

## Chapter 3: The immersive performer

The perception of the performance is not the same for the performer and audience. A musician is conscious of internal processes and of cognitive control over technical aspects of executing a piece. While playing his instrument, a musician also needs to be aware of the overall flow and impact of the presentation. It is important for a performer to cultivate an inward and an outward perspective of the actions and to be able to adjust according to changes in both domains. When working in the audiovisual field, artists have to develop a sensibility for the fundamental difference between the senses. Striking a balance between the visual and auditive aspect is a crucial challenge. Some domains (temporal contrasts, level of abstraction) need to be addressed differently for the eyes and the ears. Apart from the purely physical impact of volume or luminosity, the relationship and balance between these intrinsic attributes is what makes performance fuse for the senses. We need to find elements in one domain that relate to the other sense on a more abstract, maybe even emotional level in order to achieve a sense of coherence. Of course many different approaches to performing are possible. Depending on the field artists are working in (music, dance, video art...) or even just the sub genre (classical music, jazz, early music), complete different performing attitudes can be distinguished. Some tend to be less body conscious and really focus on the execution of their work without giving great importance to the visual expression they project with their physical presence. Musicians tend to be more stage conscious and might even bring over-emphasized gestures to their performance. Both the lack of presence and the distracting use of showmanship influence the way a piece or performance is perceived. (Schacher, 2008).

Most musicians (classical, jazz, pop...) perform on a stage that is raised above the audience or otherwise distanced from them spatially and psychologically. Christopher Small (1998) brilliantly depicts this scene in his account of classical musicians entering the stage. (Markusen & Brown, 2013).

*All public behavior sends a message about the relationship of those who are exhibiting it to those who watch it. It seems to me that the message of these musicians' onstage behavior is that of their professional exclusivity, of their belonging to a world that the non-musicians who sit beyond the edge of the stage cannot enter... The will address not a listeners in the course of the performance; we shall not hear their natural voices but only the ritual voices of their instruments as they play... (Small, 1998).*

The attitude of an artist towards his audience (often acknowledge only during the final conventional act of applause) is cultivated by schooling. The distance between performers and audiences can not be reduced to artist training, behaviour and technology. It is rooted in Euro-American political economy and institutions that restrict the definitions of art and artist and who they serve. The way artists get trained and promoted is inherited from royalist traditions where wealthy people chose and employed artists to make compose, perform music, sculpt and paint. Later, built on new industrial wealth, institutions (museums, opera houses and concert halls) evolved to reach more of the populace. This allowed them to experience art, but only as passive attendees, often far from the stage.(Markusen & Brown, 2013).

## The performer's voice in the composer's message

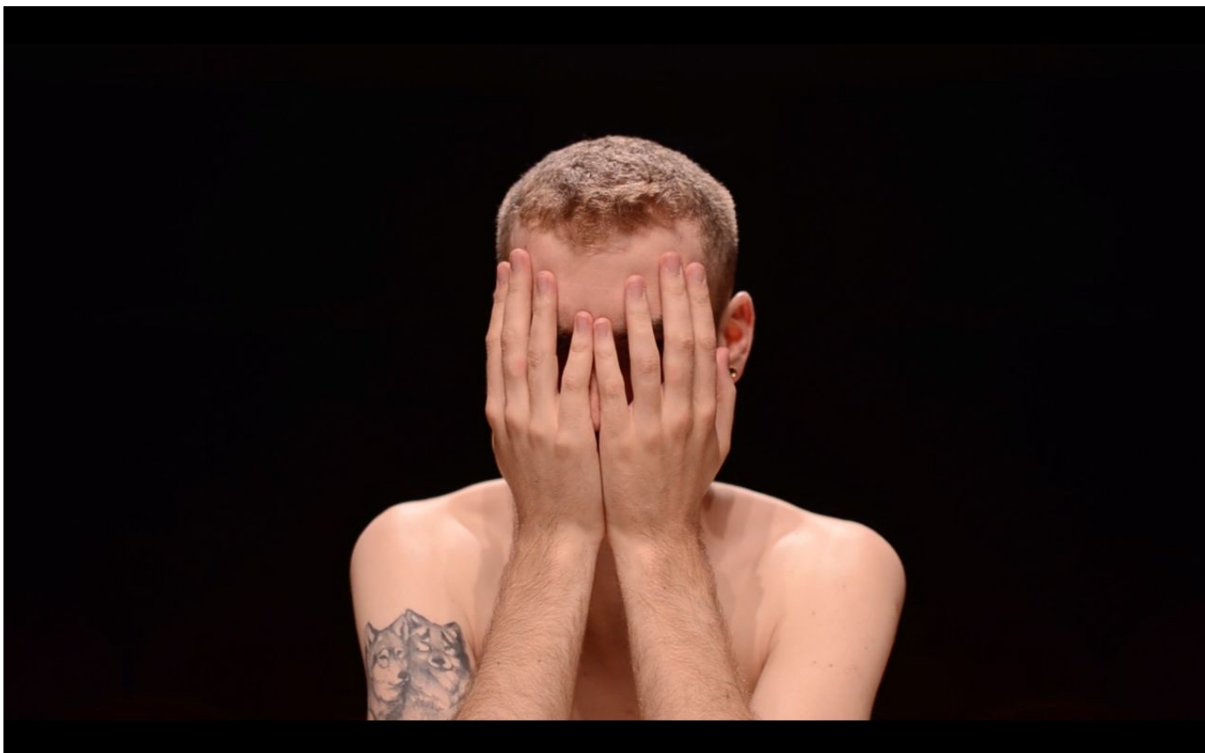
One of the biggest risks in creating an immersive performance definitely is losing the attention for the content. Good compositions have strong ideas and concepts, and in order to project those to an audience it's a must for musicians to aim for a good understanding. In the following section will reflect on my own take on the current contemporary music scene. The paragraphs below are merely opinions, based on my personal experiences as a musician, composer, curator and organiser, and therefore subject to change.

