

# “One Sees Oneself in the Eye of Another:” The Creative Processes Behind a Musical Composition on Interreligious Themes



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## Abstract

Increasingly, art is recognized as a way to promote interreligious understanding. *Gegenüber* (German for “vis-à-vis”) is a work for two cellos and reciter that draws on themes of three different religious traditions. The project *Gegenüber* aimed to contribute to the growing genre of interreligious art. In this article, the composer and the lyricist (who is also an academic working on interreligious relations) reflect together on the creative process behind this work and more generally on the challenge of working creatively with religious elements belonging to more than one religion. The authors give insight into the collaborative process and their approach to the religious narratives as an example for how interreligious art and interreligious studies or comparative theology can intersect.

## Keywords

interreligious art, non-violence, inaction, music, artist, composer

In this article we reflect on the process behind the making of *Gegenüber*, a work for two cellos and reciter, on which we worked collaboratively (music by Hans-Jürgen Gerung and lyrics by Melanie Barbato).<sup>1</sup> “Gegenüber” is the German word for *vis-à-vis* (opposite each other; facing each other). The idea of direct encounter is in different ways central to the work. First, *Gegenüber* is a collaborative work between a composer and a poet; second, music and spoken word take turns in the performance; third, the two cellists are seated facing each other; fourth, Jain, Franciscan, and Daoist narratives form the basis for the poems; and fifth, there are various situations in which a person is facing either another person or an existential situation.

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<sup>1</sup> The album and score have been published by Gerung Arts & Music / Edition Gerung, the poems are included in the poetry collection Melanie Barbato, *Die Erdbeerschale* (Passau: Ralf Schuster Verlag, 2022).

The account of the creative processes behind *Gegenüber* seeks to serve as an example of how artists who create interreligious art proceed in their work. We start by writing about the goals and motivations behind the project, and how we came up with the general idea. The main part provides a selective making of *Gegenüber*, offering some insight of the thoughts that went into our engagement with the material from three different religious and cultural traditions. In the conclusion, we sum up how *Gegenüber* has sought to negotiate the various demands placed on interreligious art. Some parts of this paper are written by both of us. In other parts, we speak each for our own work (Melanie Barbato writes in the first-person throughout the article; Hans-Jürgen Gerung does so, too, but his text is marked by a box.)

## The Goal of the Project

We both believe that art, and music in particular, can help to bring people from different religious and cultural backgrounds together.<sup>2</sup> We both worked on artistic projects aimed at furthering interreligious peace and understanding before. I was a part of the curatorial team of an interreligious art exhibition on the theme of hope in Munich in 2010. The catalogue to the exhibition included a reflection on the idea of interreligious art, co-written with Martin Rötting.<sup>3</sup> Art, we argue, has the advantage that much can be left open to interpretation, and that not everything has to be resolved in a monilinear fashion. Art can stimulate processes of opening up towards the other in a spirit of curiosity and aesthetic appreciation, which can be as valuable as exchange on a factual or rational level.

Gerung has composed, among other works, a mass called *Ritus*. It was commissioned by the Constance Cathedral in 2001. Under the impact of 9/11, Gerung reconceptualized parts of this work as a requiem. The work was his contribution as a composer to oppose the “clash of cultures.” He allowed musical elements from other traditions into a work for the Catholic Mass, signifying that music is not only about what we have in common, but also where we experience difference in positive and enriching ways. The word *Ritus* (German for “rite”) refers beyond the specifically Christian context to the ambivalence that Gerung feels towards religious dogma and rituals: prescribed, familiar forms offer feelings of comfort, safety, and community. They can offer tested paths towards the matters of ultimate concern; but they can also stifle creativity and lead to rigid structures and hostility towards those who believe or practice differently. Music can connect different cultural and religious traditions, partly also because it arguably is based on a human experience of reality that transcends such differences.

That a people align their art to their religion or to their cosmology is axiomatic. The heptatonic system of the occidental tonal art was developed from the Christian tradition and from the historical knowledge about the known planets of our solar system. The pentatonic of Asia leads back to the meaning of the number five in Far Eastern cosmology, such as the five life

<sup>2</sup> A good book on this theme is the edited volume (in German) by Verena Grüter, “Musik in Interreligiösen Begegnungen. Religionstheologie Und Ästhetische Wende,” in *Musik in Interreligiösen Begegnungen, Beiträge Zu Einer Theologie Der Religionen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2018), 13–40.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Mader and Martin Rötting, “Übertreten Geboten: Interreligiöse Kunst? Annäherung und Dialog,” in *Übertreten Geboten: Zeitgenössische Kunst Im Interreligiösen Dialog*. Catalogue for the Exhibition of the same Title, ed. Martin Rötting and Karl-Heinz Einberger (München, 2010), 3–5.

stages or the five elements. Confucius, to whom the Book of Rites is attributed, assigned in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Rites the five notes to the five elements of the traditional medicine (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water). The raga is more than just a scale; it is the entire character of Indian classical music. The raga prescribes which notes and ornaments go with a piece of music. Hundreds of ragas can be attached to each of the numerous basic scales. These can be pentatonic, hexatonic, or heptatonic, with the pentatonic's being widespread especially in the north of India. The cultural diversity of India is enormous and, therefore, it is not surprising that the inexhaustible system of a highly complex microtonality was invented there. All these point towards connections between rite, rhythm, language, and text—and the connection between rites and types of instruments, which would in detail be a matter for the musicologist. For the artist, the existence of such connections can be an inspirational starting point for engaging in work across cultural boundaries.

