

How does it strike you? Obtaining artist-directed feedback from the audience at a site-specific performance of a Monteverdi opera

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ABSTRACT

Background: Musicians generally have rather limited means of obtaining direct and detailed feedback from their live audiences. This is often limited to applause and “the feel of the room”. Although many research studies collect more detailed evaluative responses from music listeners, this is often done without reference to the specific concerns or interests of the musicians involved. It is rare for the musicians themselves to be directly involved in the formulation of the research questions, or the review of the data obtained.

Aims and research questions: This research aims to develop and evaluate means for audiences to provide responses to questions which are of direct interest and importance to the musicians involved in live performance events. Specifically we wish to evaluate how such processes enhance (a) audience engagement, and (b) professional and artistic development of the musicians involved.

Method: The research involves a process which involves (a) discovering artistically relevant questions which can be validly posed to audience members, (b) collaboratively devising appropriate means of collecting this data (e.g. questionnaire, post-performance discussion), (c) jointly reviewing the outcomes of the event, and the audience data, (d) obtaining reflective feedback from those involved regarding the value of being involved in the exercise.

Summary of content: We will illustrate the process with specific data from a site-specific performance of Monteverdi’s one act opera “Il Combattimento” at London’s Wallace Collection in May 2012 making explicit artistic use of its collection of period swords. A range of methods were employed to evaluate emotional and aesthetic impact of directorial and performer intentions. In particular, audience experience of elements of the 17th Century aesthetic of emotional communication were explored. As well as shedding light on this issue, the paper illustrates how unexpected elements of audience reactions yielded useful insights for the artistic team, and how participating in the research process added constructively to the audience experience as a whole.

Implications: Involvement of musicians in the design and implementation of research on audience response can a significant means of enhancing mutual understanding between musicians and audiences and of making research more directly relevant to practitioner concerns. Issues for discussion include the appropriate means of ensuring sufficient research rigour without distorting the artistic process.

I’d like to acknowledge the contribution of Melissa Dobson to the design and data-gathering phase of this study. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and also the generous collaboration of a number of artistic partners, including Andrew Lawrence King.

Background:

This paper comes about because of an intersection between the work-specific artistic concerns of a professional musician/director (Andrew Lawrence King, hereafter ALK) and a broader research initiative of a group of people at the Guildhall that I lead within a programme that we call “Understanding Audiences”. To explain that intersection, I’m going to have to step back from Combattimento and briefly explain the background and wider purposes of that initiative.

Classical musicians generally have rather limited means of obtaining direct and detailed feedback from their live audiences. And yet arguably such feedback can be of value to their creative process. Many research studies exist which collect detailed evaluative responses from music listeners. But these have mostly been carried out without reference to the specific concerns or interests of the musicians involved, even when the event is a live performance. In fact, in the vast bulk of existing music perception research, the musicians involved in making the music don’t even know that the research on their music is taking place.

Our research approach looks at the potentials that can be realised when musicians themselves take a lead in the formulation of the research questions that are posed to the audience, and are centrally involved in the review of the data so obtained.

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This approach can be summarised in terms of its positioning on four key research dimensions, which are contrasted to what we have called the dominant model for empirical research on audience response.

	Dominant model	This research
Object of study	Performers or listeners separately	Performers and listeners in interaction
Focus of study	Individuals and their internal processes	Group processes, involving artists, audience and researchers
Data gathering context	Controlled/closed (e.g. pre-recorded music in lab, experiments, questionnaires, structured interviews)	Open (live music performance events, semi-structured group discourse)
Primary agenda	Researcher-led	Artist-researcher collaboration

Our approach has some important precedents.

