Missing the Audience. Online Musicking in Times of COVID-19

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Missing the Audience
Online musicking in times of Covid-19

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 has greatly impacted musicians and orchestras. Classical music initiatives on social media in the first weeks of the lockdown in many countries emphasized the power of music to bring people together. While many orchestras had ample experience in producing and distributing their concerts online, others now had to experiment with new ways of performing online. The pandemic also made the questions of what music to perform, how exactly to perform it and for whom it should be performed all the more urgent. Since orchestras could no longer meet their audiences in the concert hall, they had to consider how to connect to online listeners in meaningful ways. This paper tells the story of a group of Dutch orchestral musicians and (artistic) researchers, who found themselves isolated at home, exploring digital tools to produce and distribute classical music, and struggling to reconnect to an elusive online audience.

Classical music was by no means absent from the digital world prior to the advent of widespread government-imposed lockdowns. Most notably, the Berliner Philharmoniker’s Digital Concert Hall has broadcast live performances from the Berliner Philharmonie since 2008, as well as providing many of their concerts to stream on demand. This can be seen as a development from the orchestras creating their own record labels, such as LSO Live from the London Symphony Orchestra (NEWTON 2017). There have also been a number of ‘experiments’ with technology, most famously the YouTube Symphony Orchestra with its dispersed members (SHZR EE TAN 2016), while composers have introduced a broad range of electronics to symphonic music (e.g., MACHOVER 2006). Outside of the concert situation, many European orchestras have developed additional content to enhance their social media presences. An example is the Dutch orchestra philharmonie zuidnederland (South Netherlands Philharmonic) whose orchestral musicians have for some years provided online video introductions to its concert programs. The corona lockdowns in many countries resulted in a new surge of online activity by orchestras as well as the production of performances and educational material.
This was limited at first to musicians recording themselves in their homes, but once restrictions were relaxed larger groups could come together, until eventually small orchestral performances in partially-filled halls were possible once again.

This paper focuses on orchestral activities during the first stage of the pandemic, when musicians were locked down at home and public meetings indoors were widely prohibited, in the Netherlands and in other countries. The content produced during this stage varied in approach and particularly in scale (PARSONS 2020; TILDEN 2020). Live performance and rehearsal was endangered and quite possibly dangerous (MILLER 2020), with the Budapest Festival Orchestra livestreaming their ‘Quarantine Soirees’ a rare exception. One approach was to create an orchestral feel by editing the musicians’ homemade videos together, resulting in the now familiar video matrix. An early example is the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra performing Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’, while the Oslo Philharmonic commissioned a new piece from composer Koka Nikoladze for this set-up. This approach was also employed to share smaller sections of the orchestra playing, usually light-hearted, arrangements. Orchestras also shared performances by individual musicians – similar to the work of freelance musicians (including some musical cohabiting couples) – from their homes and gardens, primarily over social media and often with spoken introductions from the players. Finally, the education departments of orchestras also produced social media content. The Royal Scottish National Orchestra, for example, produced various ‘challenges’ for children and adults to conduct at home, such as making a DIY samba band, the results of which they were encouraged to share online (TAYLOR 2020). This rapidly developing online context is the background to the experiment conducted with five musicians of the philharmonie zuidnederland.

This paper explores the challenges when orchestral musicians start experimenting with new digital formats for performing classical music online and engaging with online audiences. The aim of our emergent experiment was to make explicit what is needed to perform classical music online, where the rituals and routines of the concert hall are absent. What does it take to perform online, without fellow-musicians or audiences physically present? Based on documentation and fieldnotes made during online discussions (using teleconferencing software), individual talks with musicians, and Whatsapp-conversations, we present three lessons learnt from our journey into online musicking. Following interventionist research methods and ethnographic
methods of participant-observation (cf. BENSCHOP 2015; LEZAUN ET AL. 2016; ZUIDERENT-JERAK 2015), the researchers were part of the experiment: they too were amateurs regarding the use of digital technologies for producing and distributing classical music online. Documentation of the collaborative research process was made by one researcher (Ties van de Werff), and edited and corrected by the involved musicians-as-coresearchers.1

