

CLASSICAL MUSIC FUTURES PRACTICES OF INNOVATION

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16. Strategies of Proximity: Breaking Away from the Standard Classical Concert

Folkert Uhde and Hans-Joachim Gögl

For quite some time, the classical music industry has been experiencing a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly obvious, particularly in the wake of the pandemic: there is an audience problem.¹ On average, audiences for classical music have been ageing and declining.

The pandemic has revealed that, in addition to demographic trends, there is a new, dangerous trend as well: many people are simply staying at home. At the time of writing, hardly anyone makes long-term plans anymore, subscription sales are falling dramatically, and the audience – if it comes – is largely impromptu and far fewer in number. Those who do attend feel a genuine need to listen to music. That said, the social framework has disappeared – no champagne reception, no socialising.

The pandemic has also made it clear that art and culture in general (and classical music in particular) do not enjoy a particularly high social status. No-one took to the streets to protest cancelled concerts; there were no mass demonstrations supporting freelance cultural workers, nor were there any large-scale fundraising campaigns to save freelance livelihoods. Instead, many music professionals who, until recently, were internationally successful, were forced to apply for unemployment benefits.

1 See, among others, Heiner Gembris and Jonas Menze, 'Zwischen Publikumsschwund und Publikumsentwicklung: Perspektiven für Musikberuf, Musikpädagogik und Kulturpolitik', in *Das Konzert II*, ed. Martin Tröndle (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018).

Given the numerous sociological studies over the past fifteen years, the loss of social relevance and lack of audience development is hardly surprising. But in the cultural sector, it almost seems as if these realities have been successfully suppressed. Even the German Federal Agency for Civic Education estimates that cultural institutions can attract only 4.5 percent of the total population to their institutions. In other words, more than ninety-five percent do not come in the first place. Some studies are slightly more optimistic, but the statistics remain grim.

Such figures always refer to the totality of high-cultural institutions, i.e. opera, drama, dance, classical music and museums. There is no data for classical music alone. Nevertheless, case studies would most likely not improve this tally. In short, ninety-five percent of those visitors who theoretically could come to a concert never or seldom do. We need to keep reminding ourselves of that, even if it is painful and, above all, raises a storm of questions.

In 2019, the cultural scientist Martin Tröndle from Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen presented an extensive study on that ninety-five percent.² His book, *Non-Visitor Research*, paints a somewhat more differentiated picture of this hitherto largely under-researched segment of society. In total, 1,268 questionnaires filled out by students were evaluated, and those who explicitly avoided culture were invited to concerts, operas, and theatres and then interviewed.

The findings of this work are, on the one hand, surprising and encouraging, revealing that there is potential for new audiences to be found. On the other hand, the findings show how far removed we seem to be from these potential audiences. Firstly, the results show how thin the line is between those who attend concerts and those who do not. Many, it seems, would attend if they were invited, for example, by someone they knew well. An overwhelming forty-six percent say that the recommendation of a friend or someone they knew well provided the decisive impetus – regardless of whether this tip was received in the pub or via a social media channel. Feature articles, reputation and the name recognition of artists play almost no role.

2 Martin Tröndle, ed., *Nicht-Besuchforschung: Audience Development für Kultureinrichtungen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS / Edition Würth Chair of Cultural Production, 2019). English translation available: *Non-Visitor Research* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

Many, who in some cases had attended a classical concert for the first time, were surprised that so few of their prejudices had been confirmed: that they felt less bored and much less out of place, and that the audience and atmosphere were not at all what they had anticipated. In other words, their first time at a concert was a thoroughly positive experience, which is very encouraging.

According to the study, there is, overall, a greater potential for attracting new audiences for cultural institutions than many assume: about twenty percent of the group of 'infrequent' or 'not-yet' visitors can be won over, but only under certain conditions.

