



Inspiratum Festival – An Extraordinary Experience

HERMESensemble presented a contemporary and multi medial concert programme at The Inspiratum Kanaal Festival. The festival attracted a wide audience with its untraditional setting, and reached out to children and youngsters through collaborative workshops.

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Background

HERMESensemble has always operated on the borders of different art forms, and strives to create total experiences, with music as the starting point. In June 2014 Inspiratum, an Antwerp organisation promoting the arts, organised a first edition of The Inspiratum Kanaal Festival in a restored brewery near the city of Antwerp (Wijnegem), devoted to ancient and new music, fine arts and audiovisual and multimedia arts. HERMESensemble was invited as one of the main partners in presenting a contemporary, varied and multimedial programme.

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Concept

The aim of HERMESensemble's involvement was to promote rarely performed new music in a varied and multidisciplinary programme, attracting a new audience.

The ensemble carefully selected different spaces on the premises of the venue, avoiding regular concert settings.

A substantial part of the festival included workshops and special introductions to children and youngsters. These workshops were linked to the festival program, and featured the musicians of HERMESensemble in collaboration with coaches specialised in introducing classical music to children and youngsters (e.g. collaboration with House of Music, an Antwerp based music-education centre).

The seldom combination of live music, video art, the fascinating industrial architecture boasting many contemporary fine art works and sculptures (e.g. Anish Kapoor, Lucio Fontana) amounted to a totally unique experience for the audience. Moreover, the concerts were repeated many times throughout the weekend – every time in parts of 30 minutes – so there was room for a very individual planning and experience for the concert attendants. As a consequence different audience groups could be targeted; groups interested in drama, video art, music, and fine art, as well as educational groups like schools and universities.

Promotion

The HERMESensemble made a media deal with the national radio Klara, announcing the festival, highlighting the parts for children and youngsters.

Concerts

All concerts by HERMESensemble were characterised by a substantial interdisciplinary and/or multimedial aspect with live video and electronics.

Stockhausen's *Schönheit* has been prepared in close collaboration with the Stockhausen Foundation in Kürten, and the performance had won the “interpreter’s prize” the previous year during the International Stockhausen Kürse (August 2013).

Also, *Solve et Coagula* by Rolf Wallin was prepared in collaboration with the composer. *Las Siete Vidas de un Gato* by Martin Matalon is a newly composed score to the legendary film *Un Chien Andalou* (Dali/Bunuel), and was performed live with the film.

Outcome

HERMESensemble had never before taken part in such a large scale festival operation, performing three days almost all day and night. This was certainly a valuable learning experience.

The surroundings were truly inspiring. They were a great setting for an introduction to unknown facets of art and music, and facilitated a new and extraordinary concert experience for the audience.

As for the ensemble a lot of attention was given to spontaneous composition and improvised performance, which drew the musicians out of their comfort zones, but rewarded them with valuable experience.

The key learning points to take away from the experience were:

- The communication for children and youngsters needs to be even more precise and targeted

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better. The only way this group is reached successfully is by their very own, distinct media and communication campaign.

- Such a large scale operation involves substantial financial implications. You cannot have enough partners sustaining your endeavours, and for this it is necessary to start looking for support a long time in advance.
- The sooner the artistic programme is ready, the better. Too much was left open for too long, which led to delays in communication and misunderstandings.

Audience feedback

Extensive audience feedback was collected in the form of in depth interviews with members of the audience. The audience research was conducted in Antwerp, June-July 2014. The cultural management department at The University of Antwerp managed the research.

Methodology

The festival organizer didn't want to disturb the festival experience of the visitors, by asking questions via written or oral questionnaires, and therefore the researchers choose to organize three in-depth interviews with three people with very different backgrounds (one male musician, one young male parent with no special relation with contemporary music, one female art director with a focus on children's art experience). In order to gain as much information as possible, the researchers in collaboration with the business director of HERMESensemble, chose the following respondents.

Profile respondents

1. Bram Van de Vijver, Male, 38 years old, Parent, Belgian, Teacher, Guitar player, Active and mainstream music audience, Interested in dance. Attended the festival for 4 hours and watched 3 performances.

2. Zita Epenge, Female, 32 years old, Parent, Financial director, Active and mainstream music audience, Interested in contemporary dance. She attended the festival for two parts.

3. Galli Paolo, Male, 34 years old, Originally from Italy, PhD student and Researcher at Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, Active and mainstream music audience. He attended the festival for all three days and watched almost all performances.

