CLASSICAL MUSIC FUTURES
PRACTICES OF INNOVATION

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Neil Thomas Smith, Peter Peters and Karoly Molina, *Classical Music Futures: Practices of Innovation*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2024, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0353

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-073-6

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-074-3

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-075-0

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-076-7

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-078-1

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-079-8

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0353

Cover image: Jean Pierre Geusens, *Focuss22* (2017)

Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

10. Is It Time for Brahms, Again? The Many Roles of Classical Music in the German-Speaking Lands in 2023

Jutta Toelle

'It felt like a niche music that wasn't presenting itself to a wider audience. So, I started putting on classical music in these alternative venues and straight away it did reach new audiences.'[1] Gabriel Prokofiev, founder and artistic director of London-based *nonclassical*,[2] makes it all seem quite easy: change location and people start coming to classical music concerts. The circumstances under which Prokofiev says this are noteworthy: in the *nonclassical* YouTube video, a contribution to the PanelPicker website which the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival in Austin, Texas, uses as an 'official user-generated session proposal platform' for the coming festival edition in 2023.[3] In the video, Prokofiev and his colleagues stress the alternative approach of their performances and claim that they 'completely believe[s] in the future of classical music outside the concert hall, of classical music as a living art form.'[4] The SXSW festival, presenting itself as 'an essential destination for global professionals' with conference sessions, film screenings, music festival showcases and exhibitions, promises: 'unparalleled discovery, learning, professional development, and networking with creatives from around

1 SXSW festival, *A New Era for Classical Music in a Post-Genre World*, online video recording, https://panelpicker.sxsw.com/vote/126769
2 Nonclassical, *A music promoter, record label and events producer presenting the best new classical, experimental and electronic music*, https://www.nonclassical.co.uk/about-us
3 SXSW festival, *A New Era for Classical Music in a Post-Genre World*, online video recording, https://panelpicker.sxsw.com/vote/126769
4 Ibid.

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the world.' It is amazing that even at this venue there seems to be a place for classical music!

Of course, no music practitioner would deny any of *nonclassical*'s claims. In the continental European context of heavily subsidised classical music institutions, however, the situation appears a little more complicated. Practitioners, music lovers and other stakeholders perceive a crisis and an immense pressure to innovate. In 2023 – with a war raging in Europe, a resulting gas crisis, high inflation in many countries and the perception that climate catastrophe has taken hold of the world – classical music, its survival and its futuring may not seem to be one of the most pressing topics, but the question of continuing heavily subsidised cultural traditions is becoming ever more relevant. This essay will present some pressing issues and challenges in classical music practices and trace changes; it focuses on the challenging situation in Germany, and on the different roles classical music and its practices play.

I.

The 'big questions' in the classical music realm concern audiences and repertoires: the perception that classical music mainly caters and appeals to white, well-off, elderly audiences, and the 'museum problem' (as stated in the introduction of this volume) with its strong canonical practices and so many performances of music written by dead, white, male composers. Is classical music really 'a practice trapped in the past, unable to respond to contemporary currents in society and increasingly irrelevant to what is happening around it'?[5]

Some big societal challenges have meanwhile arrived in the seemingly old-fashioned classical music world: ensembles and musicians are starting to talk about the carbon dioxide output of their continuous travelling (also due to the lockdowns and the forced periods of rest during the COVID-19 pandemic).[6] The #MeToo movement has taken hold,

5 See Introduction, p. 2.

6 This trend was pioneered by Helsingborg Konserthus and symphony orchestra in Sweden who pledged a no-fly policy in 2018, see this article in VAN Magazin, https://van-magazin.de/mag/helsingborg-ausgeflogen/ and https://van-magazin.de/mag/klima-deutschland/. In 2019, musicians of several German orchestras started the initiative Orchester des Wandels, focusing on the effects of climate

driving people to observe the behaviour of conductors, stage directors and performers more carefully instead of excusing inappropriate or violent behaviour with a nod to somebody's genius.[7] As a result, some well-known men in the classical music world were stripped of their jobs, status and reputation. However, below this societal level and a multitude of ongoing discussions about gender representation, diversity and postcolonial issues in classical music (which will not be discussed here), the closely connected issues of audiences and repertoires constitute the pillars of a massive problem.[8] Both are inherent to classical music – and only to classical music – for a third reason.

