

## Chapter 2: The audience: traditional behavior and immersion

### Traditional audience behavior

Bernard Holland states in his article 'Concertgoers, Please Clap, Talk or Shout at Any Time' (NY Times, jan. 8, 2008) that concertgoers have become part police officer, part public offender. *"We prosecute the shuffled foot or rattled program, the errant whisper or misplaced cough. We tense at the end of a movement, fearful that one of the unwashed will begin to clap, bringing shame on us all."*

The article's introduction provides a brief description of concert behaviour in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, using examples and quotes from Kenneth Hamilton's *'After The Golden Age'*. It shows that great composers like Liszt and Chopin would have been insulted had listeners not clapped between movements or even while the musicians are playing. Beethoven himself said that it's not silence, but applause that artists really want. Elias Canetti compares modern concerts in his 1960 book *"Crowds and Power"* with the Roman Catholic Mass. *"Worshippers accept instructions from an executive operating from a raised platform at the front. They speak when spoken to and otherwise shut up."* Hamilton attributes a lot of this recently acquired holiness to the recording age, but Holland thinks it has more to do with Germanic arts taking itself deadly seriously. *"Every Mozart sonata is like Wagner's Parsifal, and listeners should get down on their knees."*

Of all concerts I have seen, only a few invited or encouraged the audience to behave differently than they/we are traditionally used to. I find it hard to believe that it is a coincidence that these are the performances that stay in my mind the longest and -generally spoken- leave the deepest impression on me. I'm convinced that in order to engage a great deal of today's people with the music, it is a must for a performer to spend some thoughts about the audience's behaviour and a possible break with tradition. Especially so in the case of contemporary music, where audiences might not know what to expect or might appreciate some guidance in how to listen.

Conductor Michael Tilson Thomas talks in his article *'When Audiences Distract The Performers'* about another aspect of the audience behaviour, one that we can't compare with concerts centuries ago. He describes true stories like the one in which a mother and her seven-year-old daughter were banned from a concert of the New World Symphony because the little girl was distracting the conductor with her Ipad or how he got in trouble with the press for lobbing handfuls of cough drops at a phlegmy audience during a performance of Mahler's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony with the Chicago Symphony and how in 2012 New York Philharmonic conductor Alan Gilbert famously stopped a performance after an Iphone marimba ringtone interrupted the last movement. The disgraced patron, a lifelong classical music lover who didn't realize an alarm had been set on his new Iphone, was mortified after being excoriated both in public and in the national media.

I think plenty advantages come with 'loosening up the atmosphere' or creating an immersive environment during a concert. Not only is the (hopefully partly younger and inexperienced) audience going to feel more at ease, I believe the musicians will also benefit from the situation. Because of the efforts and thoughts made beforehand to connect with an audience, it will become easier for a musician to find a musical or emotional connection while performing. Of course it requires a different preparation and performing attitude, but in my opinion the unique concert experiences are definitely worth it. I think that good musicians have the capacity to 'claim' silence when they feel it's needed, but should be also able to have an open, alert, spontaneous and accepting attitude towards the audience. Because if everyone stays home out of terror of disrupting the music, there won't be live classical music any more.

Of course I realise the importance of tradition in culture, which is still strongly present in concerts of orchestras like The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and national opera or ballet companies. But I do think it's important for younger orchestras, ensembles or solo performers to aim actively for an innovative and original performing identity. In this quest it's probably a good idea to reflect on how you want audiences to experience the performance.

Traditional audience behavior	Other ways
Audience arrives 30 to 5 minutes before the concert and waits until the staff opens the doors of the performance space to enter.	Performers could create an intro atmosphere that is in line with the performance. This can be achieved with specific lighting, music/soundscape or visuals. This way the performance starts from the moment people enter the performance space: the audience feels immediately more immersed than in a traditional concert situation. There could be a more casual atmosphere in which people are allowed to go in and out at any time.
People get seated (preferably not directly next to strangers) after entering the performance space and keep on talking until the audience light goes out and musicians (or conductor in case of an orchestra) arrive on the stage.	Alternative positioning of the audience immediately changes their focus. Freedom of navigation and position (sitting/standing/lying) makes it possible for people to experience music in different ways. People could be sitting close to or in between the performers. Performers could be already present and welcoming their audience (or even giving them drinks).
Audience tries to behave as silent as possible throughout the concert (no talking, preferably no coughing and definitely no cell phones) during the playing. They are supposed to clap after every composition (not in between movements!).	It would be nice if an audience was more honest. If they don't have to feel stopped when they want to clap, laugh or yell at anytime. On the contrary: they also shouldn't feel forced to applaud (or even stand up) when they didn't like it.