Our collaboration worked well because we both share an interest in promoting interreligious and intercultural elements in art but want to do so in a way that is also cautious. Discussions about cultural appropriation show that using musical or narrative elements from someone else's tradition can be a sensitive matter.<sup>4</sup> Clichés are often connected to historical power relations, and it is challenging to produce art that seeks to avoid such pitfalls while still reflecting, maybe also celebrating (and—in a neutral sense—"using") features of regional, cultural, or religious diversity. The issue of appropriation is connected to a broader point that rites and musical traditions are embedded in broader contexts, and that thoughtless de-contextualization may lead, not only to offense, but also to bad art, maybe the auditive version of what S. Brent Plate called the "icono-mash".<sup>5</sup>

Maybe it all started when I came across a lecture by Luigi Nono in the Darmstadt Contributions to contemporary Music. Nono postulated that uncompromising modern composition and political partisanship are mutually dependent and every artistic creation must be interwoven with the surrounding historical context. A creative process *in the anarchic gesture of a bomb being dropped* would be the program of those who believe they can open a new era almost *ex abrupto*.

At first glance Nono's late work seemed less radical, but as a young composer at least for him (as for others like Hanns Eisler) music had a dialectical mission to fulfil. In his opinion, this assignment implies a focus on current content in the environment of our society. The incorporation of foreign musical elements should be viewed critically if it merely serves to expand the tonal and/or instrumental diversity. For Nono, the primary question was why do we create music and how does it position itself politically.

I can't remember exactly which Darmstadt volume I read about Nono's compositional aesthetics in (presumably it was the 1960 volume) but I suddenly understood why the relationship between Nono and Karlheinz Stockhausen wasn't always easy. Like Nono, Stockhausen was a radical and uncompromising seeker. Stockhausen's work was based on a deep religiosity that guided him throughout his life and whose origins were laid in his childhood and youth in the

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Burns Coleman, Rosemary J. Coombe, and Fiona MacArailt, "A Broken Record: Subjecting 'Music' to Cultural Rights," in *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, ed. James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, n.d.), 173–210.

<sup>5</sup> S. Brent Plate, "From Iconoclasm to Iconomash," in *Re-Enchantment*, ed. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2009), 210.

Bergisches Land. Years later, when I inherited the correspondence between Stockhausen and Arthur Lamka, it all came together to give me a deep understanding of how much our art is determined by the worlds around us.

Our goal for *Gegenüber* was similar to that of *Ritus*: to offer a thoughtful engagement with the theme of religious plurality in a way that promoted openness towards other traditions without being naïve about the fundamental entanglement of religion, community, and belief with violence and exclusion. The work was to be performed in a church setting—which provided us with limitations (a full “impartiality” of the work was not possible, given the importance of the performance space for the audience experience), but also a creative space and an imagined audience with which to work. The performance was not during a service. Rather, it formed part of a festival concert. The work is also composed in such a way that it could be performed in another space—non-religious, or possibly belonging to one of the other traditions. The goal of the project is that the work should be enjoyable on different levels: just as stimulating music (and sometimes also beautiful), or as a thought-provoking engagement in interreligious matters. This engagement is, again, invited both on an intellectual and a more emotional level. The texts are grounded in my Religious Studies readings and research, but the aesthetics also seek to open up a more emotional space for experiencing sameness and difference. Through focusing on this goal, we tried to avoid the overly didactic feel that can accompany art that stands in the service of education.

When talking about the goal of the project, one may also have to add that we are both aware that the immediate impact of such a composition is probably small. First, many people who attend a festival that presents compositions on intercultural or interreligious themes will already have a positive attitude towards interreligious encounter. Second, New Music also is not a form of art that has great mass appeal. Beyond the impact of creating a work for interreligious dialogue, it was therefore also our goal to create just art: a beautiful, meaningful composition. Third, for me, as an academic with an interest in interfaith studies and comparative theology, the project was also a way of exploring visions of interreligious encounter as a shared (auditive) space, rather than a matter of transgressing boundaries. I will say a little more about this in the section on inaction as action.

## The Idea

In addition to being a person of faith, I have always been interested in exploring the meaning of faith. Without intending it, I was asked repeatedly to write for church settings. At first it was smaller works, then came commissions from Constance Cathedral, from Maestro Stefano Sabene for the Schola Romana Ensemble based in the Vatican, and ultimately from the St. Lorenz Basilica in Kempten.

In the work for the Basilica in Kempten I was asked to write a piece about angels, and I chose the story of Hagar and Sara. And again, I was confronted with the challenge of working musically on a narrative over which religions of the book have sometimes had a conflict—even to this day. According to traditions, Ishmael as the son of Hagar became the progenitor of the Arabs and Isaac, the son of Sarah, became the progenitor of the Israelites.

However, all the work that has been done in the last twenty years on cultures, religions, and the resulting conflicts were ultimately not coherent for me in a way that is difficult to pin down. When I got to know Melanie Barbato, a scholar of religion who also does creative writing, I decided to ask her for a poetic text originating from her field of study.

*Gegenüber* provides an approach in each of the three sets of poems that appealed to me very much:

*Bahubali*—the struggle between brothers need not take place.