Classical music is very expensive to produce. It relies on musicians and other practitioners, often many of them, all of whom need years of specialised training. Due to historical developments,[9] in continental Europe (the German-speaking lands, France and Eastern Europe) classical music is heavily subsidised and mainly produced in big, expensive and cumbersome institutions like radio stations, theatres and orchestras.[10]

Lately, these subsidies have come under some pressure. Some German theatres, orchestras and opera houses, especially in less wealthy towns, have been forced to cut spending, leading to fewer performances

change, https://www.orchester-des-wandels.de. The post-COVID-19 situation of 2022 might have changed things for the worse again, in that many orchestras have not travelled for two or three years and feel obliged to catch up.

7 Christina Scharff and Anna Bull, 'Classical Music after #MeToo: Tackling Sexual Harassment and Misconduct in Higher Music Education', in *Higher Music Education and Employability in a Neoliberal World*, ed. by Rainer Prokop and Rosa Reitsamer (London, New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming), also: Christina Scharff, *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work. The Classical Music Profession* (London: Routledge, 2018).

8 See Introduction to this volume, also, Kira Thurman, *Singing like Germans. Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021); Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line. Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

9 Martin Rempe, *Kunst, Spiel, Arbeit. Musikerleben in Deutschland (1850–1960)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), p. 332.

10 The available statistics by Musikinformationszentrum are confusing. They show public subsidies on municipal, federal and national levels but combine subsidies for music (including music schools, music festivals etc) with those for theatre (for theatres and opera houses, i.e. opera orchestras). In any case, a total of 4.5 billion euros in public subsidies were paid for music and theatre in 2020; 51.4 percent by municipalities, 44.1 percent by the federal states, 4.5 percent by the national state, www.miz.org.de

because up to eighty-five percent of funds are spent on wages. At most of these institutions, however, there is a limit to the amount one can save,[11] and ultimately the only option is to cut one 'Sparte' (a division of the theatre, like children's theatre or ballet) or to close down the orchestra or opera house. In November 2022, the director of the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) asked a rhetorical question that hinted at the ensembles maintained by his employer (the largest German broadcaster, and the second largest in Europe after the BBC): 'Do the contributors want the total of sixteen ensembles: orchestras, big bands, choirs that ARD currently maintains?' He alluded to the fact that all radio stations (and their music ensembles) are maintained by monthly contributions by every German household, but didn't mention that of the monthly eighteen euros and thirty-six cents, only forty-two cents are used for the music ensembles.[12] Until now, the big broadcasters and German municipalities have mostly refrained from extreme measures. At least from an outside perspective, the 129 German professional orchestras with their nearly 10,000 musicians still thrive[13], thanks to a very strong trade union and strict contracts – to the point that one gets the impression that musical life in Germany happens in order to give the orchestras something to do, and not in order to perform music or make the music heard.[14] Another issue is that several big concert halls, theatres and opera houses in Germany are awaiting overdue renovation works,

11 In 2004, the Deutscher Bühnenverein protested against the decision of the Saarland to decrease the subsidies for the Staatstheater in the capital Saarbrücken by twenty-five percent; however, in 2022 there seemed to be a moment of pause and reassessment by German politicians. There are still lots of open letters by the GDBA (trade union of German theatre workers) protesting plans to cut subsidies from the 2010s to be found online.

12 Hartmut Welscher, Rundfunkorchester ohne Rundfunk, april 26, 2023, <https://van-magazin.de/mag/rundfunkorchester-ohne-rundfunk/

13 In January 2022, there were 110 publicly subsidized (municipal or regional) orchestras, 8 publicly subsidized chamber orchestras and 11 radio orchestras in Germany, DOV Statistik Planstellen und Einstufung der Berufsorchester, <https://www.dov.org/klassikland-deutschland/dov-statistik-planstellen-und-einstufung-der-berufsorchester>; also see the map by Deutscher Musikrat, Öffentlich finanzierte Orchester, <https://www.dov.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2018-03-Orchesterkarte-MIZ.pdf>; Andreas Heinen, *Wer will das noch hören? Besucherstrukturen bei niedersächsischen Sinfonieorchestern* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), p. 165.

