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# Engaging with T.S. Eliot: *Four Quartets* as a Multimedia Performance

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**Abstract:** This article explores a recent performance of excerpts from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1935/36–1942) entitled *Engaging Eliot: Four Quartets in Word, Color, and Sound* as an example of live poetry. In this context, Eliot's poem can be analysed as an auditory artefact that interacts strongly with other oral performances (welcome addresses and artists' conversations), as well as with the musical performance of Christopher Theofanidis's quintet "At the Still Point" at the end of the opening of *Engaging Eliot*. The event served as an introduction to a 13-day art exhibition and engaged in a re-evaluation of Eliot's poem after 9/11: while its first part emphasises the connection between Eliot's poem and Christian doctrine, its second part – especially the combination of poetry reading and musical performance – highlights the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of *Four Quartets*.

## 1 Introduction

On January 28th, 2013, excerpts from T.S. Eliot's wartime poem *Four Quartets* were performed as the central part of the multimedia opening event of *Engaging Eliot: Four Quartets in Word, Color, and Sound*,<sup>1</sup> which took place in Duke Chapel at Duke Divinity School (Duke University) in Durham, North Carolina. It served as an introduction to a 13-day art exhibition. *Engaging Eliot* was organised by the Duke Initiative in Theology and the Arts in cooperation with the Fujimura Institute. It presented works of art that were created as contributions to *FOUR QU4RTETS*, a collaborative project featuring artistic responses to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* by the painters Makoto Fujimura and Bruce Herman, as well as by the composer Christopher Theofanidis. The project was launched by Makoto Fujimura and the Fujimura Institute in 2011 (Fujimura 2013a, n.pag.). *FOUR QU4RTETS* has been on tour in

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<sup>1</sup> A video recording of this event is available on YouTube, see *Engaging Eliot. Opening Evening, January 28, 2013, Duke University Chapel* (2013).

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the USA, Europe,<sup>2</sup> China, and Japan, and was hosted by Baylor and Yale Universities, Gordon College, and the University of Hong Kong from September 9th to 21st, 2014, and the City University of Hiroshima from October 28th to November 19th, 2015 (Fujimura 2013b, n.pag.). The opening event of *Engaging Eliot* at Duke Chapel was approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes long. It consisted of conversations in which the artists spoke about the ways in which their responses to Eliot's poem generated new works of art, and about the art works themselves. Furthermore, it contained readings of excerpts from *Four Quartets*, and a performance of Christopher Theofanidis's quintet "At the Still Point," played by the Ciompi Quartet with Jeremy Begbie on piano. The opening of *Engaging Eliot* was followed by a colloquium the next day, in which the audience, scholars, artists, and organisers discussed their responses to the event, the paintings, the quintet, and to Eliot's poem (*Engaging Eliot Colloquium* 2013, n.pag.). It was recorded on video by the Rev Fred Westbrook for Duke Chapel Media Ministry, and is 1 hour and 42 minutes long. My analysis is based on this video (*Engaging Eliot* 2013).

In the following, the reading of excerpts from Eliot's *Four Quartets* during the opening event of *Engaging Eliot* will be analysed as an example of "live poetry," that is, as a "specific manifestation of poetry's oral mode of realisation, which is a parallel to, rather than a mere derivative 'version' of, the written mode" (Novak 2011, 62). Julia Novak's notion of live poetry is useful for my analysis because it comprises both "presentations of 'performance poetry' as well as more traditional 'poetry readings,'" and may be encountered "in a wide variety of settings" like "poetry slams, large public demonstrations such as anti-war gatherings, formal readings (for instance at universities), literature festivals and small open mics." In all these examples, "[t]he story and images of the poem are conveyed through the spoken word rather than through theatrical ostentation, as focus is placed on the oral verbalisation of the poetic text" (Novak 2011, 62). The performance of excerpts from Eliot's poem during the opening event of *Engaging Eliot* is characterised by "the direct encounter and physical co-presence" of performers "with a live audience," rather than of the poet as in performance poetry (Novak 2011, 62). I will give a detailed analysis of the opening of *Engaging Eliot* and focus on the interaction between poetry readings, artists' conversations, and the musical performance of "At the Still Point." As this event has not been extensively discussed by critics, I will provide detailed information about the audience, the performance space, welcome addresses, performers, artists' conversations, poetry readings, and the musical performance of Theofanidis's quintet and show how these elements contribute to a re-evaluation of Eliot's poem. I seek to demonstrate

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<sup>2</sup> The exhibition of paintings was shown in King's Chapel, Cambridge, on April 13th, 2015. Eliot's *Four Quartets* were recited by actress Juliette Stevenson (Fujimura 2015, n.pag.).

that although the selection of the performance space with its interior decoration, the welcome addresses, and the selection of poetry performers place Eliot's poem in an ecumenical Christian context, the poetry readings, artists' conversations (especially Theofanidis's speech), and the musical performance of "At the Still Point" highlight the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of Eliot's poem that have been emphasised by Kenneth Paul Kramer (Kramer 2007, 129; 144; 179–195).

