

Listen closely

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Impact paragraph

This dissertation analyses how symphony orchestras innovate audience participation in their everyday practices to better understand how norms and values are challenged as well as emergent in the process. I examined how, around the millennial turn, Dutch orchestras started to experiment with audience participation in new ways in response to the narratives of crisis that had gained a prominent role in political discussions – narratives with a newly found emphasis on the importance of broadening, diversifying, and engaging audiences. Whereas previous research has focused primarily on whether the innovation of audience participation is desirable, I combined insights from music sociology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) to analyse how symphony orchestras actually try to innovate audience participation in their everyday practices.

I conducted this research within the scope of the broader NWO/SIA-funded project *Artful Participation: Doing Artistic Research with Symphonic Music Audiences*. As I explained in Chapter 1, the project combined academic and artistic research, and was a collaboration between Maastricht University, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, and *philharmonie zuidnederland*. My research was the academic component in the project: developing an empirical understanding of what Dutch symphony orchestras were already doing that would inform the experimental artistic research that the rest of the team conducted. In practice, the collaborative nature of the project meant I could observe what my findings implied for a symphonic orchestra early on. In what follows, I will briefly highlight the academic findings my research led to, the societal impact of the research – also by reflecting on its role in the broader project, and discuss how I plan to reach out to broader audiences.

Academic impact

The main objective of this dissertation was to develop an empirical understanding of what it means for symphonic orchestras to engage in the innovation of audience participation in their everyday practices, and to offer new insights into what such innovative participatory projects imply for the traditional understanding of aesthetic quality and the audience's role in symphonic music. My research led to three intertwined main findings. I showed how the innovation of audience participation is a process that starts long before any concert takes place. Innovative projects require orchestras to question who becomes involved how and at what time during the organisational process. Consequently, these projects render visible again that audience participation is deeply intertwined with all the work orchestras do and does not exist separately from the presumed 'aesthetic core' of musical works. I showed that if orchestras want to innovate audience participation, they need to reflect anew on their existing aesthetic framework of routines, conventions, norms, and qualities, and acknowledge that more repertoires of quality than just

the traditional aesthetic can become important for arriving at a ‘good’ concert. The innovation of audience participation does not *replace* traditional concert formats, instead I found that such projects function as situations through which orchestras can reflect on their traditional organisation, norms, experiences, and quality standards, and *expand* them.

As I explained in section 6.3, my research contributes to existing literature in musicology and audience studies by moving beyond the common understanding of music practice as *either* aesthetic *or* social. Moreover, the empirical understanding of how audience participation is problematised, done, and (e)valuated in symphonic practice is also insightful for researchers who study the innovation of participation in different fields, such as science and politics, because the case of symphonic music offers insights into the normative tensions that the innovation of audience participation causes, and shows how such frictions can be empirically analysed, and how norms and values agnostically traced. Finally, my research leads to the methodological insight that practice-oriented research asks of researchers – like me – to actively question and unassume academic norms and values, and accept that new forms of ‘good’ research might emerge. This finding is particularly relevant for researchers who work at *lectoraten* (research centres) within Dutch *hogescholen* (universities of applied science), as these specialise in practice-oriented research and are constantly seeking to translate their work to education and professional practice. As a PhD candidate I was also part of and contributing to the Research Centre for Art, Autonomy and the Public Sphere, which offered me the opportunity to explore and experiment with what my insights meant for young musicians and other artists who are currently being trained.

During my PhD, I shared theoretical as well as methodological insights with academic communities by presenting my research at eight (inter)national conferences and symposia in the fields of STS, audience studies, artistic research, and during Classical:NEXT – a conference for classical music professionals. I was careful to share my findings with various academic audiences to bridge the different fields that my research relates to and seeks to make a contribution to. Furthermore, I gave nineteen presentations at local events at Maastricht University and Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, either alone about my PhD or together with colleagues about the broader Artful Participation project. Apart from that, I published a peer-reviewed article and a book chapter (Spronck et al., 2021; Spronck, forthcoming). In the upcoming period I will explore how and where this dissertation could best be published as a monograph.

Societal impact

As I argued in Chapter 6, my findings do not only have implications for academic researchers, but also for symphonic practice. I empirically showed that orchestras

can no longer routinely assume who should be involved in innovative projects and what is and is not aesthetic work when they innovate audience participation, because innovative projects unhinge the commonly presumed distinction between aesthetic core and social context. I concluded that the innovation of audience participation requires orchestras and cultural policymakers alike to develop new ways of evaluating that allow for a focus on process, and that orchestras have to create the practical conditions for experimentation and reflection in their practices. To share such findings with orchestral practitioners and the broader cultural sector, the Artful Participation team organised an online event on 20 October 2021.⁸⁹ During the event, the website www.artfulparticipation.nl was launched. This website presents the findings of the project as a whole: it shares findings from my PhD research, describes the experimental learning during concert-experiments that the postdoc and musician-researcher set up in collaboration with philharmonie zuidnederland, and outlines lessons learnt along the way. The website design invites its visitors to embark on a journey into audience participation from the perspective of one of five personas: as programmer, musician, marketer, innovator, or audience member.