14 Andreas Heinen wants to 'fill the big halls with broader parts of the population in order to guarantee the survival of small orchestras' ('So gilt es, breitere Bevölkerungsschichten für das klassische Konzert zu begeistern, um so die großen

involving extremely high sums. So, while there are very few options for savings in this field, and a lot of money is being spent continuously (and uncoupled from the number of performances taking place), the ambivalence is growing; an ambivalence about the public financing of art forms that only a third of the population is slightly or really interested in, while an even smaller percentage of the German population actually attends classical music concerts.[15] This makes German concert life vulnerable. Also, the majority of classical music concerts still take the form of a symphony concert (in a concert hall, with a fixed, classical concert programme, starting between seven and eight pm) and they are attended by audiences incorporating the above-mentioned categories of class, race, wealth and age.

This 'standard classical music concert' is the default option and starting point for all discussions about the future of classical music,[16] at least in countries with a tradition of subsidised institutions for classical music. Even if Igor Toronyi Lalic, director of the London Contemporary Music Festival, claims that 'we're beyond that, [beyond the idea] of a town going to a concert hall',[17] these concerts do provide a basic service for the population, like a pharmacy or a bakery. The 'experience economy', however, cherishes unique experiences, and not these basic services; and

Säle zu füllen und den kleinen Orchestern das Überleben zu sichern.', Heinen, *Wer will das noch hören*, p. 12.

15 There are few statistics to rely on. In 2016, 31.5% of the German population over 14 said 'I like to listen to this music/ a lot.' [‚Diese Musikrichtung höre ich sehr gern/ auch noch gern.'] The category was called ‚classical music, piano concerts, symphonies'. 22% of the German population said the same thing about 'opera operetta, singing', see the statistics and the article by Karlheinz Reuband, *Musikpräferenzen und Musikpublika* (2019/22), <https://www.miz.org/de/beitraege/musikpraeferenzen-und-musikpublika.de>. Also, see Mina Yang, *Planet Beethoven. Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

16 Again, it is impossible to pin down statistically what percentage of classical music concerts happens inside or outside the major institutions. The available statistics only enlist those inside the institutions, see Deutscher Musikrat, <https://www.miz.org> and Deutsche Orchestervereinigung, <https://www.dov.org>; see also Heinen, *Wer will das noch hören*, p. 168.

17 *Nonclassical*, a new music scene is emerging in London', online video recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKVm1AGMpXY&t=83s>, minute 2.15-2.20.

the mere perpetuation of a long-held and highly subsidised tradition is probably not the answer to the challenge of 'futuring' classical music.[18]

In other countries, the situation differs. Practitioners from the German-speaking lands, France and Eastern Europe tend to envy and admire many outreach activities at classical music institutions in the UK. These are often organised by lean and flexible ensembles, obviously due to the (historically) different conditions under which classical music practitioners operate: underfinancing through a lack of long-term subsidies, project-related work with low sustainability and the need to stress the social impact of artistic projects. Neoliberal working conditions and an emphasis on entrepreneurship hardly allow the musicians to make a living out of their art, which is in turn unusual and seen critically in the German-speaking realm of classical music.[19]

II.

The 'audience issue' and the 'repertoire question' are closely interconnected and are being discussed continuously: in the German-speaking lands, nearly all the classical music institutions – radio stations, theatres, concert halls and orchestras – began in the 1990s and early 2000s to hire people to cater for new kinds of audiences. A first wave resulted in new (generally young, female, underpaid and precarious)[20] staff responsible for *Musikvermittlung*,[21] trying to attract predominantly

18 The term was coined by Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore in 1998 (Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), here quoted after Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts, *Coughing and Clapping: Investigating Audience Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 31.