The performance of excerpts from *Four Quartets* during the opening of *Engaging Eliot* evokes various other performative acts. According to Judith Butler (whose concept of performativity is based on Jacques Derrida's discussion of the unlimited iterability of signs, discourses and speech acts), specific performative acts are linked through a contingent, "arbitrary relation." They can establish a continuity of meaning and values, or question, modify, suspend as well as disrupt traditions and contexts and allow for the "possibility of a different sort of repeating" (Butler 2007, 188; Derrida 2007, 185; see also Fischer-Lichte 2012, 39–40). As *Engaging Eliot* consists of a variety of multimedia responses to Eliot's poem, the poetry readings are also related to other forms of public performance and events like literary festivals, art exhibitions, and concerts. There are furthermore continuities with public performances and events generally related to T.S. Eliot and *Four Quartets* in literary criticism: classical poetry readings, in particular readings of Eliot's poem by male speakers (e.g. by T.S. Eliot himself or by Alec Guinness, Paul Scofield, Tom O'Bedlam, Willem Dafoe, and Jeremy Irons), sermons, the university lectures in which T.S. Eliot expressed his views on literature and cultural criticism, as well as university lectures about Eliot. The opening of *Engaging Eliot* is marked by a new interactive combination of these performance traditions and by a re-evaluation of Eliot's text after 9/11. Thus, it does not express or imitate a meaning already fixed in Eliot's poem, but constitutes and shapes this meaning in the contingent processes of performance.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Audience

The audience at the opening event on January 28th, 2013 (which will be referred to as the "simple audience")<sup>4</sup> consisted of women and men in nearly equal

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<sup>3</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte and Julia Novak have emphasised this feature of media performance: "The medium is not 'the carrier of a pre-defined artistic content' but 'a shaper of that content'" (Fischer-Lichte 1990, 251; Novak 2011, 56).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie distinguishes the "simple audience" from the "mass audience" of television, for example. The "simple audience" interacts with the performer in a fairly direct way during a live poetry event in a public space (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 44; Novak 2011, 194).

proportions who were predominantly white. It comprised many young adults but also middle-aged and elderly people, as well as some children. A considerable proportion of the audience was of Asian descent. As the opening event took place at Duke University and was followed by a colloquium, a large part of the simple audience consisted of people with an academic background (students, faculty members) who were familiar not only with Eliot's poem, his other works, and his biography, but also with critical readings of *Four Quartets*. The video clip on YouTube introduces the simple audience as a central participant in the opening of *Engaging Eliot*. The first fifteen minutes of the video show individual members of the audience filling the performance space<sup>5</sup> with a polyphony of sounds that can be related to those produced by the performance of Christopher Theofanidis's quintet "At the Still Point." During the event and at its end, the reactions of groups of audience members are shown for a considerable period of time; the spectator space<sup>6</sup> is darkened, but the audience members are still clearly visible. At the end of the opening of *Engaging Eliot*, the audience's applause and conversations fill the performance space once again.

### 3 Time of Performance, Performance Space and Welcome Addresses

The opening of *Engaging Eliot* took place in the evening as becomes apparent in the welcome address by Luke Powery, Dean of Duke Chapel. This meant that those in full-time employment had a chance to participate in the event. Powery, speaking at a desk placed in front of the altar, introduces Duke Chapel (an ecumenical Christian chapel connected to the United Methodist Church) as a major participant in the event, and describes it as a "Gothic cathedral," a "site of beauty," a "towering church" and as the "icon of Duke University." Powery's address highlights the ecumenical context of the event and emphasises the connection between *Four Quartets* and Christian doctrine. Powery introduces Jeremy Begbie, Professor of Theology (Begbie 2015, 1), host and master of ceremonies at the event. Begbie was educated in the UK and was ordained as a priest of the Church of England in 1983 – all facts known to a considerable number of audience members with a close connection to Duke University (Begbie 2015, 2). Begbie's biography may remind the audience of Eliot's migrant background

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<sup>5</sup> My usage of this term follows Julia Novak's definition (Novak 2011, 208).

<sup>6</sup> My usage of this term is based on Julia Novak's definition (Novak 2011, 208).

and his membership of the Church of England after his conversion in 1927. The selection of Begbie as master of ceremonies thus again emphasises the Christian context of the event.

In his speech, Jeremy Begbie emphasises that *Engaging Eliot* is a “multi-faceted celebration of the interaction of art and faith.” He then introduces the collaboration project *FOUR QUARTETS* as the centrepiece of *Engaging Eliot*, as well as the artists involved, and then announces the sequence of performances during the event. Furthermore, Begbie informs the audience about the readers of extracts from Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and thanks the sponsors of the event (e.g. the Council for the Arts at Duke University, the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute, and Duke Chapel).

Begbie reminds the audience of its active participation in the event. He directs its responses by asking members to refrain from applauding after the performance of the quintet, and to observe a moment of silence to be followed by a reading of the last passage of “Little Gidding,” Eliot’s fourth Quartet. He invites the audience to evaluate the event by giving applause after the final reading. Begbie thereby alerts it to its ability to create an acoustic atmosphere that enables and shapes the perception of the performances, that is, a meditative silence suitable for a solemn, almost sacred ceremony. Furthermore, he draws attention to the specific, highly sensitive acoustics in the church and asks the audience to avoid disturbing them. Eventually, Begbie invites the audience to come to the front (of the stage space)<sup>7</sup> after the event to view the paintings by Herman and Fujimura that are exhibited in the performance space,<sup>8</sup> and to speak with the artists, performers, and organisers.

## 4 Artists’ Conversations

A very prominent feature of the opening event of *Engaging Eliot* is its comprehensive paratext<sup>9</sup> of introductory remarks and conversations generated by artists discussing their readings of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. The artists engage in performative acts that establish a continuity with the tradition of university lectures on works of literature. The conversations occupy much more time (ca. 40 minutes) than the reading of the extracts from *Four Quartets* (ca. 6 minutes). They shape the

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<sup>7</sup> My usage of this term follows Novak’s definition (Novak 2011, 208).