The most substantial of these is probably the set of papers published in a special issue of the journal *Music Perception* in 2004, exploring dimensions of audience response to live performances of a new work “Angel of Death” by the composer

Roger Reynolds, who was a co-author on all the papers in that issue. The primary data in these studies came from individual audience members continuously responding to various aspects of the music via a hand-held device which collected quantitative responses for later analysis by computer (McAdams et al 2004)

Another notable precedent is that established by the Dance expert Liz Lerman, who has devised a process she calls the Critical Response Process, which is described as a “multi-step, group system for giving and receiving useful feedback on creative processes and artistic works-in-progress.” (Lerman, 2003). This provides a method for performers to productively use focused audience feedback in the preparatory stages of putting together a production, before its first public exposure. However, as far as I am aware, although the process has become widely used, particularly in theatrical circles, there is no publicly available research on this process. Lerman’s book is a practical methods manual for people wishing to adopt the Process for themselves rather than a research report.

Our approach builds on this earlier work by (a) looking at a range of works across a range of events rather than just one work; by (b) including performers as well as composers or directors in the research process; (c) focusing on the public performance, rather than the preparatory phase, and (d) by focusing on the direct flow of verbal information and views between musicians and audience in the immediate post-performance period, rather than mediated through complex quantitative analyses provided by scientists which might not be available to the artist till weeks or months after the event, and which need considerable technical interpretation to understand.

Method:

We have now worked across five different artistic projects in a process which involves (a) discovering artistically relevant questions which can be validly posed to audience members, (b) collaboratively devising appropriate means of collecting this data (always a post-performance discussion, augmented in two cases by a questionnaire), (c) jointly reviewing the outcomes of the event, and the audience data, (d) obtaining reflective feedback from those involved regarding the value of being involved in the exercise.

Date/location	Event	Artistic collaborator / data collected
July 2011 Guildhall School	(A) “For Summer is a come O and Winter is a gone O” Premiere of new composition, performed by chamber ensemble, conducted by composer.	Composer / Audience questionnaire, Post-concert discussion
November 2011 Guildhall	(B) “Movers and Shakers” Workshop to explore potentials of music-related movement for audience	Directors, performer / Audience questionnaire, Post-concert discussion

School	members during a Bach solo violin suite performance.	
February 2012 Guildhall School	(C) "The Seven Deadly Sins" New staging of Kurt Weill's Ballet Chante, with orchestra and singer/actors.	Directors, performers/ Post-concert discussion
May 2012 Wallace Collection (of period swords)	(D) "Combattimento" A site specific staging of Monteverdi's one-act opera with orchestra and singer/actors.	Directors, performers/ Post-concert discussion
June 2012 Queen Elizabeth Hall	(E) "Debut Sounds" A London Philharmonic Orchestra concert of new works by young composers.	Composers/ Post-concert discussion

Melissa Dobson and I have reported on outcomes from events A and C in other contexts (Sloboda and Dobson, 2012; Dobson & Sloboda, in press). Today I'll focus on D, but will draw some comparisons to other events as I proceed.

The production of *Combattimento* involved several performances and several layers of research. ALK has just described his own historical research into performance practice and swordsmanship that underpinned his creative development of the musical and dramatic production.

A second layer of research, which we will not be addressing today, was carried out under the direction of Professor Jane Davidson, under the auspices of the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions. That component involved administration of exit questionnaires and interviews with audience members, relating to the specific emotions they felt during the performances. The data from this are still being analysed and will be reported in due course.

The third layer, which I am focusing on, was centred around just one of the three performances, where the audience research engagement was their participation in a post-performance discussion, led by myself, and also involving ALK and his performers. In order to avoid overload or confusion, the audience for this performance was not involved in the questionnaire research of Jane Davidson.

The pre-publicity for the production alerted potential ticket purchasers to the fact that there would be a research component. The precise wording was "The audience research will explore: how does this strike you". This clever sword-related pun was ALK's invention.

Over a period of several months a set of questions to frame the discussion was refined in a series of conversations between ALK and the research team, which from the Guildhall side comprised Melissa Dobson and myself. ALK's interests were broad, and his initial list contained 13 questions, several of which were actually multiple questions. A full exploration of all these questions would have needed a more extended period of time than we had available (30 minutes max) and so that constrained what could be covered.