2. Prelude: an emerging experiment

In February 2020, five classical musicians from the philharmonie zuidnederland sit in a classroom at Maastricht University (Maastricht, the Netherlands). Together with three researchers from the Maastricht Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music (MCICM) they discuss their plans for an experimental community-music project that is about to take place in the North West neighbourhood of the city.2 Starting from issues voiced by the inhabitants, the musicians and the residents were about to embark on an artistic process of composing, arranging and organising events that would explore how making music together could provide new opportunities to share ideals, experiences and stories in the neighbourhood.

Shortly before the start of the project in early April 2020, the Dutch government issued measures against the outbreak of Covid-19. The subsequent lockdown started in mid-March and continued until June that year.3 All social events were cancelled and we could no longer meet people from the neighbourhood. The musicians were not able to rehearse or perform with the orchestra and found themselves at home without an audience. We tried to connect digitally with the

1 Researchers participated in the experiment, and musicians became co-researchers. In this article, we use ‘we’ to reflect the collaborative work we did. When remarks are specific for either researchers or musicians, we will make that explicit.
2 The Maastricht Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music (MCICM) is a collaboration between Maastricht University, philharmonie zuidnederland, and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (Conservatorium and the Research Centre for Art, Autonomy and the Public Sphere). Online Musicking is one out of five experiments that the MCICM is conducting within the Artful Participation project, which is funded by the Dutch research foundations NWO and SIA.
3 The first lockdown in the Netherlands – which started at March 15 and lasted until June 1st 2020 - included the closing of schools, universities, concert halls, and other public venues.
communities of the North West neighbourhood, but many inhabitants were not able to go online or had other, more urgent, concerns. Limited to online communication and unable to reach our intended community, we decided to move the experiment online and focus on what we could do with the limited means we had. We decided to build a website that functioned as a kind of digital rehearsal space, instead of using social media channels, in order to create a secluded digital environment where musicians and researchers could freely document their experiments with online musicking. Musicologist Christopher Small introduced the concept ‘musicking’ to talk about music as an activity that involves not only performing and listening, but also rehearsing, practising, and evaluating (SMALL 1998). Previous studies of online musicking have focused primarily on the role of music in identity creation and its symbolic circulation through social media (VALVERDE 2019), the mediating role of social media and digital technologies when teaching music online, or the skills needed for creating pedagogical online music projects (CAYARI 2020; ROFE 2017). Here, the focus is on the practical work of musicians in a digital, online environment. The musicians and researchers were amateurs in online musicking: arranging, rehearsing, performing, organising, producing, recording and editing classical music performances online. 4Our attempts at online musicking raised topical questions and challenges regarding balancing different performance qualities online, the digital skills needed for producing a collaborative video, and imagining an online audience. Eventually, these challenges hindered us in fulfilling our ultimate goal of finding an actual online audience.

3. Balancing different online performance qualities

As mentioned above, the first weeks after the outbreak saw a host of classical music initiatives on social media. The researchers documented these instances of online musicking and discussed them with the musicians. Most were reluctant to value these emergent home-made videos of classical musicians and orchestras online. We found that many instances of classical music that emerged in social media were

4 The notion of ‘amateur’ here has a specific meaning. By positioning ourselves as amateurs, we created an equal level playing field where both musicians and researchers could contribute with their own skills, knowledges, and experiences. It also created an openness and a slowing down which allowed for reflexive learning in practice. See also Stenger’s notion of the idiot (STENGERS 2005).
media lacked acoustic quality, often featured children or families, and more often than not didn’t have a specific audience in mind.