Martin Tröndle writes as a conclusion:

The closer art is to people, the more likely they are to visit arts and culture organisations. *Proximity* must be understood here as a multidimensional concept: it implies proximity to art through socialisation in the parental home; one's field of study, which may allow one to repeatedly come into contact with artistic themes; knowledge about and personal reference to art; one's own artistic activities; and contact with art throughout one's school years and through later visits to arts and culture organisations.¹² But it also implies proximity through one's musical tastes and leisure preferences as well as circle of friends.¹³ The closer art is to one's experienced reality of life, the more likely one is to visit arts and culture organisations.³

Martin Tröndle proposes this broad concept of *proximity* as a new dispositive for thinking about cultural offerings: 'It's not about breaking down barriers, but about building proximity.'⁴

If this concept is followed through, it would have far-reaching consequences for developing programmes in cultural institutions. Traditional audience development has always been based on the assumption that the 'product' is ready-made and needs to be communicated more effectively. Barriers are supposed to be broken down and hurdles overcome. People rarely question their own proud offerings. Communication and marketing are supposed to bring success.

But developing this proximity would mean adopting a completely new attitude as a cultural institution, an attitude that asks questions, listens and acts on impulses. Establishing contact with the audience should not start with the presentation of the finished program but with an open-ended development process that invites cooperation partners,

3 Ibid., p. 88.

4 Ibid., p. 89.

networks and potential audiences into a dialogue. Questions such as, ‘What moves you right now?’ ‘Which performance situations and formats are suitable for this?’ ‘Which spaces can be used?’ ‘What fosters an experience, and what hinders it?’ need to be posed.

When breaking down barriers, one is wedded to a venue and one’s point of view. To build proximity, you have to initiate a process, approach others and become active. What consequences does this have for the identity of cultural institutions and, above all, for their organisers? What does programme development or ‘curation’ mean against this backdrop? And what other attitudes do cultural actors need to take for this process to be successful?

Montforter Zwischentöne and the Question of Relevance



Fig. 16.1 *Zwischentöne Vision Rhinstadt* by Matthias Dietrich © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

First and foremost, strategies of proximity need to take a new attitude when it comes to programme development: rather than barricading ourselves in an ivory tower, we need to reach out, network and connect. Rather than focusing on performers, celebrities, and musical works, we need to ask ourselves questions, search for new possibilities, and evaluate them. Rather than being representative, performances need to

invite people to reflect: perceive the audience not as ticket consumers but as allies; reverse the sender-receiver principle again and again and replace it with permeability and reciprocity.

Only through this fundamentally changed development strategy can the question of relevance, which many overlook but is now being asked more and more loudly, be answered. Relevance is a very personal and individual decision: the provider cannot demand it; it can only be felt by the visitors.

For years, through our practical work at the Montforter Zwischentöne in Feldkirch (Vorarlberg, Austria), we have been developing cultural formats based on principles other than standard programmatic-interpretational offerings. The festival, which takes place annually in November, seizes on the period between All Souls' Day and Advent to address questions ranging from farewells to hopeful new beginnings. Strategies for transformational processes, both personal and social, are the focus of our program.

At the same time, we have been experimenting with new concert formats since the beginning of our artistic endeavours – an international development in which the festival is now regarded as a pioneer.⁵ Trade publications, international teaching assignments and artistic cooperations, as well as the rise of the 'Hugo', Montforter Zwischentöne's 'International Competition for New Concert Formats', are proof of this. In just a few years, it has become the most prominent university forum for discussing the new performance practice of classical music in the German-speaking world. In 2021, student teams from around forty music universities in Austria, Germany and Switzerland participated.

With this, the Montforter Zwischentöne has the unique opportunity to run, on the one hand, a laboratory for new concert formats by international young artists and, at the same time, together with the festival, a platform for exploration, experimentation, and performance.