However, the societal impact of my research does not only lie in the *findings* that I can present now that the research is done, my *research methods* had an impact on orchestral practice too. The collaborative nature of Artful Participation meant that my PhD research found its ways into the everyday practices of philharmonie zuidnederland long before I was done writing this dissertation. For example, in the experiment *The Learning Orchestra*, orchestral staff and musicians worked to develop ‘études’ for innovative orchestral practice: exercises for practitioners that wish to rehearse how to do innovative projects.⁹⁰ One of the groups created an étude, called *the Listener*, that was inspired by the ethnographic observations that I did in their practice two years earlier. Their étude invites orchestral practitioners to develop a different way of evaluating: it asks one orchestra member to follow an innovative project from start to finish as an outsider – to ask questions about what they do not understand, talk to colleagues they are usually not involved with, and write up and share their observations afterwards.⁹¹ The étude shows that not only my conclusions but also my methods made a contribution to orchestral practice.

A final way in which my research has, or will have, an impact on orchestral

⁸⁹ Due to Covid-19, the event had to take place online. The benefit of that is that it was recorded and can be viewed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rojTw9EM2qc&t=991s>

⁹⁰ To learn more about *The Learning Orchestra* see: <https://artfulparticipation.nl/experiments/the-learning-orchestra/>

⁹¹ To read more about the étude *The Listener* see: <https://artfulparticipation.nl/etudes/the-listener/>

practice is through the organisation of new experimental concerts. Currently, philharmonie zuidnederland is exploring whether they can organise a new iteration of the experimental *Empty Minds* concert that I analysed. In my research, I investigated the difficulties that emerged in the original concert, and showed how and why the plans for the innovation of audience participation increasingly faltered throughout (see *Chapter 4.5*; and Spronck et al., 2021). *Empty Minds 2.0* is planned for Spring 2023, and aims take into account my findings to learn from what was challenging in the original concert.

Engaging a broader audience: research communication by sounding means?

This dissertation is not only of interest for academic researchers or professionals in the symphonic music sector, it also speaks to *cultuurlijfheders*: a general public with an interest in classical music. This interest already became apparent over the past year: postdoc Ties van de Werff and I were interviewed about our research by *het Eindhovens Dagblad* and *Brabant Cultureel*, and recently Peter Peters and I gave an interview to *deKlank*, the magazine for the audience of philharmonie zuidnederland.⁹² For that same magazine, I wrote a column entitled *Luisteren als een etnograaf* (Listening like an ethnographer) about my methods for conducting research on innovative orchestral practices (Spronck, 2021). In the midst of the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, I furthermore wrote a commentary that was published in the national Dutch newspaper *Trouw* in which I argued for more attention to how the lockdown and the move to online concerts not only hit professional performing artists, but also the sector's audience members and amateur practitioners.⁹³ Furthermore, in collaboration with the marketing and communication department of Maastricht University, I will write a press release that summarises the main findings of the dissertation in an accessible way that can be shared with national and regional media outlets. The aim of this press release is to gather media attention for the dissertation around the time of the public defence.

However, following from my conclusions about the changing role of researchers in collaborative research projects (see section 6.4), writing commentaries for and giving interviews to written media are of course not the only way in which researchers can share their work with a broader audience. At the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University, I was member of a group of researchers who explore how research communication can be done in

⁹² Read the interview with the *Eindhovens Dagblad* here: <https://tinyurl.com/yc68px4p> And the article on *Brabant Cultureel* here: <https://tinyurl.com/yckkkxsh> (both in Dutch)

⁹³ The commentary (in Dutch) can be read online here: <https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/we-dreigen-het-cultuurpubliekte-vergeten-b55a6667/>

sensory, embodied ways. In 2020, our collective work was awarded a grant in the KNAW pilot-programme Science Communication by Scientists: Valued!⁹⁴ Personally, I focussed on learning how to create sounding stories as a way of research communication over the past two years. This resulted in the podcast *Kunstmatig* (Artificial) which engages listeners in themes at the intersection of art and technology (>6000 listeners to date).⁹⁵ Around the defence of this dissertation, we will publish a special episode on classical music and innovation.

Apart from an episode in this already existing podcast, I am currently exploring the option to make a radio or podcast documentary about the topic of this dissertation. In it, I would take listeners along in the journey of a symphony orchestra innovating audience participation by following one project from beginning to end, behind the scenes of an orchestra, just like I methodologically did in this PhD research. Along the way, the documentary shows how audience participation runs as a red thread through all the departments of the orchestra, and how the deliberate innovation of audience participation challenges existing ideas about the aesthetic quality of symphonic music – the main findings of this research. What better way to share these findings about a practice that is all about listening, than by inviting an audience to put on their headphones and listen.

⁹⁴ Read more about our research communication work: <https://samenweten.nl/project/sensory-stories-in-digital-times/>

⁹⁵ I create the podcast *Kunstmatig* together with Rosa Wevers, PhD candidate at Utrecht University. For more information about the podcast, or to listen to it, see: www.kunstmatigdepodcast.nl