

Why musicians should care about their audience

Evert Bisschop Boele, PhD

Lecture for Symposium CityProms, 26 June 2015, Leeuwarden

Introduction

[Introducing myself]

‘Why musicians should care about their audience’.

What a strange remark.

Do musicians not care by nature for their audience?

Do they not provide them with beautiful music, nourishment for the soul, ‘the food of love’?

Do they not work, day in day out, to bring their musicianship, their artistry to the highest state of perfection?

All in order to touch our deepest self –

to touch us, seated in the concert hall listening to the sound of utter beauty produced on stage, straight in the heart?

True, true, true.

But yet I will share some thoughts with you on this afternoon about how this is just part of the picture.

And how a broader picture may help musicians to reach more people with their music, to secure a more durable place in society.

Music is important for everyone¹

Let me start with stating the obvious: music is important to nearly everyone.

Not in the same way perhaps, but all of us - you, me, the neighbor, the fishmonger – all live our own idiosyncratic musical life. It is, actually, hard to find a human being who is *not* leading a musical life.

We may wonder why that is, which would bring us into the domain of music psychology or evolutionary studies.

I will not go there.

On the contrary, I would rather – maybe surprisingly – like to state here, just as a way of thinking, that music is evolutionary meaningless, and that we should refrain from explaining music's existence in evolutionary terms. Because (paraphrasing Dutch writer Karel van het Reve's work on the *Ptauroides Volans* – the “Reuzenkoeskoes” in Dutch) the traits of living beings should not be explained in terms of their evolutionary usefulness, but rather in terms of their evolutionary harmlessness.

So let us assume music was at some point and for some reason invented because our acoustical environment made it possible and human beings are inventive.

Once invented, it just stayed, because it led to no significant disadvantages (a slight rise in repetitive strain injuries and the much later invention of stage fright put aside) and basically became meaningful for various people in various ways.

¹ This section has been taken – with some alterations – from my inauguration lecture as Professor (lector) ‘New Audiences’, held June 2014 in Groningen. Evert Bisschop Boele, *De muzikale ander/The Musical Other*. Groningen: Kenniscenrum Kunst & Samenleving, 2014.

It is precisely that – that music is in itself neutral and harmless but may be put to a thousand household uses – that makes music intrinsically interesting.

It is not hard to show that for nearly everybody music is an important factor in life.

The way music is put to use is endlessly varied; as music psychologist Eric Clarke puts it:

“Music affords dancing, singing (and singing along), playing (and playing along), working, persuading, drinking and eating, doing aerobics, taking drugs, playing air guitar, travelling, protesting, seducing, waiting on the telephone, sleeping... the list is endless.”

It is this important power of the neutral phenomenon of music to serve as a vehicle for an endlessly varied list of meaningful human behavior

that is in itself enough demonstration of the importance of music.

All that musical behavior serves basically three functions: it affirms, connects and regulates the self.

Music enables people to affirm themselves as an individual, a musical individual.

As a person with an individual musical identity, closely tied to what they consider as their ‘inner core’.

Music allows individuals to connect in numerous ways to numerous aspects outside the self – to the world out there. That ranges from connecting to others, to the past, to place, to God, to the inner self, or to the realm of the beautiful.

All those connections lead to effects, and people use those effects to influence themselves, and use them to influence others.

They regulate themselves and others, sometimes consciously, sometimes not very consciously.

It is amazing to realize the power music – that neutral and in itself harmless invention - plays in the life of individuals, in so many different ways, through those three functions of affirmation, connection and regulation.

I say “in so many different ways” on purpose, because I do not feel there is any need to look for one reason for music’s strength.

I also think there is no empirical evidence for that.

Music is not mainly a ‘tool of the self’, as important thinkers in the sociology of music would state.

Nor is music first and foremost an aesthetic phenomenon, as important thinkers in music philosophy, music psychology or music education

- people inhabiting the conservatoire (where I happen to work) included - may tell you.

Music is not one thing.

Music is always many things at the same time.

It is different things for different people in different places and in different times.

It is always a lot of things at the same time, in an ever changing constellation.

Its character changes over time.

It is everything, always, and for everyone.

Independent of age, of educational background, of socio-economic status, of cultural background, of gender.

And independent of style and genre, I must add.

It is demonstrably *not* the case that classical music is an artistic phenomenon,

that rock is intrinsically connected to the functioning in young peer groups,

or that singing in a shanty choir is first and foremost a socially – rather than musically - oriented phenomenon.

Borrowing a phrase from Dolly Parton (one of my musical heroes),
music is a coat of many colors.
Or, as the theory of practice (the social theory I work with)
would proclaim:
music, as an everyday phenomenon, is 'messy' and inherently
hybrid.
Always.
And for everyone.