We have moved further away from the 'classical' concert and its focus on musical works, programmes or performers in the development process. Classical music still plays an important role, but the repertoire has broadened to include jazz, improvisation, contemporary and early music. Above all, improvisation has become increasingly important:

5 Irena Müller-Brozovic and Barabara Balba Weber, eds., *Das Konzertpublikum der Zukunft: Forschungsperspektiven, Praxisreflexionen und Verortungen im Spannungsfeld einer sich verändernden Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021).

like a good orator speaking extemporaneously, the audience is more likely to eagerly follow a musician's reactive improvisation than, say, the fixed form of a Romantic sonata. At the moment of improvisation, all participants – including the audience – are fully present and become part of a unique process.

Of course, the audience should participate in a performance. But it should also be able to contribute to it as well. Every evening is a co-creation, and the level of attention that is being paid changes the character of the performance. Today we know from neuroscience that everyone in the hall interacts directly with each other in a physical way. And we are always surprised by how quickly audiences adapt to the unfamiliar settings we offer. Of course, this requires practical knowledge and important organisational skills. But basically, we experience the audience as being more curious, open and friendly than in the 'classical' structures.

Based on these experiences, we are proposing a 'strategy of proximity' as a new approach to developing cultural formats. Accordingly, our work always tries to start from the perspective of the audience or the impact potential. In terms of Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory, we see the 'concert' or 'event' as a potential sphere for the intensification of the way the individual 'relates to the world' (Rosa) as a kind of mediator.⁶

There are basically three possible topics or reference points (so to speak, 'sounding boards') to fulfil this mediator role:

OUTWARDS

WITHIN

THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

1. OUTWARDS

OUTWARDS focuses on the interaction between the network surrounding us and us as individuals: how do we relate to our surroundings and regional communities, and what topics are taken into consideration? What is or is not important? How do we relate to them? What experiences are there in our immediate vicinity, and how can we use them? How can we re-collect individual experiences so that everyone can use them? How can we foster group identity and experience personal efficacy in the community through such processes?

6 Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2016).

How can we re-purpose spaces, give them new attributes, instil new experiences in them and still connect to the ones we have had there?

Below are two examples from our practical work to demonstrate how we grapple with some of these questions.

St. Matthew Passion (2019, Montforthaus Feldkirch)⁷



Fig. 16.2 Matthaueus Passion by Matthias Rhomberg © Montforter Zwischentöne.
Image by Matthias Dietrich.

This was an oratorio and video installation for soloists, choir, orchestra, and historians.

‘Then all the disciples deserted him and fled’: The St. Matthew Passion by Johann Sebastian Bach is undoubtedly one of the great masterpieces of music history. As part of a festival focus on the theme ‘resistance’, we attempted to focus on two central thematic aspects of the work: what does personal responsibility mean to me? Where do I stand when it comes to participation or resistance? Would I resist the maelstrom of the majority, or do I allow myself to be incited and driven by fake news?

Death – its imminence – is the antithesis of the unreflective acceptance of the masses, and the primal fear of being left behind alone: ‘If I am to

⁷ Musical direction: Benjamin Lack; Concept: Hans-Joachim Gögl, Folkert Uhde ; Video, direction and lighting: Folkert Uhde; Chamber Choir Feldkirch; Capella Stella Matutina.

depart one day, do not depart from me.' This chorale was sung twice in our performance, once on stage and a second time with the entire audience. The entrance to the concert hall was designed as an installation: video interviews with the orchestral musicians and choristers about their experiences of moral courage (or lack thereof) in everyday life. After the intermission, there was an interview session with historian Meinrad Pichler on civil courage and resistance during the National Socialist era in Vorarlberg: major historical events set in a local context.

A late afternoon to pause for thought, with great music about courage and fear and the human need to belong. A programme about everyday heroes and heroines who paid the price for keeping true to themselves and their values.

Here is an entirely different example: the next project took an exemplary approach to a local, hotly debated issue through an artistic experimental arrangement.