Interview Objectives

1. Provide information about how interviewees experienced the festival
2. Exploring new insights and opinions on contemporary music and audience development

Interviews

In total 3 in-depth interviews were scheduled. Interviewees were selected by HERMESensemble and invited as guests for attending the festival and later participating in the interview.

Two of the interviews were completed on 30th of June at the location of Department of (Cultural) Management of Antwerp University, and one on 2nd of July at interviewee's home upon her own preference. Interviewees at the location of Antwerp University were provided with beverages. Each interview lasted one and a half hours.

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All the interviewees were informed about the reason of the interview, involved partners and objectives of the project.

All three interviews were audio taped by the permission of interviewees and they were told that they may have access to the content of the interview any time after the interview. The interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured questionnaire. Questions were divided into three different parts with related sub-questions including i) general and specific experience of the festival for elements of content and context, ii) general and specific opinion on contemporary music, and iii) background data.

Analysis

Part 1. The experience of the festival

Overall Experience

In the first part of the interview the interviewees were asked about their overall experience of the festival. *“Inspired”, “surprised by reunion of different participants”, “strange and serious”* were the key impressions of the interviewees. All three interviewees gave a mark above 5 from zero to ten (6, 8, and 10). Two of the interviewees mentioned that they would attend the same or similar festival in the future and pay for the ticket. Only two of the interviewees would buy the ticket as a gift to a friend. The third respondent who was not willing to do so, reasoned that his friends would not like this type of music and he assumed that *‘they also might feel stupid’*.

Detailed Experience about Context

Venue. All three interviewees expressed that they were surprised by the venue and they found it interesting and suitable for the content of the festival both aesthetically and practically. *“Scenery was spectacular and location was very nice”*. Two of the respondents did not have prior knowledge or experience of venue and they found it *“interesting”, “inspiring”* and *“pleasant”*. The location was easy and close to reach by bike, bus and car. Two of the respondents stated that the building and the ground of the venue needed a few constructive improvements and it felt *“a little too fragmented”*. In this regard respondents mentioned the walkways and paths in the ground, lift, and electric cables inside the building. The directions and map of the different places were well organized and respondents were able to find their way easily.

Value and price. Respondents were asked to explain their opinion on the price of the tickets for the festival and elaborate on their general opinion about the value of such festivals. With the knowledge that they attended the festival as guests; two of the respondents stated that 30 Euros is a fair price but an increase to 40 might still be reasonable *“for the people they are aiming at [as high society]”,* but an increase to 50 is a *“mental barrier”*. One of the respondents stated that 30 Euros is *“high”* for him and the maximum price he would pay is 15 to 20 Euros.

Facilities. In terms of access to parking, two respondents used car parking and they found it easy and convenient to access. One of the respondents stated that there was no place for placing and securing his bike. Regarding other facilities including restrooms, direction and maps, food and drink stands all three respondents expressed their satisfaction and content. The price of food and drinks was reported *“fair”* and *“reasonable”*, and also the quality of the food was mentioned as *“very good”*. One respondent mentioned that there were limited seats available.

Personnel and Hosts. Personnel and hosts of the festival were reported “friendly” and “helpful” by interviewees.

Timing, Length and Intervals. One of the respondents pointed that on Saturday the morning session and afternoon session was not well organized in terms of timing. She explained further that:

“Most of the people who attended the festival on Saturday morning left the festival and missed the opportunity to have the family experience with children in the afternoon because they were not informed”.

About the length of the performances interviewees stated that the length of 20 minutes to 30 minutes was very good and “just right”. However two of the respondents mentioned that the intervals were a bit short and sometimes also there was an overlap between two performances which they liked to attend but they had to choose and missed it.

Advertisement and Broadcasting. All respondents were invited to the festival as guests and hence they were informed about the festival informally by HERMESensemble. However they were asked to express their opinion on the importance of communication and the efficient ways of advertisement. They first stated that they never encountered any advertisement specifically for this festival and they believed that the festival could reach more audiences with more and broad advertisement. Secondly they are not exposed to contemporary music in any form of public broadcasting. They also do not listen to contemporary music in their private space. Radio channels, TV programs, flyers, and billboards were different options that respondents mentioned as ways to get information.