Music in Society

A sunny picture, one would say.
Music is important for everyone –
it gives people an identity, it connects people to the world, it
helps them to regulate their lives.

At the same time, we all know that the picture is not só sunny
anymore

– at least if you look at the money side.

For some reason, government authorities today are less
inclined to subsidize music.

Orchestras, concert venues, and festivals have more and more
trouble finding the finances they need

– Margot and Philip, although very successful, will have first-
hand-experience in this.

And although governmental budget cuts in culture are heavily
contested,

they are mainly contested by the inhabitants of the world of
culture itself.

For them, it feels sometimes as if the existing world in which the
arts and culture were seen as important by governments runs to
an end,

a feeling which some artists and musicians do not hesitate to
label as 'traumatic'.

But outside the world of culture and the arts, strong protests are scarce. Which gives the impression that budget cuts in arts and culture are mainly a problem for the world of arts and culture, and not for society at large.

How come?

Let me focus on music, because City Proms is a music festival and music is also the domain in which I work.

How is it possible that the professional music world feels so threatened nowadays – and indeed is sometimes threatened?

How is it possible that the Residentie Orkest was put away as a hobby club of trombone players

by a Dutch politician who is normally not fighting Music but Moroccan immigrants?

And how, I must add, is it possible that opposing this, the only thing the official music world thought of was hiring Bernard Haitink to proclaim that “we all know how civilized a country is that is closing orchestras” – an equally unproductive remark as the one on the trombonists’ hobby club?

My analysis is relatively simple

In the past centuries, we have defined music in a very one-dimensional way:

music is art, with a capital A.

To be precise: music is a craft, a specialism carried out by professional musicians;

they combine their craftsmanship with the possibility to express emotions through music;

and the ideal way of doing that is to perform what we call ‘musical works’ on a stage in front of a silent audience.

It is this strong idea about music-as-art that has governed our thinking about music for centuries.

It did creep into our genes;

it has become nearly impossible to think differently about music.

It became the basis of our music education system, in schools and outside schools;

it has become the basis for music criticism as we read it in the national journals or hear it on Radio 4;
it has become the basis for our national system of funding music.

And even if you watch Idols or The Voice of Holland, you will recognize that music is treated as a specialized craft transferring through 'musical works' (songs, in this case) emotion from a stage to an audience.

I am of course the last to deny that this cultural dominant definition of the essence of music as an artistic-expressive skill has led to beautiful results.

It has given rise to the existence of Beethoven's violin concerto and of Bach's St Matthew's Passion as performed today on the stage.

It has given rise to Ravi Shankar's acceptance on the stages in the western world,

to the acceptance of Lou Reed as an Artist with a capital A, and to the incorporation of New York jazz in the conservatoire curriculum.

Because let us not forget that:

the idea that music is essentially an artistic-expressive skill is culturally so dominant that it does not confine itself to classical music.

It is so dominant that it expresses itself in the Concertgebouw Orchestra as well as in The Voice of Holland.

And at the same time we know that in our daily lives music plays entirely different roles as well.

Remember the quote about “dancing, singing (and singing along), playing (and playing along), working, persuading, drinking and eating, doing aerobics, taking drugs, playing air guitar, travelling, protesting, seducing, waiting on the telephone, sleeping”?

Shall I tell you what I do with music?

I sing in a shanty choir.

I play the 5-string banjo in a small band every week, but hardly ever perform with them.

I collect albums of the Beatles and their individual members.

I listen to SLAM FM on the radio in the car with my 10-year old son.

I systematically listen to the collected works of Bob Dylan, of whom I will visit a concert in November in Amsterdam.

I play Mahler’s 4th symphony while ironing the t-shirts of my children.

I watch André Rieu’s concert in Mexico on the television.

I read a biography of Groningen’s local pop hero Lourens Leeuw.

Et cetera, et cetera.

As you will notice, only a small part of all this has to do with music-as-art-with-a-capital-A.

And actually, although that is present too, I would not describe it as the main thing I do with music.

It is a possibility of music, I would say, but not a necessity.

Or: music is so much more than Art.

And precisely because of that, because music does not one but so many things, music is able to do what it does:

to give you an identity, to connect to the world, to regulate your lives.

The Musician in Society

To sum up: there is what I call a fundamental mismatch between how we – how our society – *thinks* about music and what we – what our society – *does* with music.

We think about music as Art, but our everyday life is filled with all kinds of activities that are very musical but hardly artistic in the narrower sense.

And it may be this mismatch that more and more stands in the way of ourselves.

The formalized, professional world of arts and culture thinks about music as Art,

and wants to spend money on music as long as it is Art.