As a musician the ultimate challenge lies in finding the balance between the composer's intention and your own interpretation. For older music (like baroque or classical styles) many conventions are generally applied, often they are based on theories like harmony and counterpoint and/or traditions. In the scene of contemporary music I experienced two different scenarios. In the best case the performers get to work with the composer (preferably already during the creation process). If they are lucky, the composer has good social skills and abilities to combine his musical intentions with the strengths and specific characteristics of the musicians he or she is working with. Such collaboration could definitely elevate the final result. In the other scenario, performers don't get to (or don't chose to) work with the composer for whatever reason. Dealing with a composer who doesn't manage to communicate his desires (and unfortunately, that's not an exception) can be an advantage. In that case, there is an enormous freedom for performers to interpret and possibly add immersive elements to the piece or performance. My advice for such situations would be to look first for references (research the composer's style or recordings of other compositions) and combine that knowledge with one's own creativity and skills. Obviously not every composer has the same take on music and the same opinions about what is important. Whereas some composers really expect their music to be performed extremely precise (cf. Stockhausen), others demand much more freedom and input from the performer (cf. Cage). Absence of the composer (especially in the case of new music) sometimes causes (uninformed) performers to completely miss the point of the piece. As a big defender of new music, this is something I try to avoid by all means.

As I write music myself, I have also dealt with similar situations from a composer's point of view. This makes me very aware of how difficult it is for them to be clear on what exactly the message is and how to communicate that to the performers. In order to inspire musicians, I believe it is always a good idea to explain the context of the piece. A composer should be able to answer whatever question a musician has about the music. Then again, a musician should be open-minded enough to deal with answers like "because I think it is nice", when that is the case. For me as a composer it is very important to allow musicians to show their personality within the pre-structured frame of the work. The message is yours, but it won't ever come across if the messenger (the musician) doesn't believe it.

Only after making sure the respect for the composer's message and the performer's individuality are there, room for additional immersion arises. For me as an eager musician, the urge to take on this challenge of creating an immersive performance being fully aware of the above restrictions has grown exponentially over the past few years.

My own big turning point in terms of becoming an immersive performer was my version of Vinko Globokar's Corporel. It's a composition for an almost naked percussionist and his own body. Because of the intimacy of the piece, it felt completely wrong for me to perform it from a distance (as it is usually done) on a stage. I needed to be close to my audience in order to make them feel the emotional rollercoaster I go through while playing the piece. I came up with the idea to sit in the middle of the audience (facing the same direction), and make sure everyone is sitting as close to me as possible. I put a large mirror in front of me which added an extra layer of confrontation (not only for me, but also for the audience with me and for the audience with themselves). The mirror makes it very hard for them to look away or take mental distance from me, it catches their focus. Corporel was the first piece of the program, and I decided to already sit there before the audience started entering. My breathing (a direct link to the first bar of the piece) was amplified and created a natural intro soundscape with which the audience felt immediately immersed in the atmosphere of the piece. There was only little audience light. The people took place in an extremely silent and careful way, because they were immediately surprised by the intimacy of my actions. This moment was so strong for me, that I now try to find likewise approaches for every contemporary piece I'm playing.



Promo shot for my version of Corporel ©Arn Van Wijmeersch

## IN - performing attitude

My goal for 'IN' is to perform with a much more relaxed attitude than classical musicians (including myself) generally do. I want to have the feeling that I'm sharing an experience with the audience, instead of demonstrating something important. I'm planning on using my voice during the performance by directly speaking to the audience: giving them some information about the pieces or overall concept, maybe telling them something about myself or asking how they are. I want them to be well aware of the fact that we're part of the same experience.