In case of big traditional orchestral or opera productions it's encouraged to wear appropriate clothing.	People should wear what they want. Or performers could think about an original dress code that is somehow relevant for the performance.
After the last piece the public presents their biggest applause and possibly a standing ovation (it can be awkward not to do it when everyone else is).	Here too: it would be nice if an audience was more honest. If they don't have to feel stopped when they want to clap, laugh or yell at anytime. On the contrary: they also shouldn't feel forced to applaud (or even stand up) when they didn't like it.
People leave the concert space after musicians left the stage, they possibly have a drink and chat in the foyer.	There could be a closer connection between the performer(s) and audience. A direct dialogue -possibly even during the performance.

## Immersion

'Immersive art' is a relatively new term that originates from the discourses of contemporary computer art according to Peter Sloterdijk (2006: 58-63). It means to engage with one's immersion in artificial environments and most likely assisted by technical equipment. Through new technologies humans are finally taken seriously as beings for whom it is natural to immerse themselves - and not only in water - but in elements and environments generally. Especially for younger audiences (having grown up with nothing but computers and smartphones) immersive performances could be a natural way to connect with music.

Sloterdijk states that architects, and particularly interior architects, are the designers of immersion since they are the ones producing embedding situations. He points out that it has become more and more important for people to immerse themselves in interiors that fit them and makes them feel at home. I believe that artists are designers of immersion as well. We generally like our audiences to be immersed in our musical message, and this paper wants to provide some tools to help expand this idea.

As illustrated in my previous research (Bonny, 2015) immersive performances are often multimedial. One of the basic assumptions of multimedia is synaesthesia, the fact that we can blend two or more sensory experiences, but according to Jan Schacher (2008) this rarely exceeds what has been a standard of immersion since the introduction of sound in cinema: the audiovisual form. Schacher states that the merging of seeing and hearing in a synaesthetic manner often fails in live cinema. I think the same statement applies to multimedial concerts. *'Music is simply added to image, or there is nothing more than a hierarchical and illustrative relationship between the two.'* One of the reasons is the fundamental difference between the senses.

*On a physiological level hearing and seeing do not share the same mechanisms. We perceive the pressure wave in air as sound and the light particles or waves falling onto our retina as images. These phenomena occur in different media and oscillate at different orders of magnitude. The filtering by the perception process further differentiates the two. Seeing is acted out by looking, which is a reading process on a single perception point roaming across the scene in front of the viewer. Contrary to that hearing or listening is a massively parallel activity, where several streams of content are perceived at the same time (polyphony) and the acoustic elements are combined to form the perception of timbre and overall sound (Schacher, 2008: 2).*

In the interview I took with her, Kathinka Pasveer (wife of Stockhausen) points out that the visual aspect of a performance is a lot stronger than the auditive. Because of that we should always be careful to not over-stimulate the audience's eyes at moments we need them to focus on the sound. A transcription of the full interview is attached at the end of this paper.

## Early installation art and immersion

In the 1950s, artists such as Pollock began to question the line between the art object and its context. In the world of contemporary music, *Poème Symphonique* could be considered one of the first fully immersive environments to combine electronic music, projections and architecture for the purpose of creating a total work of art. This collaborative work between Edgard Varèse, Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis was exhibited at the 1958 Brussels World Fair and consisted of 400 loudspeakers, projected film, coloured lights and architecture. In the following decades, many artists have been transforming spaces: first in an attempt to reproduce existing environments (1960s), later to explore and fulfill the human desire to experience constructed realities (1970s). With the incorporating of digital technology in their work, possibilities for installation artists to create environments that enable audiences to experience alternative realities, became endless. (Bonnie Mitchell, 2010)

*The objects in an installation art space take on new meaning and the context of the elements defines the interpretation of the piece. We must remember that the elements in the installation space are not art objects in themselves; the participant's experience is the work of art. (Mitchell, 2010: 4)*

## Immersive theater

In her study on video games (Arsenault and Picard, 2007), Elena Gorfinkel brings to mind the fact that immersion is not a characteristic but rather an effect which a work may produce on the participant. This distinction partly explains to what extent it is impossible to establish a strict separation between immersion and critical distance. Oliver Grau (2003) states that the relationship between immersion and critical distance depends on numerous parameters and the participant's immersion is dependent on his willingness. In this section I will discuss the model for immersive theatre as proposed by Catherine Bouko in her article *Interactivity and immersion in a media-based performance* (2014).