In the end, what we came up with was a shortlist of 4 essential questions and 4 additional questions to be covered if there was time. The questions were these:

1. In the 17th-century aesthetic, the audience is privileged, not the performers. So it's not about what the performers 'express', it's about what the audience feels. We would like to know how you experienced the emotional mood of the piece – what emotions did you notice or feel? Did you notice any changes between emotions? When and how did these changes take place? When did it change most/most often?
2. Did you follow the story, or 'message,' in the instrumentals, dances, and combat? Were there any times where you felt confused or lost? Were there moments where you felt surprised?
3. Which emotions did you notice at the end of the combat? Religious, happiness, sadness, hope, despair, triumph, love? Did Tancredi win? Did Clorinda lose? Did you feel that "you" or "your side" won or lost?
4. We'd like you to imagine you had chosen to watch a DVD of this production, rather than coming to a live event. Would the experience be different, and if so, how? [Was it more thought-provoking, entertaining, or emotionally moving? Did you notice each other's reactions during the show? If so, how did this affect your own thoughts, entertainment, or emotions?]

Four additional questions which I had in reserve were, in the event not addressed. In fact I was only able to pose 3 questions, namely 1, 3, and 4 from the above list. The discussion that developed from Question 1 used up around half the available time, and I also felt it necessary to ask whether the audience had any questions of the performers. That yielded interesting digressions, not necessarily related to ALK's questions.

It's worth describing the physical context of the performance and its linked post-performance discussion. This took place in the large central covered courtyard of the Wallace Collection which normally functions purely as a restaurant.

The Wallace Collection is home to an important permanent collection of swords and armour. At the time of this performance, the Collection was also home to a major temporary exhibition entitled "The Noble Art of the Sword: Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe". The Exhibition – and indeed the permanent collection - was open throughout the period of the performance, and audience members were able to combine their attendance at Combattimento with a visit to these collections.

The performance took place cabaret-style, with audience members seated at small round tables, each seating up to four people. Dinner was served before the performance, and a table service of drinks and snacks were available throughout the evening. The front and central areas of the courtyard were

cleared of tables, creating a T-shaped performance space. The players were seated on the horizontal bar of the T, with the singers using the full length of the vertical bar, which constituted a wide gangway running from front to back of the hall, which allowed them to enter or exiting either at the front (through the players) or through a door at the back.

The moment the applause died down, I stepped to the apex of the T, and invited audience members to consider refilling their glasses and staying for the discussion. Of the 70 or so audience members more than half elected to stay. During rehearsals ALK had also previously invited the performers to stay for the discussion. The performance group was quite substantial and comprised 16 individuals (3 singers and 13 players, predominantly students of the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, as well as the swordmaster for the fights). Most of them stayed. Thus, the number of people in the room was large, and only a minority of them were actually able to speak in the time available. The transcript identifies 13 different contributors, 11 audience members and two members of the artistic team (ALK and one of the singers) in addition to myself.

The acoustics of the space were not ideal for discussion. The space was large and resonant, and there was quite a bit of background noise from the catering function. We therefore used microphones, one stationary where I was standing, and one roving microphone. Those wishing to speak were asked to raise their hand and the microphone was brought to them. This did somewhat inhibit the free flow of conversation, and there were slightly awkward gaps as the roving microphone was transported over relatively large distances.

We had initially wanted to hold this discussion in a smaller more intimate space, but logistics and the requirements of the Wallace Collection made this impossible. We had to hold it in the performance space or not at all. Compromising with less than ideal conditions is a feature of some of the other post-performance discussions we have held, and this holds a larger story. Things like this can only work exceptionally well if everyone concerned with the production is fully on board, including venue management. Because this is quite a novel thing, many venues are really not well prepared for it. That's not their fault, but artists will need to educate and bring venues along, insisting on the same collective high standards for the design of the post-performance event as they insist on for the performance itself.