<sup>8</sup> The paintings are invisible to the YouTube audience; to view the paintings, see *QUARTETS* (2015).

<sup>9</sup> A paratext “accompanies the ‘poem proper’ in the form of introductions, comments, etc.” (Novak 2011, 75). Novak follows Gérard Genette’s influential definition of the term but extends its use to live poetry.

audience's response to both poetry and musical performance. The artists' conversations stand in the tradition of Eliot's own university lectures, which combined literary criticism and cultural criticism. When Eliot started his work on "East Coker," the second Quartet, in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement in 1938 (Reibetanz 1983, 55), he was acknowledging his responsibility for, and his involvement in, the creation of a cultural climate that made xenophobia, nationalism, and toleration of fascist ideas possible. In a lecture from March 1939, Eliot stated his sense of shame and "feeling of humiliation" openly. As editor of *The Criterion*, Eliot had published an article by Henri Massis that attacked foreign, especially Asian, influences and supported the ideas of French integral nationalism (Scott 1994, 63–64). Eliot's book *After Strange Gods* (1933) contained anti-Semitic passages and advocated a homogenous Christian culture and society (Eliot 1940, 65; Scott 1994, 63–67). The spirit of *Four Quartets* is different from Eliot's earlier visions of cultural purity. His last great poetical work is not characterised by dogmatic confessional separatism, but by a focus on the common spiritual experiences of members of different religions, especially of Christians and Hindus (Sena 1992, 188; Kramer 2007, 129–131; 144; 179–195).<sup>10</sup> However, it is necessary to point out that Eliot never publicly renounced his anti-Semitic statements.

The oral performances in the opening event of *Engaging Eliot* can be related to sermons, not least because they follow Luke Powery's solemn welcome address and are spoken from a desk placed in front of the altar, or from the pulpit. In my analysis, I will concentrate on Theofanidis's speech, because it links poetry readings and musical performance most strongly.

Bruce Herman's and Makoto Fujimura's talks serve as guides to direct the audience's perception of the paintings and shape its reception of the quintet "At the Still Point," as well as of the readings of excerpts from *Four Quartets*. Bruce Herman, painter and Professor of Fine Arts at Gordon College (Herman 2015, n.pag.), is the first artist to speak about his creative engagement with Eliot's text. The scenic space in front of the altar is slightly above the spectator space, and the speakers are illuminated with a spotlight. The rest of the altar with the cross is kept in a darker light. Herman emphasises the lyrical, song-like quality of Eliot's poem,<sup>11</sup> and its representation of "the thingness of things" as well as of man's

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<sup>10</sup> In "Little Gidding," Eliot rejects ideological and confessional separatism: "It is not to ring the bell backward/ Nor is it an incantation/ To summon the spectre of a Rose./ We cannot revive old factions/ We cannot restore old policies/ Or follow an antique drum./ These men, and those who oppose them/ And those whom they opposed/ Accept the constitution of silence/And are folded in a single party" ("Little Gidding" III.181–191; Eliot 1943, 56). All my quotations from *Four Quartets* follow Eliot (1943).

<sup>11</sup> This quality becomes apparent in Eliot's reading of his poem; see Eliot (2011).



connectedness with matter and the environment. To underline his argument, he quotes from the first two sections of “Burnt Norton.” Herman’s speech links the religious (specifically Christian) elements of Eliot’s poem with its focus on the temporal existence of mankind in the lifeworld, emphasising the multivalence of Eliot’s language.

Makoto Fujimura is the next speaker to discuss his creative response to Eliot’s poem. Fujimura is a painter, cultural critic, Culture Care activist,<sup>12</sup> founder of the International Arts Movement (1991) and of the Fujimura Institute (2011), initiator of *FOUR QUARTETS* and co-organiser of *Engaging Eliot* (Fujimura 2013a, n.pag.). Fujimura, a former “resident of Ground Zero” and a professing Christian (Fujimura 2009, 9–10; Fujimura 2012, n.pag.), emphasises the relevance that Eliot’s poem has for people who struggle with a loss of orientation after 9/11 in a world characterised by violence, utilitarianism, and neo-liberalism. His critique of a “mass-commoditised culture,” which strips away the “depth of our expressions” and our thought, his comments on artists’ struggle for survival in this climate, his reference to acts of violence in the USA (the massacres in Columbine High School and Newtown) and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima are all reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s critique of “unregulated industrialism,” of his comments on the erosion of cultural values, and of his reference to environmental damage in *The Idea of a Christian Society*.<sup>13</sup> Fujimura even quotes Eliot’s eudaimonic definition of culture as “that which makes life worth living,” and concludes that the culture he belongs to cannot be described in this way (Eliot 1948, 27). In his essay entitled “Fallen Towers and the Art of Tea,” which was written shortly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Fujimura criticises the US-American pursuit of “cultural dominance” (Fujimura 2009, 44; 46): the Twin Towers, he states, symbolised an economic system that represented “our modern presumption” (Fujimura 2009, 45). Their destruction, Fujimura suggests, must give rise to the development of “new rules” for living. In this context, he demands acts of repentance as well as forgiveness instead of acts of vengeance (Fujimura 2009, 46–48). In his speech during the opening of *Engaging Eliot*, however, these ideas are not mentioned.

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<sup>12</sup> For Fujimura’s definition of Culture Care see Fujimura (2013c, 22–32).

<sup>13</sup> In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot develops a Christian ethics and criticises a society dominated by “unregulated industrialism”: “We are being made aware that the organisation of society on the principle of private profit, as well as public destruction, is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and to the exhaustion of natural sources, and that a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly. I need only mention [...] the results of ‘soil-erosion’ – the exploitation of the earth, on a vast scale for two generations, for commercial profit: immediate benefits leading to dearth and desert” (Eliot 1940, 62).