*No matter how immersive a performance may aim to be, it will always be possible to maintain one's critical distance, thereby negating the immersion. (Oliver Grau, 2003:13).*

Immersive theater places the participant at the heart of a work. The medium's visibility is exploited and this by itself is already an important aspect of this theatrical language: at particular moments, the audience may be absorbed to the point of confusing the created environment for everyday reality. At other times, the immersant becomes aware of the artificial nature of the world into which he is plunged and adopts a position external to the work. Exactly this game of coming and going constructs and deconstructs physical and mental immersion and constitutes the specificity of immersive theater.

Elena Gorfinkel's model of immersive theatre is centered upon three steps. They can be summed up and explained briefly in the following manner:

1. *Physical integration vs. breaking down formality*

*The boundaries between the real and the imaginary are physically disturbed; the fluctuation between the two is no longer structured by physical separation. At this stage, it can't yet be called immersion: it's not enough just to break the frontal division between the stage and the audience in order to achieve immersion.*

2. *Sensory and dramaturgical immersion*

*The immersant is sensorial and physically plunged into an imaginary world to which he belongs; interactivity can then appear. Far from being a side effect whose purpose could be resumed as breaking the spectator's classical appeal, the immersant's sensory appeal constitutes an experience which places his body at the heart of the dramaturgy. The immersant's body experiences first-hand the fluctuation between what is real and what is imaginary.*

3. *Immersion and spatio temporal indeterminacy*

*The third step takes the form of absolute immersion: the immersant experiences confusion between the real and the imaginary universe. Even when the immersant stops cooperating, he is unable to distinguish between the real and imaginary worlds. Obviously such moments of immersion are temporary and very difficult to attain.*

In the article, Bouko also talks about personalisation, a more common dramaturgical strategy. She distinguishes three ways in which the immersive experience can be personalised, without going as far as to give the immersant the role of a collaborator. In the first one (introspective dramaturgy), immersive theater develops a 'polychronic narrative'. Polychronic narration is not a complete absence of sequence or lack of definite sequence, but instead it exploits indefiniteness to multiply the ways in which the events can be chained together. This type of narration enables the immersant to effectively move around through a series of pre-written events. However the immersant can only set his own pace to a certain extent; These polychronic moments are separated by pre-arranged actions where the

producers of the performance take back the control of the experience. These moments are necessary for the story to advance. In the second way (first-person dramaturgy) the immersant is incorporated into the fictional world as the character he embodies but his social identity is also mentioned in the play. This dramaturgy places the participant at the heart of the experience, but from the individual's point of view and from the one of the character he is playing. The third technique to personalise the immersive experience aids the process of individualisation while at the same time limiting the immersant's freedom. The article refers to this technique as 'the aesthetics of fear' and it's based on the fact that anxiety and apprehension are central to many of the effects and affects evoked by participatory performance (Helen Freshwater, 2009: 65). Forms of anxiety can be caused by leading immersants into a dark area (sensory disturbance) or by a face-to-face contact between performer and audience.

The techniques used in both installation art and theatre are perfectly applicable within the world of classical (and contemporary) music, and in my opinion very relevant to consider for every performer (and not only production teams or artistic directors). We are faced with excess capacity, changing demographics and new technologies, which causes many musicians struggling to find and maintain audiences. Conventional ways of doing so (marketing, outreach, incentives) are failing. Audiences nowadays care more about the setting, not just the performance itself, challenging venue owners and artistic directors to move beyond the production and curate the setting also as part of their offerings. The attention for the context of the artwork (in this case: the music) could be as valuable as it already is for many decades in installation art and theater. By placing music very consciously in a new context, one as personal as the performer's interpretation, new levels of understanding could be achieved for both the performer and the audience. This paper aims to inspire musicians to create immersive environments in order to make the message of the composer and the interpretation of the performer(s) clearer. (Markusen, Brown: 2013).