Vision Rheinstadt (Vision Rhine City)⁸

In a legal proceeding professionally conducted on stage, the question of the dissolution of all Vorarlberg Rhine Valley municipalities in favour of the establishment of a new collective city was at stake. The topic has been hotly debated in Vorarlberg for years. Was the concept of a collective city with a population of 250,000 a dream or a nightmare? One single administration instead of twenty-nine independent municipalities? All the best arguments for and against were exchanged. The witnesses were former mayors, architects, spatial planners, regional development experts. Pianist David Helbock provided musical commentary, and the audience, who took on the role of jurors, passed the verdict. In the end, the great surprise was the merging of municipalities and the founding of a city! A complex, approximately two-hour dramaturgy with elements of Pecha Kucha, pleas, cross-examinations, musical summaries and a summative vote by the audience. The performance was unrehearsed but instead had an intuitive, dense set of rules in the background, making it possible to create a complex, elegant interplay.

The highlight of the evening was the realisation that a cultural format can shape a debate that is so politically charged (and almost taboo) that it

8 Concept: Hans-Joachim Gögl with the collaboration of all participants. Montforter Zwischentöne 2017.

can be discussed in an exciting, informed, high-quality and humorously conciliatory manner. The improvisations of David Hellbock responded, commented upon and contrasted with the debate – and also provided time and space for the audience to reflect on the discussion.

Outpatient Clinic for Unsolvable Tasks⁹



Fig. 16.3 Outpatient Clinic © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

We are familiar with the city's current issues and are in constant dialogue with the development departments of Feldkirch. By doing so, we maintain contact with our most important sponsor and ensure the festival's relevance, thus repeatedly creating formats that relate to socio-political issues in the region. Another example is the conflict in Vorarlberg between nature conservancies and commercial enterprises that want to build in the green belt.

Citizens' initiatives and nature conservationists criticise these companies for overdeveloping the countryside, to which the companies counter that growth potential is being impeded. The conflict poses important questions and offers fertile ground for format development.

⁹ *Ambulanz für unlösbare Aufgaben* [Outpatient Clinic for Unsolvable Tasks]: A political choreography, with musicians and dancers from Spodium—Ensemble für Improvisationskunst, Montforter Zwischentöne. Basic concept: Hans-Joachim Gögl.

We aimed to see whether it was possible to use an artistic vocabulary to address this conflict in a way that would be fruitful for both sides. As a result, we created a kind of dance-musical family constellation, with improvised personifications of the opposing parties.

2. WITHIN

The aim here is to turn one's perspective around: rather than focusing on our interaction with the outside world, our own personal, individual development with the outside world is considered. The focus is on ourselves: What is missing in our lives, what issues have we avoided so far, what questions are we facing? Where do we find meaning? Which experiences could be enriching? What means do we need for this, and in what forms?

Among our most intense concert experiences on this topic was an evening as part of our thematic focus on 'dying – of letting go'.

Concerto for Hospice Companion and Cello¹⁰



Fig. 16.4 Concert for companion © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

10 *Konzert für Sterbebegleiter und Cello* [Concert for hospice companion and cello]: Concept/Format development: Hans-Joachim Gögl with Folkert Uhde. Realised in the context of the focus 'dying—about letting go' of the Montforter Zwischentöne, 2016.

A doctor, a priest, a relative and a hospice companion recount their experiences on a bare stage in the spotlight. In the audience is the cellist Peter Bruns, who reacts to these stories with spontaneously selected music from his repertoire by Bach and Reger, performed by heart, thereby creating an intense space to reflect on what was heard. The result is an almost liturgical order, unrehearsed as it often is, but with a precise timing and a coordinated dramaturgical framework of the four narratives in the background.

The Funeral¹¹



Fig. 16.5 The Funeral © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

Another format has now developed into a permanent part of the series: The Funeral. Our living world is spinning faster and faster. What was cutting-edge yesterday – fashions, technologies, knowledge – is outdated today. But we hardly take time to reflect on these things, appreciate them and part ways. That is why we have developed a new ritual, modelled on the classical funeral ceremony, to say farewell through words and music.

11 *Die Beerdigung* [The Funeral]: Format development Hans-Joachim Gögl with Folkert Uhde, realised at the Montforter Zwischentönen 2020 and 2021.

