**Provocation: Quality?**

It was a few years back, after countertenor Maarten Engeltjes and PRJCT Amsterdam had graced the Wonderfeel stage surrounded by nature, that a Dutch newspaper noted how, and I quote, “The setting sun and the scent of grass, combined with Engeltjes' crisp voice, created an atmosphere you won't find anywhere else.”, end quote. Reflecting on this, Engeltjes emphasized how, quote:“Classical music has to be taken out of the frame of perfection - the experience is also important. Don't get me wrong, at 'normal' concerts, this is important too, of course it is. But we as classical musicians are so afraid of making mistakes, whereas in pop music you don't hear anyone go on about that. There, all that counts is whether the audience *felt it*. Isn’t that what you ultimately want to achieve through music?’” end quote. Engeltjes’ perspective led us, the artistic team of Wonderfeel, to contemplate on how we perceive quality, influencing how we select our Wonderfeel artists, and raising questions about the broader classical music ecosystem.

I feel the essence of Wonderfeel lies, even more than in the picturesque setting cited by the newspaper, in the festival’s sense of freedom. Without the need to buy a ticket for each performance, our visitors are free to explore the programme. And as day tickets give access to about 10 of the day’s 35 performances, attendees average 6.5 concerts on their almost inevitably diverse musical journey. In 2023, 63% heard music outside of their usual repertoire, while 85% of the audience gave the blend of classical music and nature as the main reason for their visit.

Our format, close to most pop festivals, not only empowers attendees but also liberates musicians as well as our artistic team from conventional constraints. It allows us to embrace risk, to ignore the somehow indestructible ‘classical Canon’, to urge artists to come up with ideas they couldn't present elsewhere, to insist on including works by under-represented composers, and to foster collaborations with young, emerging creatives. We checked with our audience and, interestingly, a whopping 82% said they were not particularly interested in 'big names' from the classical world.

In 2019, we challenged norms by announcing the festival program only a month after ticket sales had opened. Surprisingly, it didn't impact sales – a testament to our audience valuing the experience over predefined expectations. We could infer that when at least *our* audience is given the freedom to define quality, they prefer to explore the unknown, and delight in surprises in a setting that adds to the experience.

Over the past few months I’ve heard colleagues across Belgium and the Netherlands express a collective moan. They seem caught in a reality where, in order to convince an audience reeling from the impact of inflation, programming more conservatively is the obvious and only answer. Without resistance, our stages, ad campaigns and social media feeds would continue to be dominated by the familiar repertoire of our cherished DWMs, the dead white males, who maybe, in rare circumstances, could make the introduction of an unknown artist or work go down more smoothly.

Let me put it bluntly: hearing my colleagues’ complaints, I must conclude that our industry trends heavily towards the comfortably familiar. It seems we’d rather serve a microwave meal than offer a nuanced exploration of complex flavors. We’ve become, or perhaps we always were, a mono-sector where, despite surface differences, everything tends to taste more or less the same. The canon persists because we continue to assume that audiences choose primarily based on repertoire and artists. However, I think that, at its core, audiences just seek a thoroughly enjoyable night out, a profound moment of connection.

In our cultural landscape, where financial pressures and decidedly un-daring or conservative programming loom large, and where the classical music industry tends to lean on the familiar, I would provocatively argue that our artistic structures constrain freedom, perpetuate old habits, and resist fresh influences. And all because we fear change will harm attandence, our finances, our funders, our reputation. Are we playing it safe, catering to the status quo? Or rather: catering to what was once the status quo? How about we rethink the leadership dynamics in our industry? Perhaps this is already common practice for you, but in the Netherlands artistic decision makers tend to stick around, often for almost embarrassingly long periods of time. Should we cap how long our artistic leaders hold sway, and ensure a continuous flow of ideas and perspectives? Or maybe focus on curatorial teams, where young colleagues can be nurtured, gain experience and move on to other places in our sector? Surely that’s nothing to fear?

Perhaps it's time we let go of outdated notions of quality, and focus instead on what truly matters – (individual and) shared experiences, artistic exploration for experienced ears as well for the newly curious, and the freedom to shape a radically diverse future of festivals.

This was the provocation I had prepared last week, but since then, my country’s future is unfolding quite differently than I had hoped. To be honest, I’m in shock. I left the Netherlands yesterday morning realizing that close to a quarter of Dutch voters, whatever their reasons may have been, favor a blatantly anti-democratic right-wing populist, whose laughably thin manifesto consists almost exclusively of Islamophobia, queerphobia, climate change denial, and the full spectrum of paranoid malice. My almost 16-year-old daughter would rather move away from so much hatred, while my goddaughter, traveling with me these days, told me on the train that she feels her future is fucked. Well, You won’t be surprised, our likely future prime minister does not believe in any ‘silly culture subsidy'.

Of course, the Netherlands is hardly the only country we have recently seen veering far right, with rampant populism on the rise. What does this ask of our cultural sector? From artists and organizers? I’ll confess that while I’m not feeling particularly hopeful today, I still wonder whether The Arts, traditionally leaning left towards empathy, compassion, and humanity, should explore another role now.

I emphasized earlier the need to focus on what really matters – shared experiences, shaping a diverse future. How do we keep the channels open to people outside our bubble? After all, it may feel amazing to declare that ‘Festivals, as cultural microcosms, as meeting places, have the potential to catalyze social transitions.’ But haven’t festivals, theatres, and concert halls become meeting places of the like-minded?

As we champion the power of the arts to bring about change, to unite people beyond the left and right of politics, and proclaim we want our cultural endeavors to remain inclusive, resonating with diverse perspectives... can someone please tell me how?

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