Fujimura remains very general in his critique and makes no references to urgent global problems like xenophobia, racism, nationalism, wars, cultural conflicts, and social injustice. Towards the end of his talk, Fujimura refers to Theofanidis's quintet "At the Still Point" as a kind of music that can be played after Newtown, and through which the audience can "understand our time." The quintet, as well as Eliot's poem, Fujimura emphasises, speak to disoriented people in despair, the works enable them to deal with darkness and contradiction, they sharpen perception and awareness, give comfort and "deep incarnational hope." Hence, Fujimura, too, initiates a reading of *Four Quartets* as a poem that expresses central elements of Christian doctrine.

Christopher Theofanidis's speech serves as an introduction to the performance of his quintet and to the reading of excerpts from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which frame the musical performance. Although Theofanidis, composer and Professor of Composition at Yale University School of Music (Theofanidis 2008–2010, 4), uses the same stage space as the speakers before him, the space is altered: the desk is removed, the light is changed, and the entire stage space is lit up as the musicians move to their seats. Theofanidis positions himself closer to the audience than the speakers before him. He stands on a step that leads up to the altar, thereby breaking the clear separation of stage space and spectator space. Theofanidis's speech (which is accompanied by the movement of the musicians in the background) opens up a more dynamic and lively part of the event during which the closeness of interaction between Theofanidis, the musicians, and the audience is emphasised. By introducing the material of his quintet whose title is derived from a line in "Burnt Norton," Eliot's first Quartet ("Burnt Norton" II.62), Theofanidis prepares the audience to listen closely and attentively to both the poetry reading and the musical performance, in order to identify and reflect on these two auditory artefacts that interact with and complement each other in multiple ways.

Theofanidis's focus on the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Eliot's poem<sup>14</sup> broadens as well as opens the Christian frame of reference that is established by the performance space at Duke Chapel, by the selection of Christian artists and poetry performers,<sup>15</sup> and by Powery's, Begbie's, Herman's, and Fujimura's speeches. Theofanidis emphasises the philosophical complexity of Eliot's poem, he encourages the audience to engage deeply with the text, and

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Paul Kramer also emphasises the text's focus on spiritual experiences. However, Kramer argues that *Four Quartets* is also characterised by an inter-spiritual dimension; see Kramer (2007, 129; 144; 179–195).

<sup>15</sup> Especially Makoto Fujimura defines himself as a Christian artist; see Fujimura (2009, 9–10) and Fujimura (2013c, 30–31).

draws attention to the conceptual oppositions, tensions and paradoxes that characterise Eliot's poem. He relates these structural features to Eliot's use of a Greek philosophical and literary convention in which the speaker says one thing "and immediately juxtaposes it with its opposite." By referring to this technique, Theofanidis encourages the audience to detect such oppositions in the poetry reading of excerpts from *Four Quartets*, and in the performance of the quintet. The passage from "East Coker," which is read by Richard Hays before the performance of the third movement of Theofanidis's quintet, contains an example of such contradictions: "There is, it seems to us/ At best, only a limited value/ In the knowledge derived from experience./ The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/ For the pattern is new in every moment" ("East Coker" II.81–85). Here, the pattern created by "the knowledge derived from experience" is on the one hand rigid and imposes restrictions, limiting and falsifying perception. On the other hand, Eliot's lines show that without a pattern there can be no (new) perception, that the pattern enables new and deeper insights, and that it can be flexible and become "new in every moment." The contradictions in Eliot's poem, Theofanidis reports, had a disorienting effect on him because they seemed almost to invalidate the truth of what was being said. He emphasises that Eliot's text requires a contemplative reception strategy: readers must "stand back" from the text to reflect on it. This strategy enables them to look at both sides of a problem, an experience, an object or a phenomenon so that they come to an acceptance of both sides, and acquire a new depth of perception. Through these comments, Theofanidis guides the audience's responses towards an understanding of Eliot's poem as well as of his own quintet as works of art that engage readers and listeners in an ethical exercise of non-dualistic thinking. The Heraclitean motto of *Four Quartets*, taken from Diels's *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, introduces readers to this mode of thinking (Eliot 1943, 8).

Theofanidis explains that the *Kronos* pattern (a pattern of metred, often meaningless and empty passing time) links all the works of art that are parts of *Engaging Eliot*, and thereby alludes to the rhythmic structure of his quintet and of Eliot's poem. Furthermore, he points out that the *Kronos* pattern is represented in Herman's and Fujimura's paintings as a grid that produces squares and blocks. In Theofanidis's quintet, this pattern is realised as a background pulse that interferes with the melodic flow. In his quintet, Theofanidis follows Eliot, who captured the contrastive as well as complementary relationship between *Kronos* (passing, concrete time) and *Kairos* ("existential time") and who reconciled both forces in his poem. Theofanidis reconciles *Kronos* and *Kairos* by showing that the background pulse is not only a disrupter (a force of contradiction and disturbance) but in fact the life force of his quintet. "At the Still Point" is about 30 minutes long and contains four movements. This feature is, as Theofanidis emphasises, a conscious

reference to the four-part structure of Eliot's poem. However, Theofanidis's four movements are neither musical translations of Eliot's individual Quartets, nor do they follow the sequence of the Quartets. Instead, Theofanidis has selected titles for his movements from the lines of two Quartets (from "East Coker" and "Little Gidding"). These contain motifs and sound patterns which, for Theofanidis, are at the heart of Eliot's poem as a whole:

1. "In my beginning is my end" ("East Coker" I.14)
2. "A condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)" ("Little Gidding" V.253–254)
3. "Knowledge imposes a pattern" ("East Coker" II.84), and
4. "The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated" ("East Coker" V.191).