19 John Pippen, 'Hope, Labour and Privilege in American New Music', in *Music as Labour*: *Inequalities and Activism in the Past and Present*, ed. by Dagmar Abfalter and Rosa Reitsamer (London: Routledge, 2022).

20 See the following evaluation of a 2018 survey amongst employees in Musikvermittlung: Educult, Netzwerk Junge Ohren (eds.), *Arbeitsbedingungen für Musikvermittler*innen im deutschsprachigen Raum. Hochmotiviert, exzellent ausgebildet, prekär bezahlt. Auswertung der gleichnamigen Umfrage im April 2018*, https://educult.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/NJO_MV_Umfrage2020-1.pdf

21 See the discussion around the usage of the German term in English in *Tuning up! The Innovative Potential of Musikvermittlung*, ed. by Sarah Chaker and Axel Petri-Preis (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), pp. 16. The authors argue that no English term possesses all of the connotations of the term in German.

children and young adults to specially tailored projects.[22] The German Music Information Centre lists a threefold increase in educational performances by German orchestras between 2003/04 (2,000 plus) and 2017/18 (about 6,400).[23]

Another, much more recent wave – responding to the finding that the roughly twenty-five percent of people living in Germany without German-born parents are less likely to attend performing arts events – resulted in agents for diversity being hired by opera houses and orchestras, such as in Ludwigshafen, Berlin, Bielefeld and at the Staatsoper Hannover.[24] This is all the more topical because there is the perception that the (up to now loyal) white, well-off, elderly audiences are dwindling, especially after COVID-19, and considering that some German subscription audiences[25] for standard classical music concerts have a very high average age of sixty-nine years.[26] Karlheinz Reuband sees the classical music audience threatened by an erosion process, due to a decreasing appreciation of classical music in the younger generations (and generally a shrinking population).[27] Some fear that members of the 'Baby-Boomer' generation, born between 1945 and 1960 and by now mostly in the typical subscriber age bracket, are not as interested in classical music as their predecessors, because they were the

22 Claire Nicholls, 'Listening and Audience Education in the Orchestral Concert Hall' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Monash University, 2019), https://bridges.monash.edu

23 Deutsches Musikinformationszentrum, Veranstaltungen der öffentlich finanzierten Orchester und Rundfunkensembles 2019, https://www.miz.org/de/statistiken/veranstaltungen-der-oeffentlich-finanzierten-orchester-und-rundfunkensembles

24 For a list of agents for diversity at German institutions of classical music see Aufbrechen! Ran an die Strukturen, https://www.aufbrechen.net/360-agent-innen; for the thematic discussion see Christiane Griese and Helga Marburger, *Interkulturelle* Öffnung. *Ein Lehrbuch* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012), https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1524/9783486716900/html

25 Subscription audiences pay a regular subscription fee for admittance to a series of events in a concert season, rather than buying a ticket for a particular event.

26 There are not many reliable statistics, but Andreas Heinen, in his study about concert subscribers of seven symphony orchestras in the state of Niedersachsen, identifies an average age of sixty-nine years amongst his questionnaire respondents; Heinen, *Wer will das noch hören?* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS Wiesbaden, 2012), p. 51, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-00303-6

27 See above, Karlheinz Reuband, *Musikpräferenzen und Musikpublika* (2019/22), www.miz.org/de/beitraege/musikpraeferenzen-und-musikpublika.de, www.miz.org/de/beitraege/musikpraeferenzen-und-musikpublika.de

first generation raised with rock music and the Beatles.[28] Other statistics indicate that the numbers of potential audience members in this age group will start to decrease around 2035, when the Baby-Boomers slowly become too old to lead an active concert-going life.[29]

In any case, all practitioners in the field of classical music are aiming to strengthen their ties with existing audiences and attract new audiences – younger, more diverse or just different. In the last decades, not only children, young adults, seniors or people with a disability have become the focus of specialised music projects, but also refugees, poor people, parents with babies, amateur musicians, the rural population or the homeless. When music practitioners (or organisers) decide to reach out to audiences beyond their 'regulars', it influences all aesthetic decisions as well. Many of these often short-lived projects are not merely performance-orientated but also focus on the process leading up to a performance.[30] The pressure to communicate with audiences, to make them become interested, to connect with them is immense, everywhere – even for the big classical music institutions in the German-speaking lands.

