

Audience and Performer Relations - On Musicians and Audiences

Introduction to the topic of audience engagement for the meeting of AEC's Pop and Jazz Platform at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London, UK, 17-18/2/2017. *Evert Bisschop Boele, Prince Claus Conservatoire, Hanzehogeschool Groningen/Erasmus University, Rotterdam; e.h.bisschop.boele@pl.hanze.nl.*

Yesterday, in the excellent keynote by Dominic Murcott, I heard a beautiful, well-articulated and passionate plea. A plea to rethink what higher music education stands for. A plea for the musician as an artist, rather than a performer. A plea for music as an art, rather than a skill. A plea for a reevaluation of creativity, originality and imagination. A plea that propels us forward in asking existential questions. And a plea that connects us to the history we all share (think of Schubert) but maybe have at some point lost.

It was a plea connected to central, developing the student's individual 'voice', finding and developing the student's artistic identity. An identity which may lie not so much in performance skills, but in artistic conceptual thinking.

Which leaves me with a follow up question. Having developed this individual voice: how to find an audience for that voice? Other, less sacred, words come in. 'Reaching an audience'. 'Audience engagement'. And if that doesn't work: maybe even 'audience development'.

Our thinking about this second question currently is less refined, I think, than Simon's formulation of the first, existential question. Just to give you an idea, I show you what is said about 'career preparation' on the jazz and pop website of one of Holland's main conservatoires:

"Thanks to our contacts in the world of broadcasting, at the studios, in show business and the new media, we can help students establish the contacts they need. Additionally, a special set of courses prepares students for the business aspects of the music industry."

Or an example from a very popular and well-credited English pop and jazz school:

"We want to ensure you become who you want to be musically and can make your living working with music (...). The course helps you develop your skills in popular, contemporary and commercial music and equips you with the essential business skills to succeed. (...) You get your music in front of an audience through frequent gig nights, regular festivals and industry showcases."

Apparently music is, once it has been developed by the musician-as-an-artist, a product to be consumed by an anonymous audience. And apparently, reaching an audience is a matter of business skills. I shortly want to point out what this anonymous audience actually is, and what its members are doing.

The anonymous audience in reality doesn't exist. Any audience, be it a stadium of 10.000, a club of 200, or a living room of 15, consists of your equals. It consists of unique human beings. Human beings with unique life histories behind them and in front of them. Each of them is embedded in a unique personal music culture. And each of them has, for some reason, decided to come to listen to this music at this specific place at this specific point in time. That decision is based on all kinds of thoughts and ideas. Some are explicit and some implicit.

Some are music-related and some are related to other domains of human life. Sometimes they are so far removed from the original artistic impetus of the musician that the meeting between the musician and this audience member seems to border on the coincidental.

Why do people come to listen to music, to your music, to my music? You may think – or even hope – that they come to appreciate your unique sounds, your artistry. Research about the meaning of music to people tells a different story. Basically, everyone - including you and me - connects to music for three reasons.

First, it gives, expresses, or changes your personal musical identity. Second, it gives you opportunities to interact with the world. With others, with matter and with time, with the present and the future, with histories and geographies, with God, the devil, the inner self and the domain of beauty and ugliness, and with yourself as a worldly person. And third, it enables you to regulate your life and the lives of others. Each person does that in a unique way. Deeply and emotionally anchored in his or her biography. That includes the cultures he or she has been raised in. The family he or she comes from. The learning he or she has done throughout his or her life.

In other words: your possible audience – those 15, 200 or 10.000 – consists of idiosyncratic individuals who are finding in your music what is meaningful to them. The meaning of music does not sit in the musician or the music. Neither does it sit in the ‘consumer’. It is not a question of ‘supply’, and also not of ‘demand’. It sits precisely in the middle. In that active, individual, biography-based and therefore intensely social, meaning-making process that music essentially is.

If one wants to think in terms of performance (but music is so much more than that): music is a meeting between the musician and the listener. It is a two-way process in which there are no rights and wrongs, no worses and betters. Music doesn’t stimulate a meeting. Music is not based on a meeting. Music *is* that meeting, that meaningful meeting between individuals.

As an aside: that is why I am horrified by descriptions of any sort of music – be it be-bop, baroque, or country and western – as ‘a giant step backwards’. It denies the essential quality of any music as a human meeting place. It denies the essential humanity of our existential musicality.

As a more central point: I don’t believe in the definition of our relation with any audience as ‘audience development’. If audience development means to educate the audience up to our artistic levels, to something that is inherently beautiful or worthwhile, to something that is good for them, we will find ourselves in a dead end.

Love for music is not something one teaches. It is not something one develops in others. It is something that grows in oneself through meaningful experience. Our music making should be precisely that: offering, or rather: enabling such meaningful experiences. And therefore it should be based on knowledge of what makes music meaningful for that other human being in front of you.

Meaningful experience is an experience which is connected to biographies. To histories and to future plans. To individual frames of reference. So it is there where musicians have to look if they want more of an audience.

In other words. We may be concerned about techniques to identify ‘markets’ with ‘demands’ from ‘customers’ to sell their ‘products’ too. But I suggest we may also be concerned about how those others, those fellow human beings, those possible future audience members, make meaning of music in their lives. We should look at them, talk with them, listen to them, listen to their music, figure out what it is that makes it work for them. And if we find out, we may carefully devise ways to connect to all that.

Yes, our students have to play their own music endlessly. But they also have to listen to all that *other* music endlessly. Yes, we have to teach them to talk about and explain their music. But, at least equally important, we have to teach them to be silent. To look and listen. To be genuinely interested in *other* musical lives than their own and that of their peers. We have to teach them that the world is not about them. And that includes being very reflective about the role music plays, has played, and will play in their own lives. Only then will they be able to become meaningful to others in this our shared world.

To finish, let me confess I have been slightly unfair to you. I read you two examples from websites. Actually, I omitted the last sentence from the second example. It reads: “Aside from the business, you also learn how to match your music with an audience.” Maybe this sentence refers to an idea that music is about connecting. About mutuality. About the idiosyncrasy of music experience.

I am aware that what I am saying is far from new. I am aware that within conservatoires, for some people the issue I have been talking about is already a longstanding matter of concern. I am aware that there are conservatoires who address the issue in their curricula. Lars Andersson yesterday hit the nail on the head. Rather than claiming that audience engagement is about the engagement of the audience with our music, he stated that it is about the engagement of the student with their audiences.

For the curriculum, this might mean that there should be more room for leaving the building. More room to listen to music and to people very different from yourself. I invite you to discuss this issue further, with me and amongst yourself. Our society consists of self-conscious individuals who choose their music on the basis of the relevance for their personal lives. The issue of musicians connecting to those individuals is vital for a sustainable system of higher music education in Europe.