The extracts from *Four Quartets* that are performed by Richard Hays and Ellen Davis are selected according to Theofanidis's choice of titles for his movements, showing that the event highlights the close connection between poetry reading and musical performance.

The rhythmic structure of "At the Still Point," as Theofanidis points out, draws on the basic rhythmic pattern of *Four Quartets*, which is accentuated tetrameter (Reibetanz 1983, 29). However, Theofanidis does not follow the exact metrical pattern of the lines in *Four Quartets*. Instead, he translates the number of syllables in selected lines from *Four Quartets* into a basic musical shape. He sees this basic shape expressed in four lines from the final section of "Little Gidding"<sup>16</sup> as well as in a line from the beginning of "East Coker."<sup>17</sup> Hence, Theofanidis's basic pitch material, that is, his elementary combination of rhythmic patterns and notes, is a creative translation of the syllabic structure of *Four Quartets*, and a musical translation of its semantic pattern. At the heart of Eliot's poem, Theofanidis states, is a shape that can be described as a "literal return home." Theofanidis's musical translation of the syllabic and semantic pattern of Eliot's text is a four-note structure, described by him as "a single note, a step down, and then a step back up." This four-note structure, Theofanidis states, mirrors the four Quartets. Furthermore, Theofanidis demonstrates that the five players represent the five sections in each of Eliot's Quartets. The basic pattern of "At the Still Point" can be heard as a background figure, as a melodic contour resembling a Gregorian chant that is "free of time" and a fast rhythmic pulse played by Jeremy

<sup>16</sup> "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time" ("Little Gidding" V.239–242).

<sup>17</sup> "In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls" ("East Coker" I.14).

Begbie at the piano. It is heard in varying volumes, tempi, and layers of time simultaneously, imitating the “multiple strains of things happening in multiple speeds in multiple times” in our daily lives, as Theofanidis points out. Although he highlights the idea of a return home as the basic melodic pattern of *Four Quartets*, he does not suggest that this return leads to a clearly defined ending or point of orientation that is already fixed before the journey starts. The “step back up” in the musical pattern occurs through variations in the basic pattern that express unexpected returns and new discoveries. Thereby, Theofanidis echoes Eliot’s own structure of motif variation in which the entrance into the rose garden through the “first gate” in “Burnt Norton” (I.14–21) is repeated in the final section of “Little Gidding” as a return through the “unknown” but “remembered gate.” This return allows readers to “know the place for the first time” (“Little Gidding” V.243, 242). At the end of the quintet, Theofanidis achieves a return of a special kind by transforming a disrupter (a high, volatile note) into an organic sound that resembles breathing or sighing. Thereby, he creates a very basic sound that is common to living creatures (the sound of life) and, according to Theofanidis, even to the universe as a whole, expressing its “eternal respiration.” In the combination of musical performance and poetry reading, this sound emphasises the spiritual dimension of Eliot’s poem (“breath” is a literal translation of the Latin word *spiritus*).<sup>18</sup>

## 5 Poetry Readings and Musical Performance

The selection of the performance space, and of the artists and performers participating in the event, can be understood as a gesture of reclaiming Eliot’s poem as a Christian text after it had been subjected to deconstructive readings,<sup>19</sup> had been read as a text that establishes a dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism, and after it had been analysed as an example of ‘wisdom literature’ (Moody 1992, 25–43; Sena 1992, 188; Kramer 2007, 129–131; Meyer and Deshen 2010, 246–274).<sup>20</sup> The choice of Duke Chapel as performance space connects the oral performances related to *Four Quartets* (welcome addresses, artists’ conversations, poetry performances) to the genre of the sermon, investing them with a high degree of

<sup>18</sup> On this spiritual dimension, see Kramer (2007, 129; 144; 179–195).

<sup>19</sup> See McNelly Kearns (1993, 131–157). In his deconstructive reading of *Four Quartets*, William Spanos argues that Eliot put his belief at risk in the poem (Spanos 1978, 535).

<sup>20</sup> On Eliot’s references to Krishna and the *Bhagavad Gita*, see the third section of “The Dry Salvages.”

solemnity and dignity. They may inspire the audience with awe and encourage engagement in reflection. This effect is supported by the impressive acoustics of Duke Chapel, which increase the materiality of sounds and create impressive reverberations. The atmosphere of dignity is underlined by the fact that the poetry performers speak from the pulpit.

Ellen Davis, ‘eco-friendly Bible scholar,’<sup>21</sup> Master of Divinity and the first performer of excerpts from Eliot’s text during the event, interrupts the male tradition of poetry readings of Eliot’s poem. Thus, her performance is, to use Judith Butler’s words, “a different sort of repeating,” an emancipatory act (Davis 2015, 1; Butler 2007, 188). Davis’s cross necklace and her position in the pulpit underline the reference to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation<sup>22</sup> in the excerpt from the fifth section of “The Dry Salvages” that she performs.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, Kenneth Paul Kramer has emphasised the inter-spiritual dimension of these lines, arguing that they echo the third section from “The Dry Salvages” that refers to Krishna’s incarnation and to his “voice descanting”<sup>24</sup> (Kramer 2007, 129–131). Kramer points out that in the lines from the last section of “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot uses “the term ‘Incarnation’ (not *the* Incarnation)” and thereby represents divine presence as “a contrapuntal balance between the incarnation of Krishna and that of Christ” (Kramer 2007, 130).<sup>25</sup> The opening event of *Engaging Eliot* does not evoke the inter-spiritual dimension of Eliot’s poem. However, Ellen Davis’s performative reading of Eliot’s lines from the last section of “The Dry Salvages” emphasises the metaphorical dimension of the term “Incarnation,” which comprises creative processes of receiving art, such as absorption of “music heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all” by listeners who “are the music/ While the music lasts” (“The Dry Salvages” V.210–212). Davis makes use of *deixis* in her emphasis on “you” in the phrase “you are the music” (“The Dry Salvages” V.211). When she speaks these words, she looks at the audience and addresses its members as active participants, who shape the event by means of their acts of listening and response. Thereby, her reading directs the audience’s reactions to the musical performance of “At the Still Point” at the end of the event, which is combined with further readings of excerpts from *Four Quartets*.