Art and Crafts Workshop and Children. One session of the festival was arranged as art and crafts workshops for children. Our interviewees were asked about their opinion on participation of children and how they felt about the presence of children around them at the festival. All three interviewees expressed strong positive opinion about children’s participation. They also believed that exposing children to contemporary music would be the way to make them familiar with and interested in contemporary art and music.

“Children are open to new things and they enjoy music the way it is”

“[There is] Preconceived conceptions about contemporary art in adults, but children have open minds and they don’t look for harmony and normal rhythms.”

Audiences: Current and potential. Respondents were asked about their perception of current audiences of contemporary art. “Elites”, “High status people”, “Rich and high society”, “Limited crowd”, and “People who are themselves in music and art” were perceived as current audiences of contemporary art by the interviewees. Interviewees were asked ‘who do you think are good potential audiences to target?’ The response from all three interviewees were children and the young generation “[who] are receptive to new things” and “can be trained easily”. Regarding the diversity of audiences, respondents did not observe a diverse crowd in terms of social class, nationality and ages. Also, one respondent contrasted classical and contemporary music and stated that “for classical music you don’t have to be an expert in music”.

Engagement with musicians. Interviewees were asked if they initiated any conversation with

musicians or they were approached by musicians for a short conversation. Interviewees reported no action of engagement or conversation except in one case reported by one respondent in the children's workshop. *"Not such an atmosphere for conversation and engagement"*. However respondents mentioned that it might be their personal opinion and character.

Part 2. Detailed Experience about Content

General Perspective on Contemporary Music

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their perception and opinion on contemporary art and music. One respondent, who himself is a musician and composer, believes that contemporary art is the bridge between past and future and despite the fact that it is not well-known or well-understood by the majority, it still has its value and artistic status. *"I get inspired by contemporary music"*. Another respondent mentioned that he felt *"disconnected"* to this music as his first experience.

"A bit strange. Completely new. Not my music. No specific theme. I didn't feel connected to the music and content. It was different from what I expected to hear a familiar piece of music. It was difficult to understand. I did not understand anything. It was so serious and with no humour in it. No language was involved and I felt stupid. It seems that they take themselves so serious. I have a few emotions with this kind of music. Music is very strange. There is no theme. No Repetition. It is very serious. I like some humour in music too. Not easy to listen. Music should be easy and relaxing but this music is difficult to understand. No excitement or emotions, high society and very serious. It feels more arty-farty. Missed some joy and fun in the performances, no connection with audiences, artists should try to connect to audiences, and make it more clear what it is about. They should keep it in a normal language and simple, not too complicated".

Another respondent mentioned the huge gap between contemporary music and society's perception of normal music and art:

"I think classic music is history and contemporary music is the future. But people do not understand this music. It makes them feel stupid. At the same time it gives oxygen for new things to emerge and grow. Even though I am interested in contemporary art, contemporary music is the last item in my list for spending money for such activities".

Third respondent also stated that it might be difficult for everybody to understand this music but mixing contemporary music with classic music can keep the audience in touch and connected. *"We should not reject the past"*.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Contemporary Art and Music

The main strengths of contemporary music pointed out by interviewees include *"freshness"*, *"innovative"*, and *"inspiring"*. Contemporary music is considered to change the taste for music among audiences. The weaknesses of contemporary music are reported as being *"serious"*, *"artistic masturbation"*, and *"not very accessible for all"*. One respondent stated that *"unfortunately on the way to being innovative and fresh, they lose many audiences"* and *"There is an in-crowd in contemporary music"*.

The perception of Contemporary Art and Music in Society

Interviewees were asked about their opinion on society's perception of contemporary music. They

were asked to refer to their friends and people they know who have been exposed to contemporary music and then explain why they think it is so. Respondents more or less agreed that they didn't know a lot of people who attend contemporary music festivals or spend money on going to concerts.

“It is expensive music and people do not know much about this music”

“People do not like what they do not know or do not understand”

“There is an act of resistance to heterogeneity in music. There is a low threshold for listening to each other”

Key to Success of Contemporary Art and Music

Interviewees were asked ‘What is the key to success of contemporary music in your opinion? The responses include

- Reaching more people through effective advertisement and communication
- Performing for different categories of audiences in different venues
- Training and education for children from early on
- Try to be less serious

Experience of Interview after Festival

The experience of being interviewed after attending the festival can be of interest when it comes to knowledge dissemination in which the interview itself is one important part. But assuming the potential mutual feedback for the participants, interviewees were asked ‘how much did this interview change or modify their opinion and attitude for contemporary music?’ The answer was more or less unified as it did not change their opinion about contemporary music, but made them reflect on their experience.