Somewhat hesitant, the musicians started experimenting by creating individual videos, ranging from reflecting on what it means to teach violin over Zoom, through a podcast with inspiring stories about canonical musical works, to a series of two-minute videos in which a violinist performs before various ‘stand ins’ for her lost audience, such as a collection of drawings of people on the wall in her apartment. When the musicians experimented with filming their own performances, using their smartphones, they discovered that such home-made online videos do have their own aesthetic qualities, such as intimacy, directness, and authenticity. The musicians were imagining what an online audience could appreciate in such videos. As one musician reflected: “Seeing a fellow-musician playing violin in her own kitchen takes away some of the formality and stiffness, it shows the human behind the musician.” (Fieldnotes Ties van de Werff, 04/14/2020).

Some musicians, however, were hesitant to produce something of ‘low’ sound quality, given the lack of professional recording equipment at home. What would possible audiences or colleagues think? One violinist argued: “The smartphone has become an important part of our lives while in lockdown. And if we keep trying to get the best acoustic quality that is possible, then we are trying to conceal that we don’t have access to a concert hall right now. So if we really would like to relate to the world in this moment, then we should use our smartphones.” (Fieldnotes Ties van de Werff, 04/01/2020). The musicians are fighting against what Eve Klein identifies as the ‘single aesthetic paradigm’ of classical music, the ‘reproduction of a “concert hall”-like listening experience’ (2015: n.p.). The realisation that this was impossible shifted the focus of the musicians from trying to improve the acoustic quality to looking at other aesthetic criteria.

Other quality criteria emerged, such as the visual aesthetics of a movie clip, the quality of the narrative structure or scenario, and performance quality in terms of timbre and dynamics, which were often hard to capture with the limited smartphone microphones. Instead of trying to retain a form of ‘liveness’ (AUSLANDER 1999, see also HOLT 2010), a primary strategy in many online classical music videos, musicians started to play with the particular aesthetic criteria of the media used, its limitations and its opportunities. This balancing of different aesthetic criteria is a vital feature of any experimental project in
classical music, especially when such projects entail a collaboration with other (artistic) partners or media. When experimenting with different concert situations, like a performance online, the question of what comes to count as a good performance (and for whom), is not given or stable, but emerges throughout the project. However, as we will see, the normative weight of internalised acoustic and musical quality standards remained a concern throughout the process, and after much debate appeared too difficult for some of the orchestral musicians to overcome.

4. Engaging in digital crafts

This question of quality also presented itself through the technicalities involved when engaging with digital recording. After individually experimenting with different digital media we decided to try to create a collaborative music video, in order to reach a specific audience: the digital audience of the philharmonie zuidnederland. The musicians who volunteered for our experimental project were not selected based on their instrumental specialism, resulting in the unusual instrumentation of two percussionists, two violinists, and a horn player – while one percussionist also played bass guitar. In the digital realm of course, these instruments could be overdubbed (adding additional tracks in the recording), multiplying violins, percussion or horns where desired. We first worked on a waltz from Dmitri Shostakovich’s Jazz Suite that could easily be arranged for the instruments we had. Later, one composer in the group made arrangements of selected songs (Lieder) by Franz Schubert: *Die Forelle*, *Erlkönig* and *Lachen und Weinen*. As one musician had some experience with audio and video editing software, we discussed the arrangements from the perspective of a producer, balancing requirements for software editing with musical criteria, in order to create a recording plan. To compensate for not being able to make music together in a physical space, the musicians decided to play with a midi-track and a click track in their earbuds (a digital metronome), so at least their tempo should be easier to sync when the video was edited.