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<sup>21</sup> Davis is the author of *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Davis 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Atkins states that this doctrine is at the heart of Eliot’s poem (Atkins 2012, 33–43).

<sup>23</sup> The excerpt from the fifth section of “The Dry Salvages” covers lines 206–215.

<sup>24</sup> See “The Dry Salvages” III.146–167, Eliot (1943), 41–42.

<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Kramer argues that in the third section of “Little Gidding,” Eliot combines “Lord Krishna’s emphasis on detachment with the teachings of the devotional mystic Dame Julian of Norwich,” see Kramer (2007, 159; 162; 192).

With the exception of the lines from “The Dry Salvages” read by Davis in the first part of the opening of *Engaging Eliot*, the passages selected from *Four Quartets* that are performed during the event do not contain specific references to Catholic or Protestant doctrine. Instead, they comprise philosophical and spiritual reflections and put the titles of the quintet movements in poetic contexts. Thus, the final part of the event shifts the focus from specifically Christian elements of Eliot’s text to its broader philosophical and spiritual dimensions. The second excerpt from *Four Quartets* (performed before “At the Stillpoint”) is taken from “East Coker.”<sup>26</sup> The title of the Quartet refers to a village in Somerset where Eliot’s family lived for two centuries and from which they migrated to America in the seventeenth century (Reibetanz 1983, 56). It focuses on beginnings and endings of processes and journeys, on exploration (“East Coker I.1–50, V.172–189, V.202–209), circles of life and death as well as the circle of seasons (“East Coker” I.1–13, 23–50). There is also a reference to prayer and meditation on experiences of darkness, meaninglessness, hopelessness, hope, and ecstasy (“East Coker” III); to the mystical works of St John of the Cross (“East Coker” III.123–146; Reibetanz 1983, 72–73), to purgatory and Good Friday (“East Coker” IV.161–171), to social hierarchy and communal conjunction (“East Coker” I.28–36), to historical patterns and unprecedented experiences (“East Coker” II.81–93, V.172–182, V.202–209) and to humility (“East Coker” II.98). The lines from the first section of “East Coker” (I.14–23), beginning with “In my beginning is my end [...],” are recited by Richard Hays, an ordained United Methodist minister (Hays 2015, 1). Hays’s slow recitation avoids clutter that might jeopardise the intelligibility of the lines, but it tends to disrupt the flow and rhythm, e.g. when he breaks the first line into three or even four instead of two parts. However, this manner of speaking gives the audience time to reflect on individual words and phrases.

The passage from the beginning of “East Coker” is well chosen as an opener to the musical performance of “At the Still Point” because, as Julia M. Reibetanz has pointed out, Eliot adopts “a musical technique” in this passage (Reibetanz 1983, 57). The verse begins with a return to the opening theme, with the opening line of “East Coker” (“In my beginning is my end” I.1) repeated 13 lines later. Reibetanz describes the sound of these lines as “sullen” and the atmosphere as “sultry” and “close,” as a “shuttered darkness” absorbing the light of the blazing sun on a hot summer’s day (Reibetanz 1983, 58). Theofanidis’s music captures this sullen, dark atmosphere in Eliot’s poem that expresses the political situation in Europe shortly before and at the beginning of World War II. It emphasises the darkness of Eliot’s language to which Fujimura referred in his speech and

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26 The poem was printed in 1940 (Grant 1997, I.41).



which he captured in his paintings. The first movement (which is ca. 9 minutes long) subtly balances parts that are dominated by low-pitched sounds (creating a gloomy, threatening atmosphere, reminding listeners of Bartok's string quartets)<sup>27</sup> with more harmonious and melodic segments. It includes short parts that are dominated by high-pitched sounds. They suggest hope, echoing the harmonies of Beethoven.<sup>28</sup> Several melodic motifs emerge in the first movement; they sink into the melodic texture around them and are repeated in variations. In his introduction to the musical performance and the poetry reading, Theofanidis mentions that his quintet balances dissonance and consonance; the first movement gives many convincing examples of this technique. Theofanidis uses "disrupters [...] to the musical fabric" that represent the contradictions in Eliot's text: we hear a fast, strong and driving background pulse played by Begbie at the piano. This pulse is realised as a single note, a step down and a step back up (expressing the basic melodic pattern of "At the Still Point"). At the beginning of the first movement, this disrupter establishes the basic melodic contour of the piece. A second kind of disrupter, a "volatile gesture," a note vibrating "violently out of control" that disturbs "our sense of pitch stability" interacts with the driving background pulse. The music speeds up and slows down, and different layers of time can be heard simultaneously. This technique represents a third disrupter of the melodic contour in the quintet and it captures the varying tempi and rhythms<sup>29</sup> in the lines from "East Coker" that Richard Hays performs before the first movement begins.