*The Wolf of Gubbio*—the struggle against nature, represented by the wolf, is solved by the realization of the responsibility that we bear.

*The Rainmaker*—only the spiritual immersion in one's own self is able to achieve the impossible.

After all these findings about the conclusiveness of Melanie Barbato's poetry, the writing down of the works was only craft. It was suddenly very easy.

The theme *Gegenüber* occurred to me when the composer Hans-Jürgen Gerung suggested collaborating on a piece for two cellos as part of a festival that would also include other pieces for a cello duo. Hans-Jürgen Gerung is a composer and the director of a small annual festival in Oberstdorf, Germany. Called *Forum für Neue Musik Oberstdorf* (International Festival Forum of Contemporary Music—Oberstdorf), it is co-funded by the town of Oberstdorf and aims to make new music accessible to the general public and especially young people. The festival has been going on for fifteen years, and the current pattern is that every other year the festival is dedicated to a religious theme. In those years, the main concert is performed in Oberstdorf's historical Catholic church, St. John the Baptist, presenting new and more traditional church music side by side. The combination of New Music and a church setting is unusual also in Oberstdorf, which is located in the rather conservative alpine area of Bavaria. *Gegenüber* premiered on March 16, 2018.

I know Hans-Jürgen Gerung because I had done an internship at one of the earlier festivals. In 2017, he told me that he had read some of my poems on my website and asked me if I would be interested in a cooperation for the 2019 festival. I immediately agreed. He suggested a format with which he had worked previously: short poems performed alternately with instrumental music, possibly drawing on religious narratives from India. For the instrumental music he suggested two baroque cellos, which would also perform the other pieces of the festival's main concert: several pieces by the 17<sup>th</sup>-century composer Domenico Gabrielli and, by Boris Yoffe, who was himself present at the concert, musical responses to Gabrielli's pieces as well as an independent composition.

As a starting point for my creative process, I visualized the two violoncellos that would perform the piece, and I asked myself: What could happen between these two? How can we react to the other (in the widest possible sense)? This is how the idea for the title *Gegenüber* was born. All the poems in the cycle share the common theme of a person facing someone or something else, although in quite different constellations.

I soon decided that I wanted to draw on more than one religious tradition. As an Indologist, I naturally liked Gerung’s suggestion of taking a narrative from an Indian religious tradition; but for a performance in a church and as an aspiring secular Franciscan, I also wanted to draw on the Christian tradition. Despite the many uses of duality in the work, I did not want to have a duality of religious traditions or religious narratives that could be directly compared or pitched against each other. Also, with the venue for the performance being a church, I felt that there would be an imbalance, if there was, so to speak, a home team meeting an away team. Aiming for a relational structure, I decided to include a third religion and to write three short poems each for three narratives from different religious traditions. It is thus not the religious traditions that are facing each other; rather, the act of facing (*vis-à-vis*) is seen through the mutually enriching perspectives of three different traditions. In terms of lyrical form, I set myself the limit of ten lines per poem, or “miniature”—as Gerung calls these short texts. One poem from each set will be discussed in this article.

### **The Common Theme: Action in Inaction**

For many years, I have been fascinated by the Jaina story of Bahubali, a hero of nonviolence. When Gerung suggested drawing on an Indian tradition, I immediately knew that I wanted to work on this story. From there, I thought about stories from other traditions with a similar message and decided on the story of the Wolf of Gubbio and the Rainmaker. These three stories share, despite their very different origins and settings, the message that the right form of inaction can be effective and transformative. The two cellos on stage remain static throughout the performance, yet their music interacts in different ways, as they play together at the same time or alternately.

Across cultures, the motive of withdrawal from the business of everyday life is promoted as a path towards the highest goal, regardless of whether that goal is called heaven or liberation from a cycle of rebirth. Asceticism can be understood as a reversal of action, an anti-action. Some Hindu ascetics, for example, vow to hold up their outstretched arms for many years, until the arm becomes immobile and unusable. In this extreme practice, inaction is the opposite of laziness or just not doing anything. External inaction, many religious narratives and practices claim, can be a heroic path, which requires great inner strength and discipline. While many ascetics withdraw from social life, their inaction is often deemed a beneficial action for society and considered to play a role in maintaining cosmic harmony and equilibrium. Their inaction or minimal action can also have the power to reestablish a harmony that has been lost, especially when the crisis is due to an excessive extroversion, such as the appetite for power or wealth. At other times, inaction may not be part of ascetic practice but simply the appropriate way of being present, of meeting the world and the other. The three stories chosen for the cycle, *Gegenüber*, all present spiritual role models who chose a path of inaction or minimal action, and who succeed thereby to break pattern of violence or disharmony.