Rhythmic synchronisation and finding a good blend in intonation and dynamics was challenging when not playing in the same room, however. Pizzicato (plucked notes) proved difficult to record, though surprisingly the mics of the smartphone were able to pick it up when the violins were muted. Recording the marimba – the only polyphonic instrument in our group – was problematic: its particular attack and timbre distorted the recording, and the percussionist had to
remove the resonators to mute its sound. All musicians struggled with the midi-file that acted as a guide track, as this violinist reflects: “I will not trust myself to follow the intonation of the midi-file because it takes all your basic thoughts of intonation away… there are so many things that happen naturally. It really helps if you hear the sound colours of the other instruments.” (Fieldnotes Ties van de Werff, 05/29/2020). Or, as one percussionist argued: “The problem with us as professional musicians is that we adjust all the time. We always gradually fix our mistakes and our timing. (…) It has to do with precision, with being strict to yourself in terms of timing and intonation.” (Fieldnotes Ties van de Werff, 07/03/2020). The experiment highlighted the value of skills essential to musicians’ usual practice, and how these skills are cast asunder in a digital environment.

The odd instrumentation and the choice of repertoire made the musicians vulnerable in their recordings: where musicians in a symphony orchestra are part of a larger whole, there is much more visibility and thereby vulnerability when recording alone at home with a click track. The musicians now also became actors on the screen, as they tried to imagine how audiences would look at them in the video. This is in marked contrast to traditional performance practice, in which orchestral musicians tend to dress inconspicuously and limit their bodily movement, and is a consequence of the focus on the visual within internet culture (ALCORN 2014). The video exaggerates what is a visible but less explicit in a normal concert-situation: the facial expressions and the ways musicians look. Recording individual parts at home, and combining them into a collaborative music video using editing software, highlighted the digital skills needed to create a collaborative home-recording: from playing with click-track and tinkering with mics and home-acoustics, to increased screen awareness, editing, and delegating roles.

5. Making it matter: imagining an audience online

Throughout the experiment, the musicians and researchers tried to imagine an online audience. We were assuming elusive, invisible and diffuse audiences that manifest themselves on various online platforms (LITT 2012; LITT & HARGITTAI 2016). Early in the online musicking project, the musicians did not seem to worry too much about their amorphous audience because the initial goal was to experiment and learn, but when they started to produce a video of a collective performance, the question who would watch their video was back on
the table. Given the ‘top quality’ videos from orchestras with budget and
experience in pre-corona times, the question was what we could offer an
audience instead. As classical music audiences generally like to attend
rehearsals, we wondered whether we could show our online rehearsal: the
challenges of playing with click track, recording with a smartphone, alone at
home. We also discussed how we could make the audience of the video actually
feel like an audience, as they are probably sitting home alone too. How could we
provide musical content and create a musical atmosphere in audiences’ listening
situation at home?

In contrast to the concert hall routine, online listening practices do not come
with traditional norms or habits: you can watch and listen to a performance
video behind your laptop, on your smartphone, or while doing the dishes. This is
a marked contrast to traditional classical music performance habits, which
privilege ‘attentive listening’, with Prey arguing that ‘streaming platforms can
be said to build “inattentive listening” into their service’ (PREY 2019: n.p., see
also PREY 2017). Building an ‘attentive space’ at home may be seen as a
solution but interest in high-fidelity audio has never been mainstream
(O’CONNELL 1992). Different online platforms allow for different listening
practices, for example including live chat windows or other forms of valuation
such as the Facebook like button. If audiences are a constitutive part of online
musicking, the practical question then becomes how to incorporate their
listening practices? The musicians started with adding a simple instruction to
their video, asking their viewers to wear high-quality headphones. Later, they
discussed how they could make the viewers of the video feel part of an actual
audience by inviting them to respond to the videos with their own experiences
and stories about the lockdown. Because online audiences appear so elusive and
invisible, the question of who the audience is for a particular musical work not
only became an explicitly debated topic, it was also present through the entire
artistic process. It is also clear that the event of the concert and its facilitation of
audience-musician interaction is very different from the process – characteristic
of influencers on social media platforms – of developing and interacting with a
followership online and curating a persona (HOU 2018).