But many people do not recognize this definition of music as relevant for their daily lives;

and because we live in an era where the norms for your life are less and less set by others and more and more by people themselves,

many people – including more and more politicians – can not see the disappearance of funding for symphony orchestras or for art music festivals as very problematic.

It's not their music, anyway.

There are two ways to go, here.

Either, you struggle to keep the world as it was;

you explain again and again how important the beauty of music is for humankind,

and nowadays also for creativity, for cognition, for the brain, or for social inclusion.

It is a backwards way, and it is the way the professionals from arts and culture often take.

The other way is the forward way.

It is the way of acknowledging that music may be art but also is so much more than that.

To quote myself from earlier in this talk:

“Music is not one thing.

Music is always many things at the same time.

It is different things for different people in different places and in different times.

It is always a lot of things at the same time, in an ever changing constellation.

Its character changes over time.

It is everything, always, and for everyone.

Independent of age, of educational background, of socio-economic status, of cultural background, of gender.

And independent of style and genre, I must add.”

And I must be honest:

it is this forward way that many professionals from arts and culture also take.

They acknowledge the fundamental importance of music in thousands of different ways for billions of people.

They try to figure out how music is meaningful to other people, and to find ways to connect to that.

They take with them their artistic and musical background, but don't let that take over the agenda;

they honestly try to figure out how they can be of service to their 'musical others', their audiences.

If you look at City Proms – and of course that is why we are here –

it is precisely what you see happening there.

It is, by origin, a classical music festival, presenting top class classical musicians on a stage.

But it realizes that that is meaningful to some people, but that classical music can be meaningful in different ways for different audiences.

And because it wants to serve the community rather than the classical music audience,

it seeks to look for stages where different audiences can be reached.

And it goes even further:

in its EMBRACE programme it gets its musicians off that stage, and makes them do different things:

musical activities with babies and toddlers, for example;

or interactive creative music workshops for people with dementia, something we developed in our research group and now has been taken on successfully by City Proms.

And, if I see it right, they do not do that because they hope that in that way they can educate a new audience to eventually become listeners in the traditional concert halls

– they do it for its own sake,

because they know that classical music can be ‘the food of love’ in so many different ways

and that they want to serve that food to as many people as possible.

Which requires – to stick to the restaurant metaphore –

a menu with lots of different meals,

and not only with French haute cuisine.

I expect that in the future some music organizations – maybe City Proms? – will even go a step further. Today it is still the case that City Proms is in its core a classical music festival with next to that a ‘community music’ branch called Embrace. In the future, it may well be that they become a community music festival with as just one part of it a series of traditional classical music performances. It is a transformation one may see for example in London’s famous concert hall Wigmore Hall – they were a beautiful classical music concert hall, a building; but more and more they transform themselves into an organization of which the world class concert hall is just one of their offerings, alongside djembe courses in residential homes for the elderly and educational activities in primary schools.

Why Musicians Should Care About Their Audience

Let me finish this lecture with sharing some direct remarks about the title of this lecture:
why musicians should care about their audience.

It will have become clear that ‘caring about your audience’ does not mean:
thinking about your audience as the consumers of the wondrous gift of music you, as a musician, possess.
It is this mentality of ‘music-as-a-product’, a mentality that amongst professional musicians is still widespread (I can know it, I work in a conservatoire), that will in the end keep alienating us from a major part of our society;
a part of society in which music is extremely important in everyday life but in different ways than professional musicians usually tend to think.

Instead of that we should maybe start thinking about music not in terms of a Work of Art, but in terms of an extremely powerful experience. And we should think of musicians not only in terms of providers of beautiful products, but also – and maybe even foremost – as providers of a service: providers of experiences meaningful to the individuals he works for and with.

What does this mean for musicians?

It means that they will have to find a way to combine their own powerful musical personality with the – often very different - musical personalities of their possible audience.

They have to be able to let go of their ego and to figure out about the egos of other people;

they have to be smart in finding ways of connecting to other people without losing themselves.

They have to be very open-minded, they have to be very creative;

they also – and that is sometimes hard – have to be very humble.

If we learn to do that,

we will find that eventually we will be appreciated by even more people than we are now;

and by very different people.

We may even find out that if we are able to show how we can become meaningful to so many different people in so many different ways,

politicians may like us even more,

and they may have less tendency to consider the funding of arts and culture as of too little relevance for society-at-large.

I think City Proms is already doing a good job in his respect, and I would like to encourage them to go even further.

I would like to encourage politicians present to challenge City Proms to go even further

– and to support them in that wholeheartedly.

I would like all others here present from other sectors than arts and culture to propose new projects to City Proms, to forge new connections.

And I would like to encourage all musicians present to not consider the stage as their home, but the world.

Let's go for it!