

Searching for Safety: The concert listener beyond the limits of the concert hall

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Abstract

There are not many institutions which are as established in the music market as the traditional concert in the field of so-called ‘serious’ music. Thus, anyone going to buy a concert ticket usually knows – more or less – what they will get. The purchase will include a kind of unofficial guarantee: about two hours of announced sound art, which can be enjoyed as part of a group of people of more or less the same cultural background. Even if many forms of presentation do not feature in this concept – partially or even more generally – this model is the basis of the western music system.

Buying a concert ticket thus usually means making a communicational arrangement, a social agreement in order to draw the line between the possible and the impossible. The concert in its role of a social agreement is discussed. It appears to be a search for safety. Every presentation project – even if it questions one or more parts of what is guaranteed – deals with this contract. The aesthetic positions of artists who participate have already been analysed from several perspectives. In this text it is questioned the role of the listener within this arrangement.

Two examples are presented in order to show, what this can mean in the field of experimental music in the wider sense: The traditional ‘Landmaschinensinfonie’ (Symphony of agricultural machines) at the Stelzen Festival bei Reuth (Germany) and at the same place the so called ‘Bach-Wiese’.

Introduction

“An extraordinary” or “a very special” concert or this or that piece as “you’ve never heard it before” – publicity like this is as common to our society as the principle of the concert itself may be. But is extraordinariness really what people are looking for when attending concerts or is the publicity reference to an extraordinary concert just a cover-up for missing originality? What happens to the audience when the presentation is really an exception to the ordinary?

Almost everybody within our Western culture has an idea about what a concert is and what it is like. Thus, buying a ticket an individual has his or her expectations justified by experience. The concert represents a social agreement over time and generations, over sub-cultural as well as stylistic borders.

But, what does this mean for any presentation crossing the borders of the concert? What kind of role may this agreement play within a socio-aesthetic discussion?

The concert as a social frame

To get more inside the topic let me tell you the story of a concert I attended about ten years ago within the frame of the MDR Musiksommer Festival. Industrial monuments of Leipzig, which at the time were not that excessively reconstructed as today, which were not as hip as now, were intended to be recognized. Dusty and improvised, three different locations like this built the frame of a series of concerts. A young violoncello player interpreted Johann Sebastian Bach's "Suites for Violoncello" in three parts on one day – at two historic fair halls and in the ancient machinery hall of the spinnery, today one of the places with the most potential in matters of creativity, but nearly virgin in those matters at the time.

Listeners were brought from one concert place to the other by shuttles. Catering was arranged. And it was intended to attribute a special artistic role to the place. That was why the French light artist Pipon was integrated into the project. And at the last station, Pipon really composed space and hall. I had the great opportunity to enter the hall as one of the first spectators and thus to observe the following meaningful scene: Meticulously the artist had arranged the chairs within the machine hall – allowing the soloist the centre – but nevertheless being original by breaking the structure of rows, arranging groups of chairs, rounds of chairs, single chairs, couples of chairs and so on, thus somehow referring to other communication models. The room as such represented an artwork corresponding to the music. But what happened during the opening of the hall was that the audience upon entering and looking for a seat in its irritation started to "arrange", to make it a concert space according to its expectation. The half hour until the beginning was enough time to build a conventional row structure.

As a result of this the concert was played as a concert in the expected sense. People knew well at which points to clap and at which to remain silent – listening and watching from their well-arranged chairs that were rearranged from Pipon's light composition into a concert hall.

This unique event is an inspiring paradox for me because of the fact that this audience must, while entering the hall, had already accepted a kind of extraordinarity, or even strangeness of the event because arranging a concert space is not the usual behaviour of concert listeners, but uses this as a chance to prepare for an expected communication situation, which thus seems to be in an initial way related to the spatial structure.

The balance of the unusual

Thus, dealing in this case with a seemingly experimental and a seemingly traditional concert at the same time, any action within the frame of this "concert place" can be understood as a kind of balancing the experimental and traditional to approach the expectation, as oscillating between these poles to reach a kind of feel-good level for the listener; proving the concert listeners' situation as a kind of collective solitariness.

The role of the frame of the concert, presented within this example may be extreme, but the process of balancing between both sides can be found in other examples too. Within the field of experimental and namely electroacoustic music we are more than people in other spheres used to presentations with often more than one component to be balanced in this way – referring to or refusing the frame of the traditional concert that here functioned from the very beginning as an important communicational factor.

Electroacoustic as a prototype

Keeping in mind the fact that the communicational agreement of the concert is based on at least two sides of communication having as a base a human background, within the field of electroacoustics there was always another approach to this human side. Electroacoustics had per se for a long time another approach to the communication related concept of having a – somehow human – vis-à-vis representing a guiding difference of the traditional bourgeois concert. Thus, the integration of the technology has from its beginning challenged the principle of the concert and by that sharpened the perspective of related scientific disciplines in matters of the role of presentation.

The communicational agreement of the concert is in general completely process-oriented. And thus the moment, where perturbation is specifically extreme, is where time structure and temporality are initially challenged.