The question of repertoire – what music to perform now and why – also brought
up discussions about the societal relevance of classical music. While relevance is
often sought and being made through addressing different kinds of audiences, it
appears much harder to connect it to the content of musical works: to the canon
of repertoire of classical music. Strikingly, in the online experiment, musicians
explicitly asked the question of which works from the canon would be suitable for home-isolated audiences in corona-times. The musicians chose songs of Schubert to convey the different emotions that people can experience during a Covid-19 lockdown. One musician recorded visual shots with her smartphone camera, to connect the theme of the Schubert songs with different emotions during lockdown. The intention was that the songs gained new meaning and relevance when performed in times of crisis.

While imagining an audience while planning, recording and assessing performances helps to make decisions, eventually the musicians were hesitant to spread the finished video to specific audience groups. As one violinist worried: “People expect a lot. They are used to seeing videos of high quality. You get so used to hearing perfect things that it becomes more complicated to do something more real.” (Fieldnotes Ties van de Werff, 07/10/2020). After discussing our DIY-approach, and the vulnerability of improvising and experimenting, we decided that we should share the video with colleagues in the orchestra as it shows what it takes to perform online together as individual musicians, and to “create something out of the normal” (Fieldnotes Ties van de Werff, 07/10/2020). These colleagues were a vital part of the audience that the musicians imagined for their work and were a powerful control on the content they wished to ‘release’ into the world. This mirrors the traditional concert format in which the general audience is an amorphous formation beyond the proscenium arch, while fellow musicians are proximate and able to voice criticism. In the end, it proved too challenging to deviate from the high expectations musicians have on the acoustic and sound quality of their performance. Rather than a product for consumption, the video, and the documentation of the process, became part of our emergent and experimental learning process.

6. The value of experimentation for cultural organisations

The experiment *Online Musicking* showed the hidden work that goes into creating a collaborative music video based on individual recordings: the negotiation and balancing between different aesthetic criteria; the different ways of coping with and complementing the lack of playing together in the recording and editing process (in terms of articulation, synchronisation and intonation in particular); the skills that are needed to perform in front of a camera and make it into a collaborative whole. The experiment shows also how these skills are likely to be unevenly distributed amongst members of an organization,
depending on their previous experience. Our attempts at online musicking raised topical questions and challenges regarding performance qualities, audience participation, and societal relevance. The balancing of musical criteria with aesthetic criteria specific for online media, the curating of an online listening space for audiences, and the question of societal relevance of classical music in a societal crisis and online environment, are issues that are not easily overcome – both on an individual and an institutional level. That we eventually did not reach a specific wider audience (other than some colleagues of the musicians) illustrates this.

The challenges the musicians encountered when trying to produce classical music videos for online audiences fuel the institutional challenge of an orchestra finding a meaningful digital strategy. The experiment shows how difficult it is to shape a digital offer for online audiences when the skills and abilities of those involved in the process are too closely tied to traditional symphonic values. Due to Covid-19 and its lockdown restrictions, Online Musicking was an improvised and emergent experiment. While the experiment is not representative of the ways orchestras produce digital content (using professional digital producers, camera teams, with ample resources), our journey into online musicking does show which challenges musicians face on an individual level when attempting to perform online and engage with an online audience. Due to its emergent character, the experiment highlighted how both musicians and researchers reflexively learn on the spot, while experimenting with online musicking. The method of the experiment – an open, collaborative process where something we hold dear is at stake – allows for such an increased reflexivity among the participants. Connecting the musicians’ experience and emergent learning in experimenting with digital media to the distributed expertise of staff within the orchestra as organisation, could be a fruitful next step. A key question would then be how to bridge the gap between traditional musical criteria of the musicians versus the aesthetic criteria of online media. Presumably musical criteria have to be altered or extended in order to create that new offer. In addition, if audiences are a constitutive part of the online musical situation, how their listening practices can be incorporated in the production of digital music content is a question that needs further research. Given that the pandemic appears to have accelerated the digitisation of our world, this is reason enough to keep investing in experimental research aimed at learning, within the orchestra and other cultural institutions. At the same time, as an antidote to the digital imperative, the value of performing together ‘in real life’ has been thrown into stark relief.
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