pure force of joyous will and overpowering, voluminous charisma in Lingala.*

The context of *Elikya's* formation was at once political, pragmatic, pedagogical, religious and visionary. Its performances take place in liturgies of several denominations and none. The sacred Kearney postulates, somewhere beyond the options of a metaphysical God and an absolute secularism would seem to be the fluid space that best describes *Elikya's* sonic home.

4.2. Content

Elikya's musical influences originate in their experiences of Congolese Catholic liturgical singing, the widespread influence of Gospel in African Christian music, as well as secular Congolese rumba. Many of the members grew up singing in choirs in Catholic Congolese churches. In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the liturgical music of these churches was increasingly open to indigenous musical influences. *Elikya* recognizes these traces in its music. As the director notes:

> *The liturgical music is more of the music that comes from the village, the rhythm of the village, because most of the rhythm will be percussion—they wouldn't have guitars or electric stuff—it's percussion or people clapping—that's what makes the spiritual touch. Once you just sing and you understand the harmony or whatever is going on in there, the connection just makes itself. I can't really pinpoint or explain it but it is in those kinds of things.*

The influence of African American Gospel is also very strong in the *Elikya* repertoire and style. A staple in African Protestant churches, particularly since the 1940s, its influence within Catholic ritual practices in Africa has grown since the 1970s, especially among Congolese communities (Russell 2011).

A third strong influence on the music of *Elikya* is Congolese *rumba*. Emerging from the urban centres of the Congo in the years between the world wars, it drew inspiration from Afro-Cuban styles, West African *highlife* and forms of indigenous music from the Pool region between Kinshasa and Brazzaville. Its earliest manifestations were performed by solo, itinerant *griot*-like guitarists playing in the bars and clubs of Kinshasa. Musical recordings date to the 1940s, with its popularity spreading by radio in the 1960s throughout Africa as "Congo Jazz". This Golden Age of rumba saw a more big-band style emerge. As one member of the band explained:

> *As Congo (Belgian Congo at the time) was the first country in Africa to have a recording studio and record pressing plan, it was in fact rumba which travelled across the continent and developed a strong fan base around the continent. It was the first music from Africa, recorded in studios and pressed on the continent for the enjoyment of other Africans.*

The 1970s saw a younger generation take up the music and make their own of it, through, for example, the introduction of choreographed dances. This Congolese dance music was marketed

globally as *soukous* (from the French *secouer*—to shake). The music developed a two-part structure with a slow, lyrical introduction followed by a faster dance section (White 2000).

The core, professional musicians in *Elikya* are all experts in this style of music:

> *The style is more rumba music, the fundamentals of music from the Congo. But I would not say Congo in general, it is the music of Kinshasa . . . the core of the music would be that—that's what we start from. But it takes more influences from people's cultures. From my culture, I will bring some influences, like the language for instance. Someone else will bring a touch of their influence and we patch it onto the rumba style . . . the rumba is in the slow section of the music but when it goes fast, that's kabasha music—rhythm is what makes people dance and move . . . soukous is a style of kabasha—another name for it.*

Elikya's first recorded album is called *To Lingala/Love One Another*. The recording has 10 tracks in Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba. It features eighteen performers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (11), Germany (1), the US (1) South Africa (I) Ireland (1) Republic of the Congo (1) and Angola (2). All the pieces are performed with only voices and percussion (clapping and drums). Describing this first recording, a member explained: "*this first one mixed everything—popular, Christian music and Catholic songs.*"

An excerpt from one of the pieces is included here (Figure 2) as transcribed by one of the members of the choir. It is clear that the piece is in a call and response form with harmonic responses, drawing influence from the African Gospel tradition. The performance also includes traditional clapping and ululations.

Figure 2. Excerpt of Music from *Nzambe Ozali* (trans. Hugo Mbunga).

The caller keeps changing the first line: "God of Gods, you are God"; "God of Moses, you are God"; "God of Congo, you are God", "God of Ireland, you are God". He then starts naming members of the choir: "God of Shana, you are God"; "God of Helen, you are God", God of Donat, you are God" etc. This practice of inserting individual names into public, improvised performances is also common in Congolese secular performance. In 2002, for example, King Kester Emeneya came to perform at

the Sionna Festival of World Cultures in Ireland. King Kester, one of the most popular singers in Africa from the 1980s, achieved international renown akin to those of African artists Papa Wemba and Koffi Olomide. At his Irish concert, the Congolese community came from all over the country. A striking feature of the performance was the stream of requests for individual names to be included in well-known songs (details of visit at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9b3TU3FoHQ4).