I am not claiming that the message of inaction and nonviolence is exactly the same in all three traditions or that all religions have the same goal. I also do not make a point about the interrelatedness of religious traditions or the absence of such interrelatedness. Rather, I want the experience of similarity to resonate in the person who listens to *Gegenüber*. The image of resonance

has also been used to make sense of the processes that occur in comparative theology.<sup>6</sup> For me, art and academic work are in constant interaction, and I use one to nourish the other. This is in line with the concept of “kreative Forschung”/creative research: adding to academic knowledge and insight by doing art.<sup>7</sup> *Gegenüber* for me is part of my exploration of comparative theology as a contemplative practice, something that Francis X. Clooney called for in an article connected to his book *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, and which I think is connected closely to the aesthetic aspects of (inter)religiosity.<sup>8</sup>

*Gegenüber* offers the encounter of religious stories side by side, but through the resonances in the music and structural features as well as in a process of going back and forth. The image of resonance, and the immobility of the two instruments on the stage, were two of my starting points for thinking about interreligious encounter in metaphors of a shared space, rather than a crossing of boundaries. I am developing this idea in a current project, a German-language novella, which weaves together elements from the Bahubali story and the life story of the Christian saint Bruder Klaus, a Swiss hermit who helped to secure peace in his home country. The thought that I want to explore is that the action of boundary crossing, which is often taken as foundational for interreligious relations, is disruptive to contemplative states, and that interreligious encounter has to be thinkable also in terms that preserve contemplative states, and that are closer to inaction, minimal action, or co-being in a shared space. Ideas for the factors that must be taken into consideration for such a space can be taken from real encounters, such as interreligious choir projects, where the omission of tradition-specific elements may have to be negotiated to enable the joint performance of singers with different religious commitments.<sup>9</sup>

Successful interreligious art requires sensitivity to both similarity and difference. While drawing attention to the similarities that run across traditions, I also keep the stories separate, as distinct parts. At the concert, the three parts were actually separated by other pieces by different composers from different eras. I consider this the ideal performance situation for *Gegenüber* because it guarantees that the three different sections do not blend too smoothly into each other but maintain their distinctness. Also, the poems do not retell the stories. They are not narrative in a linear sense, but seek a creative engagement with the story, taking a further step away from factual claims towards highlighting the range of subjective responses. To allow the audience to understand the original story behind the poems, copies with short versions of all three stories were handed out before the concert. It was left to the individuals whether they wanted to know more about the context of *Gegenüber* and engage more deeply with the material before or after the performance—or just to enjoy the work of art that was presented to them. The evening before

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *The More Torah, the More Life: A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Helen Kara, *Creative Research Methods: A Practical Guide*, Second edition (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020); Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London: Tauris, 2010); Jenna Ward and Harriet Shortt, eds., *Using Arts-Based Research Methods: Creative Approaches for Researching Business, Organisation and Humanities*, Palgrave Studies in Business, Arts and Humanities (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Francis X. Clooney, “On the Scholar’s Contribution to the Contemplative Work of Hindu-Christian Studies,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 27, no. 1 (7 November 2014), <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1575>. Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Jens Kreinath, “The Interreligious Choir of Civilizations: Representations of Democracy and the Ritual Assembly of Multiculturalism in Antakya, Turkey,” in *Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as a Cultural Resource*, ed. Jone Salomonsen, Sarah M. Pike, and Graham Harvey (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 125–40.

the concert, there was a public lecture event which included a dialogical narration of “the making-of” by Hans-Jürgen Gerung and me. There, all three stories were told and through selected passages, the relation between the story, the poems, and the music was explained.

## **The Creative Process**

After discussing my general ideas about our project with Hans-Jürgen Gerung, I started to write my poems. While we did not have an ongoing conversation, I constantly kept in mind during the writing process that these miniature poems were meant as inspiration for pieces of music. This meant that I sought to give each of these poems a distinctive mood, pattern, or melody, and thus to give them some elements that may be translatable into music. However, I did not communicate these with the composer, because I thought the division of roles was clear in our collaboration: my voice was that of poetry; Hans-Jürgen Gerung’s that of music.

I worked on the three sections one-at-a-time, immersing myself as much as possible in the respective narrative. The poems, in the form in which they exist now, have in most cases been distilled from much longer drafts from which I cut words and lines that were inessential. My usual way of writing is to start with a white page on my computer or a white sheet of paper, and to note down any words or themes that come to my mind. My inspiration came not only from the narratives themselves but also from the wider context. In the case of Bahubali, these were visual representations of Lord Bahubali as well as the vast body of literature on Jain non-violence that I had studied for my doctoral dissertation. In the case of the Wolf of Gubbio, I read up on Franciscan spirituality, studied different interpretations of the Wolf of Gubbio story, and also drew on my experience of attending the meetings of the Secular Franciscan Order as well as my visits to Umbria, the region where St. Francis lived. For the poems about the rainmaker, I read poetry translated from Chinese to get a feel for the images that are used, read up on Chinese religions and the symbolisms of Chinese art, and also tried to find out about the background of the rainmaker story. While most of this never made it into the final version, I hope that this engagement contributed to my goal of writing poems that are true and respectful to the respective tradition, even if they are written by an outsider.

In the next section, I present the three narratives, one of the poems I wrote to them, a short illumination of the poem, and then a short statement by Hans-Jürgen Gerung on how he wrote music inspired by that poem. I will discuss them in the order in which they were presented at the concert: first Bahubali, then the Wolf of Gubbio, then the rainmaker.

### ***Bahubali***

The first triplet of poems was also the first to be written. This story is taken from Jainism, a small Indian religion distinct from both Hinduism and Buddhism. Jainism is one of the world’s oldest religions that are still practiced today, and it is frequently referred to as the most peaceful religion. Nonviolence is indeed commonly understood by Jainas as the most important value to live by. Nonviolence is, in the Jaina worldview, not only based on the goal of serving the other. As a renouncer’s religion, Jainism sees itself as a path for liberating the soul from the cycle of



rebirth.<sup>10</sup> The idea is that thoughts, speech, and actions attract karmic particles that pollute the soul and cloud its natural capacity for perfect knowledge. The ultimate goal of the Jaina is to become omniscient by purifying the soul, and this is done by abstaining from wrongful thoughts, speech and actions. The meditation posture of perfect stillness assumed by Bahubali, in which only minute movements like swallowing the saliva that gathers in the mouth are permitted, comes as close as is possible for the human being to the perfect inaction that attracts no more karmic particles and leads both to perfect peacefulness and ultimately liberation.