The very elements of this format make up a powerful theme, which in our case denotes a term, a circumstance or a state. In this way we have already put to rest certitudes, privacy, leisure and distance. A philosopher delivers a eulogy on the respective theme, for which relevant texts are also selected. There is music before and between the eulogies. So far we invited a wide range of musicians for this format from Early Music, Classical String Trio and Vocal Ensemble to improvising musicians. Again, music is needed to give space for reflections and thoughts on the spoken word.

In the end, volunteers read out the intercessions written by the speakers. Every time, a different architectural firm creates a temporary interior design.

Love, Pray Tell, What Are You Doing? – Early Music and Oral History¹²



Fig. 16.6 Love, pray © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

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- 12 *Liebe sag' was fängst du an?* [Love, pray tell, what are you doing?]: Format development Hans-Joachim Gögl with Folkert Uhde, realised at the Montforter Zwischentönen 2020 and 2021. Concept/format development: Hans-Joachim Gögl, Folkert Uhde, Mark Riklin; 'Liebe sag', was fängst du an?' Baroque love songs and video installation, Ensemble Age of Passions with Hille Perl and the soprano Dorothee Miels, Montforter Zwischentöne.

Another approach addresses the audience's biography and life stories. When we opened the Montforter Zwischentöne back in 2015, we focused on the theme 'anfangen—Über das Beginnen' (starting—About the beginning). While reflecting on such experiences, we, together with the artist Mark Riklin, hit upon the idea of how romantic relationships begin – those moments in our existence that are whimsical, sublime, banal, long-planned, spontaneous and funny, but always significant. In each family, and in every locality, there is an untapped treasure of extraordinary stories, and because of this we trained story collectors to track down these experiences among their circles of friends. The result was an exhibition in the foyer of the Montforthaus, where one could read these countless recollections before or after the concert.

From these, we then selected individual stories that participants had told us to camera and which we then placed in the context of baroque love songs by seventeenth-century composers like Philipp Heinrich Erlebach or Johann Krieger. Consequently, a live ensemble played music that addressed the same theme as the respective story. This created a visual layer in a concert where couples from the region – elderly, same-sex, long-divorced, or newly married – recounted their successful or failed stories of how love began.

At the end of the concert, a visitor came up to us and said, 'Early music was new music!'. It was only now that she realised for the first time that a song by Heinrich Albert from the seventeenth century thematised the same emotion as the story of the lovers who dialled the wrong number three times on the telephone two years ago and thus met.

3. THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

A person's LIVING ENVIRONMENT – and how he or she confronts it – is related to one of the most frequently asked questions by non-attendees of cultural events: 'What has this got to do with me?' Here, the decisive factor is the constant search for new forms and formats that are in keeping with the present or adapted to deal with the present. Free, open forms, which are more likely to stem from the visual arts, are naturally more suitable here than the form of the civic concert, which has been handed down from the nineteenth century. Installation forms and the inclusion of public space, as well as digital formats, can

be employed here. De-hierarchisation is also key: the active decision-making of the visitors, for example, who can freely choose the object and duration of the encounter, similar to an exhibition of visual art, is essential. We often combine different forms, ranging between lectures, concerts, art in public space and walks. In 2016, we realised a complex form of these different elements based on the theme 'Belief—between doubt and revelation'.

Credo - Six Concerts and Ten Encounters with Mystics¹³



Fig. 16.7 Credo Mutter Hildegard © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

The tour featured three different elements: in the large, empty hall of Montforthaus, there was a meditative pendulum installation by the Austrian light artist Erwin Redl. Two points of light at the end of the pendulum, approximately twelve metres long, danced across the floor with an amplitude of about fifteen metres. Live concerts from a nearby chapel were transmitted into this pendulum installation: violinist Midori Seiler and organist Christian Rieger played the fifteen-sonata cycle of the

13 CREDO – *Sechs Konzerte und zehn Begegnungen mit Mystikerinnen und Mystikern* (CREDO - Six concerts and ten encounters with mystics): Concept and format development: Hans-Joachim Gögl and Folkert Uhde, realised at the Montforter Zwischentönen, 2016.