Terms that keep coming up in all discussions about audiences are closeness, resonance, contact, participation, engagement, accessibility, relationship, meaningfulness, immersion and of course relevance. This term does not only refer to the possibility that classical music is important to certain people, or that one can relate to a performance (as the audience researcher Martin Barker asks, 'How might what this performance is trying to do relate to you?').[31] What the term relevance could mean, and how it could work, and to whom the performance should be or become relevant, is unclear. It is a cliché, and also an argument that kills any further discussion: that because classical music in many countries is heavily subsidised, it has a duty to make an effort to appeal to all kinds of people.[32] Maybe this is also asking too much of

28 Ibid.

29 Heinen, *Wer will das noch hören?*, pp. 22–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-00303-6

30 Astrid Breel, 'Audience agency in participatory performance: a methodology for examining aesthetic experience', *Participations* 12:1 (2015), 368–87 (p. 12).

31 Martin Barker, 'I Have Seen the Future and It Is Not Here Yet ...; or, On Being Ambitious for Audience Research', *The Communication Review* 9:2 (2006), 123–41.

32 See e.g., the Heidelberg Music Conference 2020, https://www.heidelberger-fruehling.de/heidelberger-fruehling/ueber-uns/festivals-projekte/

an art form whose practices were formed in the nineteenth century, with performance traditions firmly rooted in Central European upper-class style and behaviour.[33]

III.

Of the three issues mentioned above, it can be argued that the 'repertoire question' – or the 'museum problem'[34]– is the only intrinsically aesthetic one. It is also the most accessible and most easily changeable one. Here, in the daily practice of classical music, a lot of experimenting has been happening for a long time; however, merely changing the programming of a concert does not necessarily result in less pressure to innovate. The probability that any standard classical music concert presents a piece by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, or Tchaikovsky is still quite high, but the canon has definitely been enlarged in the last few decades. Statistical overviews are hard to come by,[35] and it is difficult to prove the perception that more unknown or unusual works and more pieces by twentieth-century or living composers are being played than twenty or forty years ago. This refreshing of the canon attempts to counter the 'museum' allegations – the perception that classical music practices are merely about representing the past – but structurally it does not change much.

Alternatives are offered by non-institutionalised performers, who are free from the burden of the big institutions but also responsible for providing their own income. They do not perform standard classical music concerts but focus on more concept-orientated performances. In Germany, these mostly take place in major cities (with diverse audiences) or in places out of reach of the big institutions, in the countryside. Not all concept-orientated performances focus on a certain topic, but they all have some 'spark' to set off this particular concert from others: the

heidelberg-music-conference/ and its topic 'What's next? Auf der Suche nach der Relevanz von morgen' ['What's next? Searching for the relevance of tomorrow'].

33 Walter Salmen, *Das Konzert. Eine Kulturgeschichte* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1988); James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris. A Cultural History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996).

34 See the Introduction and Chapter 2 of this volume.

35 The website https://www.operabase.com publishes statistics about the most performed operas, while https://www.dov.org/klassikland-deutschland/dov-konzertstatistik/ has statistics on the number of classical music concerts, not on the pieces performed.

musicians are specialists in new/old/contemporary/electronic music, play without a conductor, in unusual locations, late at night; they actively engage the audience, create immersive performances, play by heart, collaborate with artists from other fields, target very special audiences (visually impaired people, mothers with babies), or do other things to make themselves stand out. The German website, www.betterconcerts.org, aimed at practitioners, collects best-practice examples: categories focus either on hard facts (actors/location, space, technical facilities), on requirements for aesthetic decisions (cast, concert format, genre, epoch, composer, intersection to other arts, etc.) or on audience issues (target audience, activity grade of the audience etc). The subcategory *topic*, though, includes the most entries (such as identity, future, loneliness, love, liberation, longing, isolation, pain, mourning, darkness) and thus tries to be attractive to the kind of audiences the organisers are imagining.[36] This 'spark' feature, setting off one concert from another one, is thus concept- and repertoire-driven. It spills over, however, into all other aesthetic decisions, and of course influences the question of audiences – so instead of playing a standard classical music concert with an overture, a concerto and a symphony for a random or undefined audience, a concept-orientated performance will start with an idea for the programme and (hopefully) also for a target audience.