Conclusion and recommendations

The goal of this research was twofold: first we wanted to know what kind of experience the respondents had during their presence at the Inspiratum festival. Second we were curious about their opinions on contemporary music and audience development.

We can conclude that their experience with contemporary music are characterized by two quite contradictory spectrums: ‘inspiring/surprising’ and ‘strange/serious’. While some found this kind of music and festival inspiring, others think it’s strange, difficult and *‘makes people feel stupid’*. It is clear that according to the background and the acquaintance with contemporary music, people feel comfortable with this kind of festival. We carefully assume that the more familiar people are with this kind of music, the more they appreciate it. This leads us to the **first recommendation:**

Invest in engaging young audiences and build on or expand the children’s program in your festival on contemporary music.

The interviewees stated that the presence of (young) children during the festival was very pleasant and that they are more open for new things and strange (music) experiences. The potential for new audiences lie in attracting children and the young generation, according to the respondents.

In general the festival experience of the respondents was very good. They were surprised by the venue and found it interesting and suitable for the content of the festival, both aesthetically and practically. The location was easy to find and the directions and map were well organized. However, the respondents made a few suggestions regarding the venue.

Second recommendation

Improve the walkways and paths around the buildings, foresee more seats and a (safe) parking place for bicycles (especially if you foresee a program for children in the afternoon).

On the other facilities (restrooms, food and drinks) all respondents expressed their satisfaction and content. They were also very pleased with the 'friendly' and 'helpful' personnel. About the timing, length and intervals between the concerts, two of the respondents stated that the intervals were a bit short, but that the length of the concerts (20 to 30 minutes), was 'just right'. On Saturday morning and afternoon, the timing was not realistic according to one of the respondents.

The respondents thought a ticket price of 30 to 40 Euro is justifiable, if the audience targeted are high society people. They got the impression that the audience of the festival were 'elites', 'high status people', 'rich' or 'people who are themselves in music and art'. When the target group of this kind of festival has to be much broader, the price should be 30 Euro or less (20 Euro).

Our **third recommendation** suggests to differentiate in the entree prices, for example to make a special price for youngsters (until 28 years old) and another for families (parents who bring their children), apart from a fixed (and higher) price for the others. In this way you are building and developing your future audiences.

Fourthly, we suggest to invest more in communication on a broader scale (in time and/or in money). The respondents were invited to attend the festival and didn't notice any communication or marketing for the Inspiratum Festival or the participation of HERMESensembles. To attract new audiences the organization of the festival as well as the invited ensembles should promote the festival and the experience of contemporary music that they get there more widely. The respondents did not observe a diverse crowd in terms of social class, nationality or age. Wider broadcasting is needed through billboards, radio/TV channels (national and regional) and social media. Klara, one of the national radio channels was a partner of this festival, but we think it still reaches a too narrow niche public.

A suggestion to get more attention on broader media channels or social media is to focus more on the children's part of the festival, because in that way you reach parents and grandparents too. Though, for a strategic and good communication, defining your target groups specifically is very important (who do you want to reach?). Therefore you can plan and organize specific communication strategies for the different target groups. This can be linked to a pricing strategy. To widen your public or to find new audiences it is equally important to get to know your current audience. From them you want to learn what they like and dislike and what kind of people attend your festival/concert (socioeconomic data). Analysing and evaluating this kind of information can give you more insight in how to attract more people and how you can improve the audience experience.

According to communication the respondents also found that engagement with the musicians was difficult (although it can also be related to their character). However it could also be one of the strengths of the festival to create possibilities for more interaction between public and musicians

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before or after a concert. This means in person at the festival or concert (creating a nice atmosphere, meet and greets, talking sessions, possibility to ask questions, lectures) but also via social media such as Twitter and Facebook (provide the possibilities before, on a website or live during the festival). To give the possibility to have a personal contact with musicians or composers can be very attractive and a reason for people to come to your festival or concert.

A **fifth** suggestion that comes out of this research is to consider the combination of classic and contemporary music festivals and concerts. Since the perception of contemporary music is rather negative (“difficult” and “strange”), it is not easy to change it. The mixture of two genres can keep audiences in touch and connected.