Ellen Davis reads the next excerpt from *Four Quartets*, which comprises the latter part of the fifth section of "Little Gidding" (starting with "Not known, because not looked for/ But heard, half heard, in the stillness/ Between two waves of the sea [...]," ["Little Gidding" V.249–254]), but it does not include the five final lines of the poem. Again, the selected passage, while making no reference to Christian doctrine specifically, focuses on intense spiritual experiences. Eliot's fourth Quartet captures the devastation caused by the Blitz in London shortly after Christmas in 1940 ("Little Gidding" I.12–14, II.54–85, IV.200–206). It refers to experiences of intense prayer and to Nicholas Ferrar's small religious community living at Little Gidding in the first half of the seventeenth century ("Little Gidding" I.20–53). Little Gidding as a stronghold of Laudianism was of central importance to Eliot who confessed his Anglo-Catholic faith (Spurr 2010, 133). Eliot's last Quartet contains political, historical, and ethical reflections

<sup>27</sup> On the link between Bartok's string quartets and Eliot's *Four Quartets*, see Kenner (1959, 306).

<sup>28</sup> John Holloway emphasised the link between *Four Quartets* and Beethoven's string quartets No 12 Opus 127, Opus 131, Opus 132, and Opus 135; see Holloway (1992, 147–150). On an earlier reference to this link, see Howarth (1957, 322).

<sup>29</sup> On the varying rhythms in these lines, see Reibetanz (1983, 58).



(“Little Gidding” III.181–191, V.232–237) as well as a variety of contrastive affects, emotional states, and attitudes (anxiety, distress, despair, shame, humiliation, wrath, hope, and love) which are expressed by the help of oxymora like “Midwinter spring” and “pentecostal fire/ In the dark time of the year” (“Little Gidding” I.1, 10–11). Davis’s poetry reading introduces the second movement of Theofanidis’s quintet (which is ca. 8 minutes long). Her solemn, slow reading of Eliot’s lines is followed by a slow, calm, solemn, and harmonious melodic contour performed by the strings, then Begbie plays single notes on the piano that are dance-like; there is no mechanical pulse to the sound. The short, lively notes echo the metre and rhythm of the short words in the final passage of “Little Gidding” (“Quick now, here, now”) that the audience has heard performed by Ellen Davis and that invoke sounds connected to epiphanic moments like “the hidden laughter/ Of children in the foliage” (“Burnt Norton” V.171–173; “Little Gidding” V.248) or the “voice” of the “waterfall” (“The Dry Salvages” V.210; “Little Gidding” V.247). In the second movement, the sequence of a playful, harmonious contour and a darker, dissonant contour is repeated in variations. In this way, the movement enacts the framing and interruption of the short, lively impressions connected with the words “Quick now, here, now, always” by “two waves of the sea” in the lines from “Little Gidding” performed by Ellen Davis (“Little Gidding” V.251–252). The reference to the sea waves in “Little Gidding” echoes lines from “The Dry Salvages.” They refer to the sea’s “many voices” and to the sea tossing up “our losses” (“The Dry Salvages” I.22–25), reminding readers and listeners of the victims of evolution and of history, of the victims of wars and conflicts, of technical progress and environmental pollution (“The Dry Salvages” II.69–70). Towards the end of the second movement, a very high-pitched note can be heard which is produced by the violins, accompanied by a musical scale contour performed by Begbie at the piano. The high-pitched note is repeated at the end of the fourth movement and is then transformed into the sound that imitates the breathing of creatures and the “eternal respiration of the universe.” The passage from “Little Gidding,” which is read before the performance of the second movement, is repeated after the fourth movement that closes the musical performance (and the event). This repetition highlights the close connection between each movement.

The excerpt from the second section of “East Coker” that is selected as an introduction to the third movement emphasises the philosophical dimension of Eliot’s poem. Richard Hays’s recitation starts with the words “There is, it seems to us,/ At best only a limited value/ In the knowledge derived from experience” (“East Coker” II.81–93). Hays reads slowly with many pauses, but follows Eliot’s punctuation. The third movement is rather short (ca. 4 minutes). It begins with a fast, playful, rhythmic, dance-like contour with changing rhythms. This opening contains a short melodic pattern of four notes following very quickly after each

other (a variation of the basic melodic contour of the quintet), which is played by Begbie at the piano. This short melodic contour is repeated in harmonious and dissonant variations. It captures the description of the “pattern” created by “the knowledge derived from experience” which is “new in every moment” in the lines from “East Coker” read by Hays before the beginning of the third movement (“East Coker” II.81–85). The dance-like, playful part that opens the movement is followed by a darker, dissonant contour with a fast rhythm: the very fast, driving background pulse (a disrupter) played by Begbie imitates the dramatic chase through “a dark wood” and “a bramble” that is depicted in the lines from “East Coker” performed by Hays (“East Coker” II.90–93). All five instruments are heard playing at multiple speeds; consonance and dissonance are subtly balanced. At the end, the forceful and fast four-note pattern played by Begbie at the piano (realised in a low-pitched, dissonant variation) is answered quickly by the string players, creating a dramatic dialogue.

