

Thinking about New Audiences

[blog entry for Reflective Conservatoire Conference 2015, 8-1-2015]

I was giving a guest lecture in our course 'The musician as Entrepreneur' the other day. Bachelor students from the jazz and classical departments were waiting eagerly – as always – for my wise words. Yes, this is a bit of irony; most of them were understandably *not* looking forward to go through a two-hour session with me on a late afternoon at the end of the week, at a moment where they also could have spent time practicing their instrument.

For starters, I asked them to write for five minutes about their possible audiences in the future, once they were professional musicians. Who were these audiences? Where were they? How would they know you? The students wrote and wrote. I collected the answers. Now, having looked through them, I see that they basically wrote the same things that students in this class write every year: their future audiences consist of friends, family, class mates, and 'people who understand my music', as some of them put it. They will play on stages in concert halls – if possible famous stages in famous concert halls. And their audience will know them by recordings, by leaflets and posters, by word of mouth.

Hardly a word about teaching. Hardly a word about playing in schools, in hospitals, in prisons, on streets. Not a word about trying to reach people who do *not* already like your music by definition. Lots of words about playing 'my music' – no word about attempts to make it 'the audiences music'.

A grim picture, I would say. Of course I exaggerate. But not much. And of course I don't blame the students – I love them too much for that. It's no wonder that the ideas they come up with match with the ideas of the formalized music world they have been socialized in for the past fifteen years of their lives through their teachers, many of their parents, general press and media coverage, and – to top it off nicely – the many hours they spent in a 'conservatoire', an institute whose name itself refers to the conservation of tradition so particularly.

So I spent a lot of time talking with them about the changing times, to quote Bob Dylan (I even mentioned him, but most students were unaware of his existence, which shows my age as well as their lack of it). About the fact that it used to be straightforward that 'conservatoire music' would find support in society – if only because it was the music of those who ran that society (or at least they had to pretend it was their music) – but that this is rapidly changing. About the fact that many people out there, outside the conservatoire building, just on the streets – yes, including Mr. Jansen the shopkeeper two doors down the street – were leading extremely meaningful and personally fulfilling musical lives in which 'conservatoire music' plays no role whatsoever. Yes, I said, it's true, it's really true; and the funny thing is that little is known about those musical lives apart from some statistical data with little meaning, and that actually few people – and very few, I added, when it comes to people inhabiting the conservatoire – are really interested in those lives. But suppose you would be interested. Suppose you could just go to them and ask them: "I am a musician – how may I help you?" rather than to demand the ubiquitous: "I know how to play my music very well – come and listen to me!" Could you imagine what might happen if you would consider yourself as someone offering services rather than selling products?

And I gave them some examples of musicians doing just that with elderly people – people with dementia, or people in residential homes making a piece of music together just for fun, or vital 68-year old ladies eager to pick up strumming chords on a guitar in order to connect with her grandson. (One of the students asked if 'new audiences' meant 'elderly people', bless him; so I hastened myself to add that you could replace 'elderly' by 'school children', 'prisoners', 'the ill', 'the general public', or 'your neighbour'.) And I threw in a plea for a reassessment of the value of André Rieu because he shows utter respect to his audience, which made the day of some of the fiddlers in my audience and raised my profile as a serious conservatoire staff member considerably, though perhaps in a negative direction.

In the end, the afternoon turned out to have been worthwhile for some of the students at least. One of them, a jazz saxophone player, came to me the day afterwards and shook my hand. "Thanks for the lesson," he said. "I had fun."

I don't know exactly what he meant by 'fun', and if his fun would lead to any form of change in mindset or even behaviour in the long run (I doubt it; transformative learning usually is not the result of guest lectures but of having to function practically in new situations). I had fun too. I also had some feelings of guilt. It was easy, for me, to stand there and talk about new audiences and to be very critical about musicians serving their old audiences. But I felt a bit as if I were betraying my dear and esteemed colleagues; earnest and hard-working musicians who constantly strive for the highest levels of musicianship and artistry, who often put their whole lives and souls into playing and teaching, and without whom our musical world would be a lot less worthwhile.

But in the end I thought: the conservatoire may actually need the message that the times are a-changing' more urgently than we sometimes realize. There is no harm in balancing the messages about musicianship and artistry, so natural to the conservatoire anyway and still so persistent in our societal formal discourse, with messages about the musical life of Mr. Jansen the shopkeeper two doors down the street, the value of André Rieu, and the musician as a service provider rather than a product salesman.

I hope that the conference you are going to visit will provide you with lots of musicianship and artistry, but with the second type of messages too. And I hope that those messages will lead a longer life than just the conference period. Because I am afraid we are not going to make it when we return to our institutes to do what we always have done. The saying "If you do what you always did, you will get what you always got" will prove invalid for us, I am convinced. If we keep doing what we always did, we will end up with very little.

'And the times, they are a-changing.'

Evert Bisschop Boele, PhD
Professor ('lector') New Audiences, Prince Claus Conservatoire/Research group Lifelong Learning in Music, Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen.

www.lifelonglearninginmusic.org

Curious? Check out my blog: www.evertworldofmusic.blogspot.com