Finally we asked the respondents what according to them are the keys to success of contemporary art and music. This list summarizes this research results well and clear:

- Reaching more people through effective advertisement and communication
- Performing for different categories of audiences in different venues
- Training and education for children from on
- Try to be less serious

Questionnaire used in the research

The general objective of this study is to investigate audiences’ experience of Inspiratum Festival. For this aim the research will be focused specifically on contextual factors (i.e. venue and facilities) as well as the content of performances (i.e. forms, genres). Also in order to enrich the data from this study for contribution to the New Music: New Audiences project, interviewees will be probed by their general and specific attitudes for contemporary music both of content and context. I propose a three phase structure of the interview as follow:

Phase I.

- Overall experience of the event
- Specific/detailed experience of the event
- Context
- Content

Phase II.

- Overall attitude/perspective for contemporary music
- Specific/Detailed perspective on contemporary music
- Context: demands and needs, expectations, viewpoints
- Content: demands and needs, expectations, viewpoints

Phase III.

- Socioeconomic data and background

The interview will start with an introduction of the interviewer, the New Music: New Audiences project, HERMESensemble and a brief explanation on the objectives of the study and this interview. Interviewee will be asked for any further question or clarification and I will continue to phase I.

Phase I. General about the festival

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1. How much did you like this festival? (From 0 to 10)
2. How much did this festival meet your expectations? (from 0 to 10)
3. Would you attend the same or similar festival for free in near future if there is any? Y/N
4. Would you attend the same or similar festival on your expense in near future if there is any? Y/N
.....If yes how much is the maximum you would pay for ticket
5. Would you buy a ticket for a friend as a gift?
6. Were you surprised by anything during the festival?

Phase I. Details of the festival

1. What aspects of this event did you like? Content and context
Key words: Length, timing, language, formats, intervals, atmosphere, price, diversity of audiences, diversity of music, venue (distance, aesthetic features), and so on. Indeed: toilet, parking, eat/drink facilities and possibilities, quality of food and drinks; the service of the hosts/personnel
2. What aspects of this event did you dislike? Content and context
3. What was your main motivation for attending this festival? Any prior knowledge about musicians, composers or repertoires?
4. How did you find out about this festival? Do you find it useful and efficient? Suggestions?
5. Did you encounter any family with children around? What do you think of that? Additional question: Would you take your children to this festival? Why? Or Why not?
6. Did you encounter international audiences as well? What do you think of that?
7. Do you have any comparison in mind between this festival and your previous experiences?
8. Did you feel engaged with other audiences, musicians, music, composers during festival? Y/N.
Explain/ suggestions/ observations
9. Did you observe anything during festival that you would want to share with us?

Phase II. General and specific about contemporary music/ music experience

1. What is your general perspective on contemporary music?
2. How do you see the status of contemporary music in society?
3. What are the strength/weakness points of contemporary music?
4. How would you contrast contemporary and classic music?
5. How much have your attitudes on contemporary music changed since last decade of your life?
What do you think was the reason? Any specific experience?
6. What do you think can enrich contemporary music? Innovative and traditional
7. What do you think can attract more audiences for contemporary music?

8. What do you think can be a good potential contemporary music form and format?
9. In your opinion, what are the potential audiences for contemporary music?
10. What is your opinion on music with mixed genres? Popular and folk for example or different forms of arts
11. What do you think can be the key to success of an ensemble? Contemporary music?

Phase III. Socioeconomics and background Data

1. Education
2. Occupation
3. Age
4. Any artistic activities experience: armature or professional
5. Do you see yourself as mainstream music consumer or left?
6. How often do you go to such festivals? Concerts? Other art activities? Which kinds? Give examples.
7. What are the most frequent genres of music you listen to? Where do you listen to them? How many of them were in the festival?
8. Do you see yourself as an active or passive audience for contemporary music?

Closing

“Thank you very much for your participation”.

1. Do you have anything else to share with us related to this project?
2. How much do you think this interview affects your perspective on contemporary music?

Facts

Ensemble: HERMESensemble (9 musicians involved)

Venue: Het Kanaal – Inspiratum Kanaal Festival, Wijnegem, Antwerp, Belgium

Dates: June 27th-29th 2014

Programme:

Martin Matalon: *Las Siete Vidas de un Gato*

Rolf Wallin: *Solve et Coagula*

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Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Schönheit (aus: KLANG)*

Further information: <http://hermesensemble.be/>