

Public solitude or participatory experience: The complexity of applause

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Disciplinary background A. This work in this contribution draws on disciplines of musicology and music history, to explore the socio-cultural context of musical performance.

Disciplinary background B. The research described here draws heavily on theories and discussions pertaining to music performance studies/science, applied musicology and practice-led research.

Abstract

To demonstrate how different needs and requirements pertinent to the performance situation on both of the stage, performers and audience members alike, interact and collide in the act of applause. To show the complexity of a phenomenon and a norm which we enact on an almost daily basis.

When a musical live performance is finished or a prime minister has delivered her speech, audience members applaud. When the plane has touched ground, passengers applaud (sometimes), and when the singing of Happy Birthday in the nursery has ended, the children applaud. Of course, there are many different reasons why people applaud: audience members want to show thankfulness or relief, are eager to demonstrate their sophistication and distinguish themselves from others (they know the rules), or simply want to participate in the action or the music. Performers perceive applause as feedback or as a collective thank you.

The situations in which people applaud are fairly similar – they share the division of all those present into performers and audience members. The collective clapping affirms these roles and transcends them at the same time. In the moment of applause, all participate in the sound, rhythm and experience of it, and all together embrace the transition from collective experience back to everyday life.

In my presentation, I will show how different needs and requirements pertinent to the performance situation on both sides (performers and audience members) interact and collide in the act of applause.

Research has shown that applause is a highly complex phenomenon (Heister 1984; Mann et. al 2013; Cochrane 2009); here, physical needs (to move to the rhythm, to let off steam, to participate), the enaction of cultural and social norms (such as the adherence to strict non-applause-laws in classical music), group phenonema (social contagion, synchronicity) and the audience members' willingness to be appreciative (or not) are intertwined and challenge each other. This is especially palpable in the restricted behaviours of classical music audiences which will serve as an example in my presentation.

During applause, people act as a group and as individuals simultaneously. They see and hear, listen and watch, act and react, all at the same time. In a way, applause is not only a means of participation, but also a result of it. In a performance, applause is the one moment of participation for all.

Interdisciplinary implications. My contribution suggests further research in the fields of the musical live performance, bridging historical musicology with performance science, historical anthropology and sociology.

References

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