In this way, such a performance has tackled two of the three 'big questions' inherent to classical music in the German-speaking lands: repertoire and audiences. The third big question, the financing, does not even apply because if non-institutionalised performers receive subsidies (and in Germany, most do), they will be almost negligible to the public eye: a subsidy of 10,000 or even 50,000 euros for a performance series seems nothing in comparison to the annual subsidy of a municipal theatre.

At the same time, all concept-orientated performances also achieve something extra-musical: they generate attention and sell their avant-garde feel, show politicians and stakeholders that musicians are making an effort and that they work innovatively on many levels. But while these kinds of concert by non-institutionalised performers appear fashionable and different, they often only supplement the big classical

36 Georgina Born, 'The Audience and Radical Democracy', *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik* 25 (2020), 51–59 (p. 53).

music institutions and depend on them in an almost parasitical way: orchestral musicians find more liberating work in concept-orientated performances, concert halls trade rehearsal spaces for some of the cachet and the 'spark' of the free ensembles.[37] 'The wealth of novelty is fuelled by tradition',[38] as the *nonclassical* musicians from London also claim: all freelance classical musicians are standing on the shoulders of giants—of cumbersome, subsidised, classical music giants (not only in the German-speaking world); their novel approaches, however, challenge the classical music giants, in more ways than both sides are probably aware of. By moving away from the safe and subsidised shores of the (German-speaking) classical music lands, non-institutionalised performers innovate and rethink classical music practices.

It is probably time for the subsidised classical music giants to catch up – institutions have to prove that they also do important work, and at a grassroots level. They are thus called upon to make themselves heard and to show that they are indispensable, not only for the cultural, but also for the social and political life of a community, city or region, rather than dangerously perpetuating the status quo. They are obliged to reach out to everybody beyond barriers of age, income, race or education; they have to let their intrinsic hierarchies be challenged by audience projects and develop wise strategies for the 'futuring' of institutionalised classical music. They need to not only provide basic services to a community, but also facilitate excellent music performances at the same time, which is probably the biggest challenge. There might still be room for standard classical music concerts, but their 'near-natural occurrence' is severely challenged: do concerts really have to take place just to keep the (employed and paid) musicians active? Should it not be the other way round: that musicians perform at a concert because they want to, and have something to say? Even wines have to tell stories nowadays[39]

37 There is also an in-between space inhabited by several independent German orchestras, who are subsidised from time to time but not structurally: Ensemble Resonanz, Ensemble Modern, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen and others.

38 Marta Peris-Ortiz, Mayer Rainiero Cabrera-Flores and Arturo Serrano-Santoyo (eds.), *Cultural and Creative Industries: A Path to Entrepreneurship and Innovation* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

39 See the wine blog Just Taste, www.just-taste.com

– should classical music concerts just take place because the subscription series[40] says it is time for Brahms (again)?

Music, and classical music, can play many roles. It can provide basic services for learning, entertaining, socialising, meeting others, forgetting the everyday world. It can foster one-of-a-kind experiences, create networks and connect communities – and that is why classical music practitioners discuss the boundaries, challenges and futures inherent to their art form not only at a German municipal theatre, but also at the South by Southwest festival 2023 in Austin, Texas.

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Deutsches Musikinformations Zentrum, *Homepage*, https://miz.org/de

40 Subscription series are selected events within a concert season that audiences can buy a subscription for.

Deutsche Musik-und Orchestevereinigung, *Homepage,* https://uni-sono.org/

Genossenschaft Deutscher Bühnen-Angehöriger, *Homepage,* https://www.buehnengenossenschaft.de/

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