The second recording is called *Elikya Choir: Catholic Liturgical Songs*. This recording was, "*to show how we do the Catholic Mass, the liturgy*". It has a number of pieces from the liturgy of the Catholic Mass ("Kyrie Eleison", "Alleluia", "Mosantu" for example) but also includes more Gospel style pieces ("Oza Nzambe"). Instead of unaccompanied voices and percussion, this recording also includes keyboards, guitars and drums with musical styles influenced by Congolese rumba. While this second recording is named for the Catholic liturgy, its content and style demonstrate more fluid influences. One piece, for example, "Yesu Wangu", appears on both recordings but with striking differences in musical style and instrumentation. In *Worship Music: A Concise Dictionary*, the definition of liturgical music as music which "serves to reveal the full meaning of the rite and derives its meaning from the rite" (Foley and Bangert 2000, p. 181) is strikingly close to the explanation given for the creation of a recording specifically of Catholic liturgical songs:

> *If we go to play for the Catholic Mass, we have that, if we sing for the Anglicans, we have Gospel, if we go to play in a festival, we have rumba.*

Despite these seemingly clear demarcations, the musical content reveals much more stylistic and repertoire overlap between the three (much as the concise dictionary notes the overlap in common usage between terms including "liturgical music" "church music", "sacred music" or "religious music"). While the language of explanation may attempt to create clear Catholic liturgical/Gospel/secular rumba lines, the performative experience of style and repertoire is far more malleable.

4.3. Intent

Whatever articulations of demarcated space may appear in the language of context and content (most of which is over-ridden by performative examples), the language of intent is overwhelmingly inclusive from all participants.

One of the founder members was inspired by his memory of African people sent to the Americas and how they used music to help overcome difference and prejudice:

> *I was thinking about people deported—about Africans deported to America to work—I don't like to use the word slave—those people changed the minds of people because of music, everyone listens to music and they forget about the colour of the skin or the cultural differences because of the good sound of the music.*

Evoking the name of the group, another member speaks of what he hopes *Elikya* brings to people:

> *I hope that it can go beyond—because the word itself says "hope"—to bring that energy everywhere we go and to leave it there—that way, this sense of fulfillment I feel I hope to leave to everyone.*

Every singer I interviewed felt that "the sacred" was in the music itself: in the act of singing:

> *Yes, there is certainly a connection between my singing and my spirituality. I cannot exactly pinpoint why, but when I sing, I open and share as much of myself as I am at that given moment in the same ephemeral way as a personal prayer said directly and without prior preparation.*

The song types might vary, or their context or their style, but the sacred experience remained a constant. The minister of Christ Church named this experience as the experience of love:

> *I think it is probably a simple, "we're gifted by God and we celebrate that and offer those gifts when we make music": it's joyful . . . I think the connection is love.*

5. Conclusions: Singing the Stranger Home

The three-fold model suggested that content, context and intent are key aspects of musical and ritual processes. In examining the musical life of *Elika*, it becomes clear that *Elikya* performs a dual identity simultaneously: on the one hand, moving between different contexts, repertoires, styles and intentions, while on the other, blending these performatively in a way that both enforces and dilutes these differences (See Figure 3). The distinct categories are not obliterated, but find common ground in the sonic encounter:
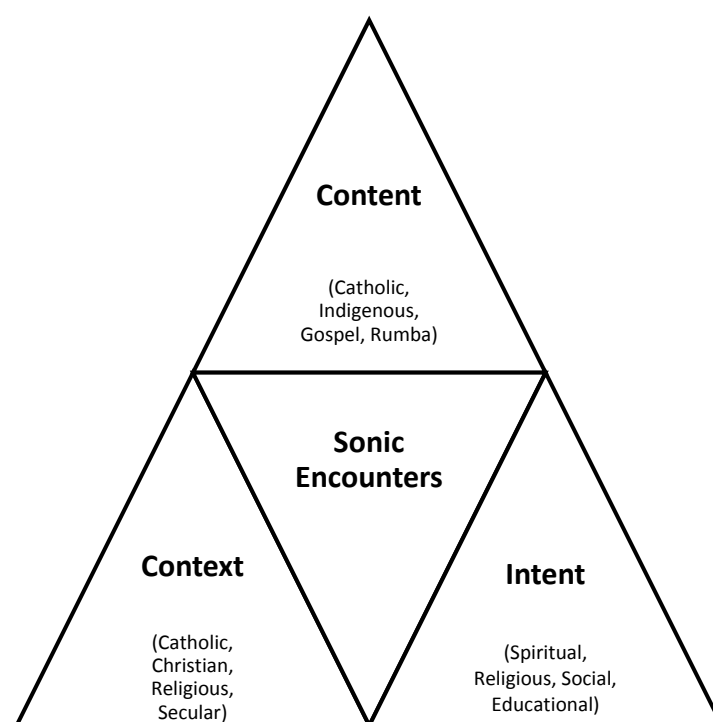
Figure 3. A Three-fold Model of *Elikya*'s Performance of Sonic Encounter.