Rosary Sonatas by Baroque composer Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber. Their performance, spread throughout the day at the times of the medieval Liturgy of the Hours, could be heard by the audience either live in the chapel or in the focused, darkened atmosphere of the great hall with the light pendulum. The path between the two venues traversed a brightly-lit covered bridge that led over a stream. The interior of the bridge, which itself had become an installation, posed questions that invited the audience to respond and reflect for themselves during the short walk. Additional impulse lectures on various spiritual topics took place in the Montforthaus throughout the day, among others by the abbess and the head of a Buddhist monastery.

Salon Paula



Fig 16.8 Salon Paula © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

Our ‘Salon Paula’ series illustrates a simple aspect of proximity that is also in line with our objective. For these offsite concerts, staged at the kitchen table or in the living rooms of our audience’s homes, we select soloists from the fields of music, science, art or mainstream culture. We pay the complete fee and anyone in Vorarlberg can apply to host such an event. The underlying idea is straightforward: the expert or musician comes to that person’s home and provides half an hour of content or

musical input; afterwards there is a chance for everyone to exchange thoughts and ideas. Friends and family are invited – it doesn't matter to us if there are five people or twenty-five – and we put up a poster in front of the entrance to welcome everyone. In attendance is an on-site artistic director, who goes over to the kitchen table of the student co-op, villa or social housing project and says, 'Welcome to the Montforter Zwischentönen,' thereby transgressing the barrier of the concert hall by privatising it.

Conclusion

Of course, the above examples taken from our work at the Montforter Zwischentöne over the past several years are just that – examples. Each demonstrates our underlying desire to establish a participatory link with audiences that, hopefully, achieves our objective of building proximity. And although the programmes described here have been tailored for our facilities and epitomise our vision of striving to create a sounding board for issues relevant to audiences in our region, they are by no means set in stone. One venue's success story may not work for another – there is no single formula, and yet the possibilities are limitless. One only needs imagination, as well as the courage to step down from the ivory tower of the 'classical' concert and listen to the needs of the public.

Of course, the beauty of this – of breaking away from the standard 'classical' concert – is that a clean slate appears suddenly before your eyes. No longer is it necessary to succumb to the pressure of wooing potential audiences by presenting the 'best' musicians with the 'best' programmes – elements that, once you have freed yourself of such constraints, make you realise that the classical concert can resemble a three-ring circus at times. Of course, we strive to offer high-calibre performances at the Montforter Zwischentöne with top-quality musicians, but more important is our desire to find points where music, art and culture can be employed to strike a nerve and resonate with topics and issues current in today's ever-changing society. Simply put, we are not interested in creating an institution that elevates music and culture to a podium. Such an approach, in our opinion, leads institutions down

a dead-end street, one that has resulted in declining concert attendance figures in the first place.

But with that clean slate comes the need for concert organisers to accept a particular responsibility, too. One must be willing to take risks, try things out and potentially make mistakes. That said, however, such risks can be calculated in advance with good planning. Behind our closed doors, we regularly meet for brainstorming sessions that, through trial and error and a bit of imagination, attempt to take the pulse of the issues at stake in society and turn them into programmes that extend beyond being representative. At times the results may seem unconventional at first or even crazy. And yet, our experience – again to echo Tröndle – is that when our offerings truly ‘speak’ to the inner voice of our potential visitors and invite them to reflect, people become interested and are likely to attend. That, in a nutshell, is our guiding principle for our ongoing experiment at the Montforter Zwischentöne. We hope that the examples here provide insight and inspiration to think beyond the horizon.



Fig 16.9 Zwischentöne © Montforter Zwischentöne. Image by Matthias Dietrich.

Translation: Eric Lloyd Dorset

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