Results:

The key value of this research is not so much in what the audience said, as what impact what they said had on the artistic team. Did they find the event useful, relevant, challenging? And in particular, did ALK find the event of value to his artistic practice?

So I'm not going to give a blow-by-blow account of what was said in the hall, but rather pull out some themes focused on in the reflective feedback session that was held a few weeks after the performance, at which the research team met

with ALK and six of the performance team (2 singers, 4 instrumentalists, and the swordmaster).

The first important point that came out is that this was a novel experience for many of the performers. Post-performance discussions have not been part of their landscape. ALK has done it more often, but in the traditional “ask the performer” mode, where the audience, not the creative team, sets the agenda.

It was clear, then, that most performers didn’t have any very clear expectations about the experience, and that coloured their remarks. ALK, on the other hand, having designed the questions and thought about it a lot, was very explicit about what he hoped to get from it.

He said

“In this 17th Century music it’s not about what we express as performers, it’s about what comes over to the audience... And so, if that’s what we believe, we ought to find out what’s coming over, and ask them directly...”

He went on to say

“also, knowing that this was going to happen then focuses your way of thinking during the planning and during the rehearsals, so I was perhaps even more than normally focused on, okay, these are the things we’d like to do, but what are the audience going to get from this? What are they going to understand? So the fact of doing the investigation increased my awareness of the audience, you could say. I think it is something I try to prioritise anyway, but it made it sharper, and it kept there at every level, so that even quite small decisions you were thinking about them very much from the audience’s perspective”.

Exactly parallel statements have been made by collaborators in our other post-performance experiments. It sharpens the preparation.

One participant raised the issue of whether the performers other than ALK might have been more directly involved in the thinking about and preparation for this event. One performer indicated that there was so much else to think about that thinking about this “slipped” down his priorities.

For one performer it actually came as quite a shock when an audience member asked a very specific question of him, which he clearly did not expect. He said

“I think I would like to, well in the past. Because my English is not perfect, I improvise things at the moment. I am not so confident to do that. I don’t know. Probably I would have liked to have prepared something. But obviously that’s difficult, because you don’t know what the audience will ask. I knew that that was going to happen, but I didn’t imagine how far it can be... one person asking me directly what I was doing with the chair!

And I was really shocked. It was quite strange for me... quite a revelation, well, violent, actually.. yeah, strong”

There was a sense that some of the performers would have been happier with a more informal setting in which one-on-one or small group conversations could be had, and which didn't put them on the spot in such a public way. Indeed, several people indicated that they DID have one-on-one conversations once the formal part had ended. One participant said

“So the things which people said to me when it was just me talking to them, nobody raised these when we were doing the big discussion.”

Another respondent qualified this by saying

“But the problem... the type of people that come to talk to you at the end of the performance are, with no disrespect, a certain type of person, who are kind of, maybe regular concert goers, quite confident, used to talking to you... and they say a certain kind of thing sometimes, like they get very interested in your instrument, or you know, did you know my uncle used to play in the LSO or that kind of thing. Whereas actually, if you can take control and say – these are the questions we want to ask you, its for me a better thing. It's actually more interesting.”

So there was a clear understanding in the group that what we were aiming for was something different, and potentially better.

Did it deliver?

Well, to some extent! According to one performer:

“there was a general problem, which was that it seemed like the audience slightly refused to engage directly with the question.”

It is true that quite a lot of the remarks from audience members were general, applying to the whole performance, rather than any specific part of it, but rather than seeing this as a problem, perhaps it teaches us something about the “manners” of an audience, and some intuitive sense of the shape of a response, in which one needs to preface more specific remarks with more general ones, before drilling into the detail.

So for instance, in response to the question “how did it strike you emotionally, or where did it strike you most strongly, the first respondent said

“It was a very dramatic and felt performance, from everybody. I could understand everything – I'm Italian (laughs). And it was all very clear and very good all round”.