In Jainism, the idea that inaction can be the best action to choose for one's soul is nothing out of the ordinary. Rather, the spiritual benefit of bearing suffering or discomfort without reaction is universally accepted. For example, among many Jainas, not slapping a mosquito that seeks to draw blood on one's arm is seen as a sign of spiritual progress. Lord Bahubali, in the traditional Jain narrative, is a person who has perfected these Jaina ideals.<sup>11</sup> He was a prince who initially wanted to fight his brother about their royal inheritance. However, at the fight's decisive moment, he realized how wrong it was to fight one's own brother. He renounced the world, shed all clothes, and stood perfectly still. There is a colossal statue of Bahubali in Shravanbelagola, India, which is venerated every twelve years with a great ceremony in which it is showered with flowers, colored water, and even precious jewels. The poems I wrote were inspired by my visit to this very impressive statue and the time I spent in solitude looking at it.

Ein Mann, der Kämpfe müde und auch der Siege  
Kam zu dir, dem Entsager, den die Welt nicht rührt  
Vielleicht sahst du dein früheres Selbst in ihm  
So wie du seiner Hoffnung Bild der eignen Zukunft warst  
Aber du sagtest nichts, dein Blick blieb eingesenkt ins ferne Himmelsblau  
Auch er sprach nicht, die Zeit verstrich  
Bis eine Ameise ihm zickezack über die Wade lief  
Da lächelte der Mann und ging  
Sag mir, was hältst du nun von ihm?

*English Translation:*

A man tired of fighting and of victories too  
Came to you, the renouncer whom the world does not move  
Maybe you saw your former self in him  
Just as you were his own future's hopeful image  
But you said nothing, your gaze remained sunk into the distant blue sky  
He did not speak either, time passed  
Until an ant zigzagged down his calf  
Then the man smiled and left  
Tell me what do you now think of him?

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<sup>10</sup> Good introductions to Jainism are Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2009) and Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (Routledge, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Sherry Fohr, *Jainism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 93–95.

The idea for the poem developed from my own experience of visiting the statue in Shravanabelagola as a researcher, tourist and, at least in a wider sense, pilgrim. While Bahubali in the original story becomes tired of fighting and of victories because he recognizes the futility of it in spiritual terms, in my poem I picture myself as a high-status person from my own culture, a successful manager or banker, who is despite all success disillusioned and close to burn-out. He visits the statue of Bahubali, attracted by the hope to find inner peace. Yet the statue of Bahubali, like many of the Jaina role models, is not a vis-à-vis that provides simple answers: Bahubali’s inaction is both the example he offers to the observer, and the refusal to help by direct intervention. The status of the encounter between the statue and the seeker is thus, for most of the poem, left open. The seeker’s attitude may be respect, the desire to imitate, even deep meditation, but it could also be disappointment that the object of his veneration does not speak to him, and does not even answer his veneration with a single glance. There is no meeting eye to eye—or is there?

Unlike Bahubali in the Jaina story, the man in my poem does not remain motionless for a whole year. An ant walks up his leg, the apparently irrational zigzag of its movement in stark contrast to motionlessness and self-control of the two protagonists. Yet it is this ant, the spontaneous, uncontrolled, and unprovoked encounter with a small living being, that triggers an experience of joy and understanding in the seeker, which allows him to become active in the world again. Yet the ant should not be seen in contrast to the insights gained by Bahubali. The ant is taken from the story itself, as Bahubali stood motionless for so long that the ants used his legs as support for their ant hills. This ant hill is depicted, too, at Shravanabelagola’s Bahubali statue. The hill of restless ants makes Bahubali’s mastery of stillness visible. Bahubali is thus the person who masters the art of action in inaction. The degree to which such perfection can be passed on to ordinary people, exemplified by myself, especially when they come from a very different cultural background, is left as an open question in the poem.

When I began to design a language of sound for Bahubali, I buried myself for months in reading the theory and aesthetics of Indian *ragas*—and in the old diaries of my stay in India in 1987. By doing so, I did of course not become an Indian composer, but something new matured in me: my own language of sound that nourished itself from experience that was studied and dreamed. This material (and its associated techniques) became a part of me through long studying periods and rumination. Ultimately and suddenly, I felt that all the new flowed into my work completely weightlessly. Incidentally, a similar process happened to me with the Chinese music theories. Nevertheless, I remained a European composer, who is always involved and anchored in the traditional environment of his ancient art.

In the next step, I assigned both instruments in their tasks in *melos* and *tanpura*, whereby the *melos*-part also derives its sound material from different *ragas* in the broadest sense:

Bahubali I	→	Bhairav
Bahubali II	→	Shri
Bahubali III	→	Hindol

While developing the melody lines, I avoided as far as possible listening to any world music. And when I enjoyed music in breaks, I listened only to a beloved record of Gregorian songs of the Benedictines. The longer I worked the more the European, free melismatic style seemed to

merge (and being even related) with my newly found (and for me *invented*) *melos*-ornamentation.

