

Attending to attending: performing audience personae in contemporary music

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Disciplinary background A. Practice-led research. New and experimental music practices have long explored fluid movement between composer, performer and audience roles, including audience participation (Nyman, 1974). As composers ourselves, our interest in these topics is personal and enacted in our practice research. We analyse our work in this field alongside other contemporaries', reviewing how socio-musical roles are fluidly explored in recent work.

Disciplinary background B. Performance studies. Philip Auslander's (2006) notion of 'musical personae' is key to our understanding of role relations in performance. Drawing on Goffman's symbolic interactionism (1959), this idea stresses the self-presentation and negotiation of identities in the social realm of musicking, and highlights the physical setting, appearance and manner of performers and audiences as key factors delimiting them. Theatre scholar Caroline Heim (2016) enriches our perspective through her accounts of audience agency in live performance settings.

Abstract

In music as in the visual arts and theatre, prevailing models for participation tend to reductively construe audiences as passive consumers in need of activation after the image of practitioners (Bishop 2012; Rancière 2011). This means the co-creative potential of audiences as audiences is overlooked (Heim 2016). We advocate for attending to, reciprocating, and adopting audience behaviour in/as performance. We argue for listening to audiences and as audiences, reaffirming the responsibility to hold open space for exchange, to put our relations at risk with other relations, to attend to one another. Thereby, we may catalyse novel interactions, hybrid identities, and formats for creative practice, even expanding what 'participation' can entail in contemporary music.

We examine five case studies where the performer-audience relation is a key focus, central to both composers' and performers' efforts—at least as much attention is given to audiencing as to the organisation of sounds, or the playing of one's colleagues on stage. What sets this kind of work apart from prevailing models of 'participation' is that the activities 'peculiar to the spectator' (i.e. audience personae) are embraced and engaged.

Pauline Oliveros' "Deep Listening" (2005) holistically develops diverse behaviours that we typically associate with audiences. Multimodal exercises distance participants from received Western Art Music performer/composer identities and their associated rituals and privileges. Thereby, Oliveros opens space for alternative modes of attention, creativity and interaction.

David Helbich's "Audience Observations" (2011-) is a collection of pieces and projects which draws attention to and subverts the usual roles played by audiences and performers in concert halls and theatres. In "Keine-Pause/No Break", Helbich assumes the role of an 'audience interventionist', observing and noting the audience's behaviour before describing it back to them. This offers the audience the chance to reflect on their behaviour and its influence on the performance.

Claiming audience behaviour as a type of performance opens numerous creative and relational possibilities. In Carolyn Chen's "Adagio" (2009), the performers make emotive facial expressions while listening to a Bruckner slow movement over headphones. In dramatising and elevating the listener's position above all else, Chen strips the inaudible Bruckner of pretences to canonisation or universality.

The facial choreographies radically situate a classic work in the listening bodies and experiences of those specific people on stage. Adagio subversively highlights the power of listeners to trace fresh associations, and even dismantle or remake the canon anew.

Louis d'Heudières's "Laughter Studies 7" (2017-18) appropriates the audience-derived acts of listening and commenting to gain insight into performers' individual perceptions of the world. Through unscripted interaction with an audio score, the performers' manner resembles that of audiences, opening up space for reciprocal listening and empathy to emerge in the concert hall.

Charlie Sdraulig's "one to one" (2018-20) is an intimately staged sequence of three pieces for one performer and one audience member (i.e., audient) at a time. Each pair co-regulates one another's nonverbal rhythms to develop behavioural attunements and social connections (e.g., synchronising a violinist's bow lengths with an audient's respiratory cycles). This dynamic, bidirectional exchange blurs distinctions between roles. Thereby, the interaction moves beyond generic relations to explore an interpersonal dynamic specific to the people involved, embracing manifold differences and varied levels of involvement.

Interdisciplinary implications. For practice research, our case studies reimagine performer-audience interactions in contemporary western art music, which are often by rote and highly formalised; the role of audiences may be just as rigidly delimited as in Classical recitals. The lens of personae—derived from performance studies—attunes us to the social dynamics of musical events, rather than 'disavowing' them (Born, 2017); it assumes that differences in the performances of 'musician' and 'audience member' are of degree, quality, and kind, as opposed to assigning all performance capacity to musicians alone; and it stresses the situated fluidity of self-presentations.

Collectively, our analyses reveal how centring audience personae can emphasise co-creative interdependency over more or less passive reception. Adopting an audience position can lay bare individually differentiated aural experiences and stress multi-perspectival receptions of sound to critique and contest canons. Framing audience behaviour as performance means embracing a wider array of multivocal self-presentations, unfolding along alternative relational vectors. Listening to audiences and as audiences reaffirms our responsibility to hold open space for exchange, to attend to one another.

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