After the third movement, Ellen Davis reads three lines from the fifth section of “East Coker” that again emphasise the philosophical dimension of Eliot’s poem and introduce the fourth movement: “Home is where one starts from. As we grow older/ The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated/ Of dead and living (“East Coker” V.190–193). When Davis reads these lines, her scarf covers her cross, a gesture that might suggest that the meaning of Eliot’s lines, and of the fourth movement from “At the Still Point” that they introduce, point beyond Christian doctrine to a “pattern” that is “more complicated,” to a broader philosophical and spiritual dimension. The fourth movement (ca. 9 minutes long) begins with slow, low-pitched notes played by the cello, accompanied by dark, low-pitched notes on the piano. This creates a gloomy, threatening atmosphere. Different speeds and rhythms are heard; disrupters constitute the main musical contour. Dissonance dominates, different melodic patterns are suggested, and a stronger background pulse is introduced by Begbie at the piano. Then a transition to a new passage and a new contour is audible. The playful piano sounds from the second movement (reminding listeners of the sounds of words in the line “Quick now, here, now, always” that are “half-heard” between “two waves of the sea,” “Little Gidding” V.250–253) are repeated and are accompanied harmoniously by the string players. The piano produces a regular organic pulse. Then the tempo slows, and the harmonious melodic pattern is followed by a passage that is dominated by dissonance. The alternation between different tempi, between consonance and dissonance as well as between different melodic contours captures the complicated pattern evoked in the lines from “East Coker” read by Davis. Towards the end of the movement, only a slow, low-pitched piano pulse is heard and the violins produce a sound that resembles sighing and breathing. This existential sound, as Theofanidis explains in his introduction, is created by a disrupter that

slows down and turns into a very high-pitched violin note. This technique captures the idea that the pattern of time passing is transformed into an organic life force. At the end, a free pattern of single playful piano sounds is heard together with the breathing sound of the strings, a combination which, as Theofanidis points out, suggests a form of existence that is free from anxiety.

Jeremy Begbie's request to observe a moment of silence after the end of the performance of Theofanidis's quintet "At the Still Point" is heeded by the audience. Thus, an 'audible' still point is created that can be regarded as the climax of Theofanidis's quintet. A squeaking sound destroys the meditative silence, and this incident shows that a live performance cannot be completely controlled or predicted. The pause after the musical performance connects the quintet with the last passage of "Little Gidding," which is read by Richard Hays ("Little Gidding" V.239–259) and which is preceded by an empty line (a void, a moment of silence) in Eliot's text ("Little Gidding" V.238). Richard Hays's manner of reading the last passage of "Little Gidding" sounds very emotional. His voice clearly changes when he performs the quotation from Julian of Norwich included in Eliot's text. Hays's style of reading emphasises the attitude of attentiveness that characterises the listening processes described in Eliot's lines. Hays slows down the speed of his speech when he reads the last five lines of "Little Gidding," inserting long pauses between the lines and even between words to capture the meditative quality of Eliot's text. Unfortunately, he breaks the enjambment between lines 255 and 256 ("And all shall be well and/ All manner of thing shall be well") and thus destroys the emphasis on flow and continuity that characterises the final lines of the poem. The last five lines of "Little Gidding" are marked by a very regular three-stress rhythm (Reibetanz 1983, 183), by enjambments and a dense pattern of assonances. In the joint performance of the last movement of Theofanidis's quintet, entitled "The pattern becomes more complicated," and of the final passage of "Little Gidding" that contains the reference to the "condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)" along with the quotation from Julian of Norwich's optimistic vision of God's all-encompassing love that implies universalist tendencies (Julian of Norwich 2006, 49; 60; Turner 2011, 106), the audience can understand the connection between complexity<sup>30</sup> and a form of simplicity that does not reduce, but condense, multifacetedness, and multivalence. It integrates consonance and dissonance, despair and hope, fear and joy, love and hatred as well as light and darkness. The "condition of complete simplicity" expressed in Julian of Norwich's lines captures her vision of God's all-encompassing love, which the audience can relate to the simple and at the

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<sup>30</sup> Julian of Norwich's vision is mirrored in the complex "one" created through the combination of the opposites "fire" and "rose" in the final line of "Little Gidding."

same time equally all-encompassing sound of the breathing universe performed at the end of “At the Still Point.” Thus, the “condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)” depicted at the end of “Little Gidding” and at the end of the quintet is the result of an acknowledgement of multivalence and complexity that is achieved through a process of close and deep listening to the joint performance of Eliot’s poetry and Theofanidis’s quintet.

## 6 Conclusion

All in all, the opening of *Engaging Eliot* accomplishes a re-evaluation of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* after 9/11. Its dramaturgy can be described as leading from a focus on the Christian elements of Eliot’s text (especially on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation) to a broader philosophical and spiritual frame of reference. The performance of the final passage from “Little Gidding” that closes the multimedia event underlines this shift of emphasis because the lines focus on spiritual experiences and mystical visions (on epiphanic moments, on Julian of Norwich’s mystical experiences, and on the beatific vision expressed in Canto 31 of Dante Alighieri’s *Paradiso* which unites the images of fire and rose)<sup>31</sup> rather than on abstract tenets of Christian doctrine (“Little Gidding” V.239–259; Julian of Norwich 2006, 49; 60; Alighieri 2009, 423). In addition, the sound of breathing that concludes the performance of “At the Still Point” expresses a spiritual, non-divisive vision of the universe. It is closely connected to the performance of the last passage of “Little Gidding,” particularly to Eliot’s quotation of Julian of Norwich’s lines that imply universalist tendencies. Thus, especially the final part of the event (consisting of Theofanidis’s speech and the combination of poetry reading and musical performance) demonstrates that Eliot’s poem inspires hope as well as acts of non-dualistic and non-divisive thinking, all characteristics that are of great value in the context of the intercultural conflicts after 9/11.

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31 On the connection between Dante’s *Paradiso* and the mystic tradition, see Botterill (1994, 88).

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