“Ein Mann, der Kämpfe müde und auch der Siege...”

*A man tired of fighting and of victories too...*

“...dein Blick blieb eingesenkt ins ferne Himmelsblau...”

*...your gaze remained sunk into the distant blue sky...*

In order to make the motionless *Gegenüber* (opposite) of the silent scenery quasi audible, I constructed a *tanpura*-cello part, which, using flageolets and multiphonic-sounds, spreads a shimmering light over the ever-winding *melos*, creating a surreal and lifeless landscape. At the decisive moment, when life in the form of the little creature (ant) shows itself, the silent mirage dissolves to give way to hope and wisdom.

These sudden transformations (in each of the three Bahubali songs) are the moment *tanpura* and *melo*'s voices move from one player to another. *Einer sieht sich im Auge des anderen*—one sees oneself in the eye of another.

### **The Wolf of Gubbio**

The story of the wolf of Gubbio is included in the Little Flowers of St. Francis, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century collection of legends on the life of St. Francis of Assisi.<sup>12</sup> A man-eating wolf is said to have brought terror to Gubbio, a town near Assisi. No one dared to venture outside the city walls. When Francis learned of the people's plight, he decided, against all warnings, to search for the wolf. The wolf sought to attack him, but St. Francis did not brandish any weapon. He calmly made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to abandon his wicked ways. Francis made the wolf and the people of Gubbio solemnly agree to a contract, and indeed the wolf no longer terrorized the city, and the people of Gubbio happily fed him for the rest of his life.

St. Francis is the Catholic patron saint of the environment, and the story of the wolf of Gubbio exemplifies his love for nature and all creation, including its darker aspects that others may fail to embrace.<sup>13</sup> It is also a story that shows the power of a saint who acts with divine authority, and of the effectiveness of reconciliation in the name of God. For *Gegenüber*, it is the moment of encounter between the wolf and the saint who chooses not to meet aggression with aggression, but only with the small gesture of the cross. This nonviolent inaction can of course be seen as folly by those who have experienced the damage done by the wolf. However, in the third of the three poems I wrote on the story of the wolf of Gubbio, the inhabitants of town meet the wolf not with fear and anger, but with a hymn of joyful hospitality.

Öffnet die Tore, es kommt der Wolf  
Der hungrige Wolf, unser Gast

<sup>12</sup> Robert H. Hopcke and Paul Schwartz, *Little Flowers of Francis of Assisi: A New Translation* (Shambhala Publications, 2006), 66–70.

<sup>13</sup> James Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Georgetown University Press, 2009), 163.

Wir wollen ihn bewirten mit Schinken und Brot  
Mit Feigen und Braten, Oliven und Speck  
Ist es nicht Fügung, dass er nach Gubbio kommt  
Eine Stadt, die den Hunger nicht kennt?  
Perugia hat mächtige Streiter  
Spoleto den prächtigen Dom  
Über Gubbio wird man einst sagen  
Hier weilte der Wolf schon beim Lamm

*English translation:*

Open the gates, the wolf is coming  
The hungry wolf, our guest  
We want to entertain him with ham and bread  
With figs and roasts, olives and bacon  
Is it not providence that he came to Gubbio  
A city that knows no hunger?  
Perugia has powerful fighters  
Spoleto the magnificent cathedral  
One day it will be said about Gubbio  
Here the wolf already lived with the lamb

St. Francis is one of Christianity’s most beloved saints, probably because he was in equal parts loving and cheerful and radical in his asceticism and imitation of Christ. Francis dared to take the message of the gospel literally, fully embracing the poverty and non-violence Jesus teaches to his followers in the sermon on the mount. For almost all other Christians, the gospel’s calls to give away all possessions and to turn the other cheek remain major challenges that some acknowledge, and others do not.

I wrote my poem in the light of the European refugee crisis, when Germany opened its borders to thousands of refugees, most of them young Muslim men. The response of the German population was largely one of support and welcome, but there was also fear and anger, especially after the sexual harassment of women in Cologne during the New Year’s Night of 2015 and several terrorist attacks by young Muslim men who entered the country among the refugees.

The wolf in the wolf of Gubbio story stands not only for an individual animal but more broadly for the “other” as a source of fear and danger, most existentially within oneself. He is both the stranger outside the city gates and the dark side of one’s own psyche. In my poem, I am trying to follow the example of St. Francis: how can people meet the unknown with the attitude of the gospel? In the poem I am trying to communicate the radical message of the gospel, within the setting of 14<sup>th</sup>-century Umbria but ultimately within our own time. The first lines, which speak of opening the gates for the hungry wolf, show, depending on the perspective, the folly, the scandal, or the seriousness of Jesus’ message, while the last line points to the Biblical utopia of the wolf living with the lamb, the lost paradise which Christians hope will be regained at the end of times.

“Öffnet die Tore, es kommt der Wolf ...”

This work evolves entirely from the language of Central European sacred music. More precisely, it is the language from the beginnings of polyphony in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Fragments of parallel quart-quint constructions over organal-(bordon)-basses are just as recognizable as the still prevailing presumption of a *cantus firmus*.