This is Derrida's "both/and"; the space that allows for the distinctiveness of multiple identities but also for the malleability and changeability of these at the same time. This is what allows *Elikya* to be unapologetically Catholic and yet to simultaneously understand their music as transcending this identity:

> *I've asked myself that question as well before—the answer is quite simple—it's not about Catholic views, it's just about the music. I reduce everything to the feeling of the music because, like we said, if that good vibe is there, whether on the liturgical CD or the other one, we can bring it everywhere . . . the music goes everywhere, the music has no barrier—you can come to a place where the people are not Catholics but they accept the music. I believe that if we had to put the music that* Elikya *does into one category it would actually break the barrier of the music going everywhere . . . if we take away the barriers, it allows us to make a Catholic CD or a different one.*

This is the performance of who we are and who we might be; of ourselves and our potential others. It is the creative space where we meet the sacred stranger. One of the priests in the Augustinian church describes this moment as the creativity that emerges out of uncertainty and chaos. He related the story of a visitor to the church during a time of great architectural change in the physical structure of the building, coinciding with the arrival of new migrants to the church's community:

> *I apologized for the mess of the place. She said, "I prefer the model of church that is an untidy playground rather than a mortuary."*

When we cannot hold on to who we are in a strict or narrow sense of identity, we must re-negotiate this in the untidy space of chaos and creativity. When we are forced to re-invent ourselves in new parts of the world, we must simultaneously hold on to who we are (African, Congolese, Catholic) but also allow these identities to dialogue and sometimes merge with new ones (Irish, musical, ecumenical, performative). Those who encounter these changing identities are also changed, if they are willing to "sing along", to enter this space of simultaneous knowing and unknowing of ourselves and others.

The nature of "the sacred" may be deceptively simple in its performance. It might turn out to be a cup of tea and a song with someone you have never met before.

Elikya, for example, have become the musical patrons of a movement called *The Irish World Music Café* (See Figure 4). Started in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, it is a monthly gathering of people from around the world to sing, share stories, food and fellowship.
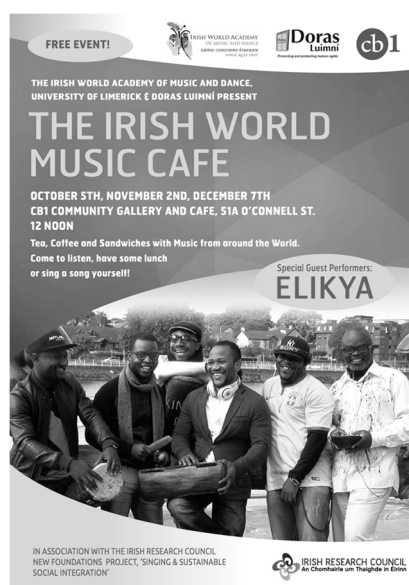

Figure 4. The Irish World Music Café (Poster Design by Joe Gervin).

What passes in the space of song or the "map of tune" as Irish poet Paula Meehan has it in her poem *Home* (Meehan 1994), may allow us to encounter each other in ways that permit us to remain ourselves and yet be changed utterly. This sacred encounter may happen to anyone at anytime but there are reasons to suggest that music (and particularly singing) is especially effective in facilitating it. Moreover, in exploring the musical soundscapes of *Elikya* as a case in point, it suggests that the global, seismic eruptions in human demographics brought about by migration in our contemporary world create an urgent need and unprecedented opportunity to explore the possibility of sacred encounter.

Humanly produced sound is one of our most primordial experiences. The ability to hear is one of the first senses to develop in the unborn child. The first sounds the developing child usually hears are the sounds produced by its mother's body (Stoppard 2006). Not only do babies respond to music they have heard in the womb, but they respond more emphatically to music, which is favored by their mother. Babies have demonstrated the ability to change their sucking patterns to re-enforce the humming of a well-known lullaby (Deliège and Slobada 1996). Moreover, the ability in the young child to produce sonority precedes its ability to generate language. The first phase of vocal development emerges when the physiological production of sound, superimposed on the infant's breathing, develops into a euphonic cooing at about eight weeks. By two months, the infant has developed a range of vocalizations based on these early modulations/melodies. Parents and care-givers intuitively guide these melodic vocalizations towards verbal communication and the later development of language, but these melodic modulations are also early forms of play and theorists

propose that this is one of the reasons why such modulations remain in the child's repertoire of sound as a form of singing, even after the acquisition of words and language. Singing is both the foundation for language as well as a form of ongoing play.

Singing remains, therefore, a primordial way in which human beings play and create. Pearce et al. (2015) note this in explaining why singing, of all human activities, seems to allow for faster and more immediate social bonding. In a study of activities from creative writing to craft making, singing demonstrated the most accelerated results in feelings of belonging and positive affect among groups of strangers.