## Incorporated and additional immersion

In my previous research about intermediality (Bonny: 2015) I made a distinction between incorporated or additional intermediality. I now choose to apply this distinction when speaking about immersion. In incorporated immersion, the immersive elements are part of the creation. This means (in the case of music) that a composer decided to add extra-musical elements to the music (spatialisation, instructions about lights/amplification/decor/movement etc). These elements are an inherent part of the composition. Additional immersion means that someone other than the creator (musician, programmer, director) decides to add extra-musical elements to the performance. This could happen for instance in an attempt to make the composer's message clearer, to make the music appealing for a bigger audience or to fit in a bigger whole like a dance/theater production or a conceptual festival.

## Collapsing the Distance between Performer and Audience

Research has shown that contemporary performing art audiences desire to be more engaged and interactive with the artists (Conner, 2008). As in spectator sports, the roles of performers and viewers in performing arts are strictly delineated and segregated by how the performances spaces are structured (see previous chapter). Interaction between performers and audiences has been severely limited by artistic conventions and technological progression has reinforced the experiential distance. Lynne Conner states in her essay '*In and Out of the Dark* (2008)' that the introduction of lighting into the performing arts has made it much more difficult for an audience to interact with performers, since they're usually put into complete darkness. An ideological shift accompanied this process. According to Lawrence Levine (1988), art became sacralized in this period. It needed to be treated with awe and respect, insulating elites from the masses. People were only supposed to clap at appropriate times and otherwise remain mute.

I saw many performances in which an effort was done to decrease the distance between performer and audience, but almost all of them were dance or theatre productions. Also here I find myself concluding that the classical music scene is a bit behind on the trends. The new Pierre Boulez hall in Berlin is already considered revolutionary because of the absence of a stage. This probably has to do with the many conventions musicians are educated with and the average age of a classical music concert audience. I can imagine that older people find it less important to be immersed in a concert since they probably value tradition more and can't deal with the amount of impulses young people grow up with nowadays. Below are some examples out of my own experience.



Tryst - Chloé Geers ©Rudy Carlier

Music for Bars (Slagwerk Den Haag, Poetic Disasters Club)	This flashmob performance really demands the performers (3 percussionists and 3 dancers) to interact with the audience. They have to talk to them in order to get their musical material (words to produce rhythmically in a composition). Movements and sounds of the audience are imitated, which makes everyone involved aware of this non-traditional relationship between performers and audience.
Tryst (Chloé Geers)	In this small dance production, the solo performer suddenly reached me (sat in the audience) her hand. She led me to the stage where she danced with me for over 15 minutes in front of the audience. Without planning or expecting, I was not watching – I became part of the performance. Obviously I was the one to experience the highest level of immersion. Still the audience is surprised and more involved because of the situation. They know it could have been anyone.
Naked Lunch (Slagwerk Den Haag, Club Guy & Roni)	At the end of this dance performance, the audience is invited to come dance with the dancers. Instruction videos with the moves were part of the marketing plan and the energy was elevated in a way that people felt comfortable enough to go for it.
Many other performances	Artist talks to the audience after the performance which is always a very nice way to get to know more about the content, context, performers and makers.



Naked Lunch at Nederlandse Dansdagen - Club Guy & Roni ©Jochem Jurgens



## IN - immersing the audience

I really want to treat the audience of 'IN' like friends that come over for dinner, only it's not food but music I'll be sharing. I will have prepared home-made lemonade and pour it myself when the people enter the performance space. This idea is based on an experience of my teacher who was asked to help at the bar during a break of a concert he played. He still remembers this performance as one of the ones in which he really got to connect with the audience, because of the face-to-face communication. The effort put in things like this seems to me like a much more human and sincere way to thank someone for being there.

For *Intérieur* (Lachenmann) the audience will sit in a large circle (2 rows) around the (amplified) set-up. Together with a sound engineer, and based on a thorough analysis of the piece, I will make a sound projecting plan to play with the audience's focus. Because the piece is all about sounds, I think it's a good idea to keep them fresh and surprising, and amplification could be a great help for that. By switching the sound projection between inside (acoustic sounds of the instruments) and outside (amplified and projected through the speakers surrounding the audience), I'm not only trying to keep their attention, I'm also playing with the overall concept of 'IN'. The idea of inside vs. outside: sometimes the sound is inside the audience and at times it's the other way around. In the process of creating the sound projection plan, it's important to keep in mind that this idea should not distract from the actual sounds. I don't want the audience to be confused and only think about the direction of the sound. I'm looking for ways to keep them intrigued and focused.