Ritualized communication

Working also as a music reviewer for quite a long time, I have the opportunity not only to listen to concerts of every type and style, but also to observe different audiences and their behaviour – from the traditional classical concert audience of different price levels over pop, sometimes rock, folk music audiences to those of lots of revival shows of any style and of course avant-garde music in the widest sense. The rites may differ a bit as well as the limit of tolerance of this or that direction, but generally it is the same procedure every time. The dress code changes, but the way to deal with the dress code does not; and this is the same with drinks and so on. Between concert listeners a loose connectivity can be seen.

Concerts thus are essentially social agreements, ritualizing communication and ritualized by communication. The concert listener beyond the limits of the concert hall can be seen as a model brought up to continuously enhance musical possibilities. And thus there is the question, at which point can the breach of agreement be balanced, which is of interest for research on music presentation of the 20th and 21st centuries, and which says a lot about the intentions behind the enhancement of presentation forms, as well as on the social character of the concert as such.

The concert listener beyond the limits of the concert hall

Thus, the concert listener beyond the limits of the concert hall keeps the character of a paradox – a socio-aesthetic paradox, but a paradox with guiding character. Refusing decidedly the principle of the concert as a whole or in parts nevertheless means referring to it. There are not many institutions that are as established in the music market as the traditional concert in the field of so-called ‘serious’ music. More than any other presentation form the traditional concert has established and kept its form and ritual over more than a century. Thus, anyone planning to buy a concert ticket usually knows – more or less – what they will get. The purchase will include a kind of unofficial guarantee: about two hours of announced sound art, which can be enjoyed as part of a group of people of more or less the same cultural background. Even if many forms of presentation do not feature in this concept – partially or even more generally – this model is the basis of the Western music system.

Buying a concert ticket thus usually means making a communicational arrangement in order to draw the line between the possible and the impossible. It is expected that people know about the ritual and thus will clap at the right moment, usually not eat popcorn, but listen closely. Meanwhile, the listeners – even if the question of artistic quality is not the first priority of this ‘contract’ – can be sure that they will find themselves in the expected communicational position. Usually they can be sure that they will not to be blamed for any direct and personal address or participation outside of the group. Thus, they expect a special communicational frame.

This agreement represents for both sides – but first of all for the listener buying a concert ticket – a kind of guarantee, it appears to be a search for safety. Every presentation project – even if it questions one or more parts of what is guaranteed – deals with this contract. The aesthetic positions of artists who participate have already been analysed from several perspectives: although the position of the listener is seldom seen from a socio-aesthetic perspective. Thus, what is the reason for making this agreement from the side of the listener? Why does someone buy a ticket for a concert? Usually to have a nice evening, to be well entertained in a way someone likes. Thus, the concert agreement guarantees a special kind of entertainment, which is the result of this reduced communication. With the knowledge that the communication is of an aesthetic nature, one pays for the guarantee that the way of tangency keeps a certain distance and by that in a way collective and common. The abstractness of what is presented within the frame of a concert is common, namely by the unity of space and time, but without any engagement because of its joint participation. The closedness in matters of time and space is a central point within the communicational agreement of the concert being nearly as important as the content of the presentation – usually music.

Discussion of exemplary concert or concert related events

In order to pay tribute to the place where this year’s conference is held, I have selected two very different examples found within the German province to demonstrate in a more detailed way how electroacoustic – or more generally experimental – music can profit from this communication constellation and the attached expectations. But possibly even traditional classical music is not excluded per se. Both examples are part of a festival, which has been established for the last two decades in a village near the former East-West German border: the Thuringian Stelzen. The festival is called “Stelzenfestspiele bei Reuth”, which in German is an impressively ambiguous title rich with associations.

Stelzen is the word for stilts. Thus, the association of stilting is there as well. Nevertheless, it is the name of the village where the festival takes place. On the other hand there is a kind of word-sound-play in the title because “bei Reuth”, which means near the place of Reuth, sounds the same as the name of the city “Bayreuth”, the place of the world famous Richard Wagner Festspiele. This is especially meaningful as far as the traditional place of Reuth is not much bigger than of Stelzen with 370 inhabitants. But, representing a very German paradox, the places, being about one kilometre away from each other, are part of different German federal lands – Stelzen of Thuringia and Reuth of Saxony.

It was the inspiring mood of the political turn in Germany, which had in 1993 resulted in the founding of this festival. Henry Schneider, the founder of the festival, is a member of Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra, but comes originally from the village of Stelzen. So the

intention was on the one hand to culturally animate the not very attractive region, as well as to bring together two very different cultures or traditions, somehow to feature musical agriculture or agricultural music. After twenty-one editions the musical festival is established with its events from exhibition to puppet theatre, from lecture to performance, from the traditional football match of the Leipzig Gewandhaus team and the local team “tractor Stelzen” to concerts. Concerts clearly make the bigger part of the festival programme. Nevertheless, not all of the concert presentations are what they pretend to be – decidedly extending the communicational frame of the traditional concert. As public music presentation means for most people concerts, audiences may expect music inside anything called a concert; but not everything inside what is announced to be a concert consists of something that everybody would call music. Nevertheless, this naming represents a kind of frame balancing uncertainty. Thus, the stronger this frame, which means the prediction of being a concert, the more strangeness music and presentation can bear.