However, this *cantus firmus* does not come from the tradition of Roman church music but was taken from a Heirmologian of an Athos monastery (Cod. Monasterii Hiberarum 740, XI / XII century fol. 1 r). Like Francis, the Athos monks are concerned with a radical following of Christ, and in both traditions there is strong Christian mysticism. But the *cantus firmus* (from the third movement of the second-lyrics-cycle) stands out more clearly for the *Gegenüber* (opposite).

The *Gegenüber* (opposite) and the controversy, the divisive and the other ... and how the two are combined in this chorale as if the question of the “*right*” manner of praise had been overcome!

### ***The Rainmaker***

The rainmaker is a story set in China. It is referred to by the psychologist C.G. Jung who writes that he heard it from the sinologist Richard Wilhelm.<sup>14</sup> The storyline is that there is a severe draught in a village, and after all other measures fail, a delegation is sent to fetch a person who is famed for the ability of making rain from another province. When the rainmaker arrives, expectations are high, but instead of performing rituals or saying prayers to bring about the rain, he just sits in his room. This remains the same for the next two days, and people are starting to question the ability or even intention of their rainmaker, but then on the third day, it starts to rain. When the rainmaker is asked how he managed to bring about the rain, he replies that there was nothing he had to do. When he arrived, he noticed the imbalance that there was in the Dao in the region, and once the Dao had found the balance again within himself, the external world came into order again, too. The story serves to illustrate a fundamental principle of Daoism: the microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm, and there can be no happiness against nature.<sup>15</sup> Rather, wisdom and success are natural consequences of a harmonious state, a balance of the Dao, and this applies to the individual as much as to a village community or the natural world.

The rainmaker’s action in inaction lay in letting his inner world get back into balance, and when this was achieved, the sky opened to bring forth the longed-for rain. In my poems on the rainmaker story, the first is describing the drought, the second the point of transformation, and the third the onset of the rain. Here I am discussing only the first poem.

Auf rissiger Erde fand ich  
Schwach gezeichnet unseren Pfad

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<sup>14</sup> Meredith Sabini, *The Earth Has a Soul: C.G. Jung on Nature, Technology and Modern Life* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2001), 211.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Little et al., *Taoism and the Arts of China* (University of California Press, 2000), 14.

Auch die Bank ist noch da, die unsere Bank am Ufer war  
Wo aber sind dein Gesicht  
Die Blüten deiner Lotushände?  
Die Schilfrohrflöte liegt in meiner Hand  
Tot, wie ihre Brüder ringsumher  
Wie sollte es auch anders sein  
Jetzt da der Mond kein Ebenbild mehr hat

*English translation:*

I found on cracked earth  
Our path weakly drawn  
The bench that once was our bench on the shore is still there  
But where are your face  
The flowers of your lotus hands?  
The reed flute is lying in my hand  
Dead like its brothers all around  
How else could it be  
Now that the moon is no longer matched by an image

This poem discusses the situation of the drought in the language of a love poem, in which a man misses his lover. Elements of the romantic landscape of happier times are still there: the path the couple used to walk towards a lake, and the bench from where they used to look at the night sky. The moon and the reflection of the moon in the lake are of course clichés of romantic literature. In my poem, they symbolize the perfect harmony of two lovers who experience each other as soul mates. The situation is, however, that the moon no longer has a matching image, as there is no water that could offer a reflection—not even the word water is used in the poem, and hence the German word *Ebenbild* (matching image) has been chosen, rather than the more usual word *Spiegelbild* (mirror image), which is typically used for a reflection in water. The reed used to frame the lake is lying dead, and the reed flute that the man is holding, is equally described as “dead.” In a way, the synchronicity between wild nature (the reed) and cultivated nature (the flute) is already there, but at the moment that the poem captures, it can bring forth only absence: missing the lover’s face and delicate hands, and the silence of the flute. The drought is thus described as an entanglement in memory and relations which are no longer productive. The lovers’ cliché of the moon and its reflection is leading to a dead end. My reason for using a love poem to express the drought of the rainmaker story was to find an expression not only for the thirst (as expressed in the lover’s longing for the beloved) but also for the confusion and inner turmoil that stems from a wrong attitude to life. This is of course only the first of the three poems, and already in the next poem, hope will be introduced again for the possibility of rain, when the lyric will express itself not in artificial and cliché expressions of the love poem genre, but instead in ways daring to open up to a genuine encounter with nature and the cosmos.

The first music in the third lyrical cycle closes the circle to the opening Bahubali. While there, the third music has climbed the highest levels of wisdom (also musically) and in bright colors everything turns into light-filled peace, a quite different summit sounds open up the rainmaker. No longer for the highest level of wisdom and recognition are the (of course quite differently produced) agonizingly high sound-constructs, but for an all-burning light—for death

and drought: ...*jetzt, da der Mond kein Ebenbild mehr hat* (Now that the moon is no longer matched by an image).

Almost without exception, the actors act on the string parts of their instrument, under which there is no longer any fingerboard—laborious and scratchy and unpleasant. It seems that music is no longer capable of movement. Stoic and almost static—*quasi una nota sola*.

How different the changing Shrutis in their fine figurations with which they seek their way to heaven in the Bahubali! The first sentence of the rainmaker is without hope (Dante: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!”). But wait!—one person has hope [in the next poem]—one’s heart is heaven-wide! Here begins the transformation of the entire work and the introduction of the solution into its *Gegenüber* (counterpart)—in the balance of hope and faith (and in the water, the symbol of life) the listener is led out into a friendly world in which all effort seems to have disappeared and into one natural and positive belonging dominates. The use of Chinese pentatonic systems such as Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu (in conjunction with Horsehead-Fiddle playing techniques) is irrelevant to the listener, but may be of interest to the skilled artisan.