Pretty generic stuff, but then I followed up with a repeat question “was there a kind of emotional high spot for you, where you felt the kind of emotional climax of the piece”

The response came back:

“I think... I enjoyed the variety of all the performances, from the very dramatic and intense to the dying scene, which I found very moving..”

Then immediately the respondent moved back to the general, and spent another several seconds outlining responses to the performance as a whole.

But several other audience members picked up the thought of the final minutes as the “emotional heart” of the piece.

As previously stated, one question I posed was number 3 on ALK’s list. The transcript reveals me as saying

“What emotions were present and what was the dramatic core of that ending... particularly, who won? Did Tancredi win, did Clorinda lose? Did you in a sense take sides, and did you feel that you or your side won or lost”

One response which the performers picked up and discussed was this one:

“I suppose I want to slightly dispute the framing of the question. Because my perception of the ending is not that there’s some kind of competition involved here, that there’s a kind of ... a reconciliation between the combats? And this a moment of what happened sacramentally through that ... it’s a kind of peace. And I suppose what I find interesting about this production is that there’s... a choice was made about the way the baptism was carried out. And I’m wanting to ask the performers, why is it that you chose for there to be no physical contact at that point, between Tancredi and Clorinda. What was the dramatic impulse behind that choice, that mode of baptism?”

After giving a really quite thoughtful and insightful response to the question, the audience member takes the opportunity of asking a really specific question about an element of the staging.

In the public event, ALK’s response was as follows:

“There were two things that guided our choice. One was that we were looking at the Tintoretto picture of that very moment that shows Tancredi kneeling at quite distance as he reaches towards her. And the other is simply practical. We wanted to keep his hand back so that you could see her face, because we found in the rehearsal that if he was doing a much closer baptism or actually touching her forehead or marking the cross on her forehead, which would be a very believable way to do it, the difficulty

then is you don't see her face. And we wanted you to see her face in those moments".

What this exchange triggered in the review session was an examination of different levels of engagement by different performers. One player said

"The guy talking about baptism was exactly on the mark. I think that was something that you (ALK) may have thought about a lot, but we didn't talk about hugely in rehearsals... If I am going to study and perform this again.. I want to maybe explore that element more."

ALK noted that

"it's something we rehearsed a lot more in rehearsals where not all the instrumentalists were there, and it had been a topic of conversation and what we were doing with it. "

Following from this, another player said

"I felt like the singers were a lot more emotionally involved than us, the musicians: like it went,, for some of the questions I didn't have anything to say, from an emotional point of view. And that was quite interesting".

ALK clarified by saying

"Because of the way the project was set up with rehearsals... I mean, the singers were at rehearsals for more than a week,, 9 or 10 hours a day. It was very intense for them.. and the musicians were on 2 or 3 times a week for 3 hours or so. So there was a different level of involvement"

So here we have a clear case of instrumentalists benefitting from the post-performance events in ways which deepened their understanding of what they had been involved in, and potentially shifting their motivation towards a deeper and more engaged stance in future productions.

It was also clear that even "not answering the question" could provide stimulation and food for thought for the creative team.

ALK said this of one quite dramatic example.

"The strange thing for me that I've spent the longest thinking about since the discussion was the guy who hadn't read the programme notes... "

This was a man who intervened after two previous comments, one from a parent of a singer, one from a native Italian speaker. He said

"I am neither Italian nor the mother of one of these very fine singers. I had to go through and read the programme while the singing went on to get some sense of the context while I was actually watching the piece. It would

have helped me to enjoy the performance much much more, had I known that I could have, and certainly should have read the background, at least before it all began. Because I kept wondering, what's going on? I think the next time you perform something like this, whether it's in these grand surroundings or in another situation, you should let your audience know what's in store so they can really take part to the extent that they can... audience by understanding more of the historical context, and what's going to happen. I regret that, and had I read that... but had I done it before the performance started, I might have seen the whole performance differently.”