Is it possible to image that we could sing our way into fruitful meetings with the sacred stranger? That the primordial, affective, sensorial and somatic character of singing may bring about experiences that allow us to both survive pragmatically in a disrupted world while also experiencing leaps of faith towards the unknown in ourselves and others? Performative and creative, singing opens up the space to encounter the stranger more successfully than almost any other human activity. Commenting on *Elikya*, the minister of Christ Church noted that "*their obvious engagement with a spirit of creativity would speak to anyone, a person of faith or none*". In a world where approximately one percent of the global population is an asylum seeker, refugee or forcibly displaced migrant, we urgently need creative ways to respond, welcome and have faith in a shared journey. As a priest from the Augustinian community offered, the untidy playground of creative performance offers one such possibility:

> *It's like the dawn of creation: the spirit moving over the chaos until something emerges from that chaos—but you have to find ways to live in the chaotic times until something creative emerges . . . I hold that image of the untidy playground where creative things happen in my head and in my heart.*

References

Bannerman, Christopher, Joshua Sofaer, and Jane Watt. 2006. *Navigating the Unknown: The Creative Process in Contemporary Performing Arts*. London: Middlesex University Press.

Barbour, Karen. 2011. *Dancing Across the Page*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Bartleet, Bridie. 2009. Behind the Baton: Exploring Autoethnographic Writing in a Musical Context. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38: 713–33. [CrossRef]

Caputo, John D. 1997. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Caputo, John D. 2001. *On Religion*. London and New York: Routledge.

Caputo, John D. 2006. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of Event*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. 2001. *Questioning God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Conquergood, Dwight. 2002. Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *The Drama Review* 46: 145–56. [CrossRef]

Crispin, Darla. 2009. Artistic Research and the Musician's Vulnerability. *Musical Opinion* 132: 25–27.

De Ville, Jacques. 2007. Derrida, the Conditional and the Unconditional. *Stellenbosch Law Review* 18: 253–85.

Irène Deliège, and John Slobada, eds. 1996. *Musical Beginnings: Origins and Development of Musical Competence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Aporias*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2000. *Of Hospitality, with Anne Dufourmantelle*. Translated by Rachel Bowly. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Translated by Mark Dooley, and Michael Hughes. with a preface by Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney. London and New York: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques. 2002. *Acts of Religion*. Edited and introduced by Gil Anidjar. New York and London: Routledge.

Foley, Edward. 1995. *Ritual Music: Studies in Liturgical Musicology*. Beltsville: The Pastoral Press.

Foley, Edward, and Mark Paul Bangert. 2000. *Worship Music: A Concise Dictionary*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.

Gallagher, Shaun. 2005. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [CrossRef]

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Irwin, Monsignor Kevin W. 2004. *The Liturgy Documents*, 4th ed. Chicago: Chicago Liturgical Training Publications.

Johnson, Mark. 2007. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. [CrossRef]

Kearney, Richard. 2001. *The God Who May Be*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kearney, Richard. 2011. *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kearney, Richard. 2016. *Reimagining the Sacred*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1991. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1993. *New Maladies of the Soul*. Translated by Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 2009. *This Incredible Need to Believe*. Translated by Beverley Brahic. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 2013. Going beyond the Human through Dance. *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 21: 1–12. [CrossRef]

Meehan, Paula. 1994. *Pillow Talk*. Meath: The Gallery Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1891/1999. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Translated by Thomas Common. New York: Dover Thrift Editions.

Pearce, Eiluned, Jacques Launay, and Robin I. M. Dunbar. 2015. The ice-breaker effect: singing mediates fast social bonding. *Royal Society Open Science* 2: 150221. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Phelan, Helen. 2003. Sanctuary: The World Church in Ireland Programme 3: The Congolese Catholic Church in Ireland. *Lyric FM*, August 24.

Phelan, Helen. 2017. *Singing the Rite to Belong: Music, Ritual and the New Irish*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rice, Timothy. 1987. Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology. *Ethnomusicology* 31: 469–88. [CrossRef]

Russell, Aidan. 2011. Home, music and memory for the Congolese in Kampala. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5: 294–312. [CrossRef]

Shusterman, Richard. 2000. *Performing Live*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Shusterman, Richard. 2008. *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stoppard, Miriam. 2006. *Conception, Pregnancy and Birth*. London: Dorling Kindersley.

Tracy, David. 1981. *The Analogical Imagination*. New York: Crossroads.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2016. *Global Trends*. A Report of the UNHCR. Geneva: UNHCR.

Uzukwu, Elochukwu E. 1997. *Worship as Body Language*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.

White, Bob. 2000. Soukouss or Sell-Out? Congolese Popular Dance Music as Cultural Commodity. In *Commodities and Globalization: Anthropological Pespectives*. Edited by Angelique Haugerud, Pricilla M. Stone and Peter D. Little. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.