### **Concluding reflections: interreligious art and the artist**

*Gegenüber* is a work of art that seeks to engage religious boundaries. For me, interreligious art is not only about crossing or bridging boundaries but also about respecting boundaries. And, as I pointed out, interreligious art may even be about rethinking metaphors of boundaries, about sharing a space in uncertainty, ambiguity, and trust. In the case of *Gegenüber*, I felt that I had to respect the sacrality of the church in which the work was to be performed. Irrespective of my personal religious beliefs, I felt that it would be acceptable if our poems or music made some listeners uncomfortable, but it would not have been acceptable for my work to mock or attack the religion of the community that has provided the space for our creative performance. This is especially the case as the concert was to be performed not in a community hall or other casual space, but in a consecrated church, with the performers positioned in front of the altar and the tabernacle.

On the other hand, we sought not to compromise our artistic standards. While my poems are not cryptic, each of them opens a new scene, and they are not as accessible as a simple re-narration of one of the three stories, or all three stories, would have been. Also, listening to New Music is to many people an unfamiliar and challenging experience. The work is thus not seeking to deliver a feel-good message of interreligious harmony. Rather, I consider *Gegenüber* an invitation to delve deeper into the religious narratives of different traditions, and the resonance they may evoke subjectively in each person. As such, I saw the project related not only to interreligious studies but also to comparative theology – faith seeking understanding in the light of other traditions. That comparative theology itself has an affinity to art can be sensed, I think, particularly in the beautiful *His Hiding Place is Darkness* by Francis X. Clooney, which itself is

structured like a literary work, and from which I drew my inspiration for thinking about interreligious art, boundaries, space, and creative research.<sup>16</sup>

Working with three traditions for *Gegenüber* also meant for me respecting the distinctiveness of all three religions and cultures. This is relevant especially in the light of the issue of cultural appropriation that is increasingly raised when creatives use elements of other religions or traditions. I found that as a poet, in seeking to express this distinctiveness and trying to communicate some of the tradition’s voice and flavor, I tried to walk a fine line between making all poems in *Gegenüber* sound too similar to each other and overemphasizing the distinctive features of each of the religions/cultures, which can easily lead to stereotypical representations and mimicry. Hans-Jürgen Gerung has noted a similar challenge for his compositions, for which he had to take into consideration not only the three religious traditions but also the language, rhythm, and message of the poems I had written.

To musically recapture a text that is located in a foreign cultural sphere always carries the great danger of losing oneself in shallow ethno-blend. Navigating without a personal, artistic handwriting, indeed even without any coordinate system at all could be one of the consequences. In the past, I have been confronted several times with texts by European authors who bore this loss of coordinates right from the very beginning and who proved to be simply “unconvertible.” If poetry is to be redrawn by music, then music becomes the sounding meta-level (*ars sequenti non primus*) and the composer becomes a recreating artist, whose task seems comparable to that of a stage-lighting-technician. He turns the object and thus illuminates the unseen, he clarifies, emphasizes—or obscures, retouches. In short, a composer can clumsily destroy anything. To re-ennoble an excellent text by a semantic other than the linguistic one is enormously difficult. At least this is my experience from years of intensive examination of texts from poetry, prose, or the sacred books.

As Hans-Jürgen Gerung had indicated before, engaging with these materials did not make us Indian or Chinese, Christian or Jain. Good interreligious art, in my view, combines feeling at home and confident with one’s message and method while remaining a stranger, or expressed more positively, a guest. I do not accept the claim underlying many accusations of cultural appropriation that elements of culture belong exclusively to certain politically defined groups. Such an outlook would instrumentalize and ultimately destroy art. Art is always culturally rooted, but it speaks to all persons because openness for beauty and transcendence are features of universal human nature. I believe that sweeping accusations of appropriation must be rejected in the name of good art. However, I only make this claim because I believe that good art is also sensitive. Art that merely seeks to shock and provoke, or to trade in stereotypes, cannot be good interreligious art. Interreligious art, in my view, can draw from other traditions but it must approach the material with humility because it always keeps in mind that religious narratives and the artistic expressions of another culture are not merely inspiration for the artistic self.

I tried to look at all my poems also from the perspective of the believer, not necessarily in a tradition-specific sense, which is difficult or impossible to achieve for an outsider, but in the sense that I was aware that the material I am working with is to another person sacred. Interreligious art thus requires revisiting the concept of what an artist is, shifting the focus away

<sup>16</sup> Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*.



from the independent, rebellious genius to that of a life-long learner and creative mediator of different communities and their answers to the biggest questions in life. Here a post-Western understanding of the role of the artist can be fruitful.<sup>17</sup> This applies not only to the role of the artist, but also more generally to the arbitrary and contestable boundaries between religion, science/academia, and art.<sup>18</sup>

## RY

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<sup>17</sup> See also Melanie Barbato, "Interreligious Art in Light of Hindu and Buddhist Thought," *CrossCurrents* 68, no. 3 (2018): 336–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12316>.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Wuthnow, "The Contemporary Convergence of Art and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Peter Clarke, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 366. Wuthnow argues, for example, that there is a blurring of boundaries due to democratization.