When I asked him whether he had received a programme before the performance he said

“Yes, but I looked at it and I thought, oh this is what's going to happen. I didn't realise at the time that there were all these pages, which would let me know what's going on. Now, that may seem obvious to everyone, but you get stupid people like me who do exist in audiences, people who feel that they're stupid and really do enjoy something, but just that little thing, that if you let them know... perhaps if you gave out the programmes, there is more information about this that you can read about. I'm just saying it's small, but it would have made a big difference to my enjoyment.”

This remark was quite combative, and created some negative counter-responses among both other audience members and some performers.

But ALK's response to this was an attempt to understand what might be behind this person's apparently perverse question

“I began to think that the real agenda with this guy was not actually about knowing and so on... but it was a sense that he felt that in the room there were various sets of people who were insiders in different ways, and he was not. And felt himself an outsider. So of course there was the insider group, Alessandro's mum was there, my family were there, families and friends and supporters... there was the insider group of early music experts, there was an insider group of Wallace type art and weaponry...”

And this does remind us that audiences are very heterogenous and bring very different backgrounds, knowledge levels and agendas to performances. Being exposed to these differences was clearly something that engaged the performers at the time and stimulated further thought afterwards.

For me, it highlights how the audience experience is a composite of so many things beyond the actual music. Programme notes are often not presented with the same professional thought and care that marks the production on stage, and are not a focus of team discussion in the preparatory stages. But perhaps they should be.

Discusslon

This study, like the other in our set of five, involved students and/or staff at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, which is a higher institution for the advanced training of professional musicians and actors.

In this we are trying to make full advantage of a conservatoire's unique position as a meeting place between researchers, professional musicians and other creative professionals, advanced teachers, and the students they teach.

This position allows us to observe professional performance and the development of emerging professionals. But more than this, it also enables us to help shape innovative practice. The practice we can influence most directly is that going on within the conservatoire, both its teaching and learning practice, but also the considerable amount of artistic practice that emanates from the staff and students. We see research as an integral part of an ongoing process whereby new means of relating to audiences are being devised, trialed, and embedded in the culture. We believe that a progressive conservatoire can be a crucible for pushing professional boundaries as well as evolving educational practices, and allowing experimentation in a context that is somewhat protected from the harsh winds of commercial imperative.

One of our aims is to help encourage an environment in which musicians are much more likely to engage directly with their audiences to obtain tailored and valued feedback. We would like to see a situation where it is normal for the kinds of process we have researched to happen in public concert halls. That may be some way in the future.

Of course, applied or action research of this kind must still be subjected to the critical scrutiny of peers in relation to its research rigour. That is why we are presenting this data to academic as well as artistic audiences, and we welcome your critical eye. There is another tightrope we must walk. On the one hand we researchers need to respect the artistic process and not import research processes that come to "dominate" or distort the artistic outcomes. On the other hand, the very introduction of this interactive research process does have the capacity to alter the artistic process itself, as the interviews showed.

Artist-led processes of obtaining audience feedback are rare. Most artists therefore don't have prior experience of such processes to motivate their involvement in such a process. To that extent, the process has still been more researcher-led than we would have liked. We had to explain to artists what this process might be, and what benefits it might yield. We are not yet in the enviable position where artists seek us out to help them design feedback processes. It is we who are still seeking out willing artist "guinea pigs". But we hope that exposure of this approach at opportunities such as this which brings performers and researchers together, will help more of us to realise that our audiences are a great asset, whose capacity to assist us we have not really exploited to anything like the degree to which is possible, and, as I hope ALK and others will agree, useful.

And this presentation is unlike the other presentations we have made from this initiative, where the musicians involved were not part of it. Here, for the first time, the artistic director of the enterprise is here on the podium to share in the discussion of this, and I hope you'll take full advantage of that opportunity, for which we thank the enlightened organisers of this conference.

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