The “Bachwiese”

Originality or a certain kind of attraction is the result of the ideal difference of expectation and surprise, which keeps people communicating within the frame. But there are forms of presentation within the festival that refuse in a way to be a concert, including music in its purest form and expecting people to somehow just listen. The so-called “Bachwiese”, as paradoxical as it may appear, is one of the decidedly most enigmatic projects of the festival since Bach-year 2000, which represented the music world’s celebration of the 250th birthday of Johann Sebastian Bach. The project is based on a play on words within this title.

What is a prototype of an example of presentation over an extended duration takes as a departure point the name of the composer – often used for anecdotes or a play on words within music historiography. Bach is the German word for brook. And a Bachwiese is a meadow with a brook. But it can also be understood as a meadow with Bach, thus with Bach’s music. The end of the festival weekend in the inner sense is since the start of the Bachwiese. The complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach played from loudspeakers from the lovely countryside usually attract a number of listeners – even campers who have come just to hear this. Overall this takes eight days and nights. The media have written a lot on the project, addressing first of all the impossibility to listen to the music in its totality; thus, its richness, which makes this impossibility one of the central topics of the project. As within any sound installation, the possibility to enter and leave the presentation at any point is a central dramaturgic moment of the artwork. This marks the central difference of any concert presentation, while the music played could be of course played within the frame of a concert. The project takes this into account, as well as the knowledge of this fact by the audience. This knowledge makes the difference between this presentation and the possible other, or even usual presentation, a kind of guiding difference. Thus, it is nevertheless the traditional concert presentation, which in its well-known character guarantees understanding and by that the continuity of communication.

“Landmaschinensinfonie”

As another example – representing the opposite in a way – I will present some ideas on something that is a festival highlight from nearly the very beginning. The “Landmaschinensinfonie” (Symphony of agricultural machines) is the traditional festival

opening from the second festival edition. In 2014 they have staged *Landmaschinensinfonie ST 214/A and B*. What started in a quite improvised manner initiated by Schneider and the sound artist Erwin Stache is now not only following its own ritual, but also a fully worked-through composition following a more or less strong dramaturgy: bringing together musicians and amateurs, instrumentalists and sound artists with different backgrounds featuring agricultural sound in a wider sense. Stache is known as a sound artist, an inventor of strange machines and as a performer working with several ensembles.

An impression of what happened in 2013 can be easily found at the festival's youtube channel¹, – one has to imagine this happening within a huge barn within a lovely landscape, and with the celebrated smell of Thuringian Bratwurst all around.

Since the symphony was played twice this year (in two versions) and the new festival barn built in the middle of the last decade has space for around one thousand listeners, we could say that here in a way two thousand people are reached by an experimental music event. And this is – namely within German provinces – really far from usual. The reasons for that may at least, besides the ideal context the project has within the Stelzen population, be found in the point that the associated spectrum of the idea of symphony as a guiding difference is as rich and clear at once, so that people of any social and intellectual background, as well as of any age, can relate to and find their point to enter the reflection structure. Contributing different levels of punch lines and installing a strong structure of quotes and quotations the piece usually follows the concept of the symphony in a wider sense, but nevertheless intensely refers to and plays with the expectation and the experience of the audience. Constructions such as the slurry organ or the milking machine candelabra contrast established associations, which are balanced in an impressive way by the presentation. Thus, the guiding difference of what is called a symphony or a concert becomes the topic of presentation, and thus guides – by balancing uncertainty – the listener beyond the limits of the concert hall. In the mentioned case this appears as more delicate as wider parts of the audience may know the machines used from other more usual contexts. Of course the performances are in matters of form more or less far from that of the symphony; but by the reference within the title this is, in matters of reception, an important issue. The expectation of genre and its usual presentation forms takes here the character of the guiding difference and thus guarantees the communicational character of the presented.

Contextualization

This is an established principle whenever irritation with one or more musical matters becomes too effective. When references to symphony, concert or so on become more important, the more disturbing the presented is as such. One of the most well-known cases is Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry's *Symphonie pour un homme seul*.

A strong reference to something, which the presented is not at first glance, is an aesthetic principle brought up to continuously enhance artistic possibility. Thus, it can be said that as far as projects move in some central points from the usual, they have to strengthen it in other points. And analysing the reflection – first of all reviews – this difference develops its guiding character as well. While electroacoustic studies over the years have developed approved strategies to deal with presentations beyond concert halls, this may be seen as one of the

¹ see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DS26yx9jor8> (last accessed 09/14).

interesting points where traditional musicology could benefit from research within the field, if it was able to accept these art forms as an equal subject of its scientific occupation.

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