

Experience and memory



Photo: Natascha Thiara Rydvald

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What is the relation between experience, memory and time? And how does an audience verbalize their experience with classical music? These questions have been the starting point for this report. In a society where we store knowledge in growing archives and at the same time are living at a fast pace with a tendency to short memories, these questions become important. In response to a symphonic concert with The Royal Danish Orchestra presenting oeuvres of the French composers Henri Dutilleux and Maurice Ravel the 14th of May 2016 at The Royal Danish

Opera, two focus groups were conducted. The first was held immediately after the experience i.e. in the evening. The second focus group was held in the afternoon five days after the concert. We asked two basic questions during the conversations: 'Describe your experience today' and 'name your first experience memorable experience with performing arts'.

The Concert

The program of the evening was a combination of Henri Dutilleux's *Métaboles* and Maurice Ravel's *Piano concerto in G major* and *Daphnis et Chloé*. Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) is not very well-known by the general public although he has garnered high international



esteem. At the other end of the scale Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) is well known even among those who are not connoisseurs of music. Both composers are inspired by impressionism and influenced by another French composer, Claude Debussy (1862–1918) who broke with the idea of a strict structure in composition. Instead he stated 'Je joue avec plaisir' (i.e. I play with pleasure) and started a movement that was more liberal in its approach to musical composition. This movement initially aimed to capture impressions of nature, and later, life in the cities – sometimes almost like what we today would call soundscapes.

The three pieces, which were conducted by the French conductor Bertrand de Billy (1965–), are very different, but all contain an expression of lightness and an approach to nature that binds them together. In the first piece, *Métaboles*, nature is painted in pastel colour. The second piece, *Piano concert in G major*, featured the soloist Pascal Rogé on piano, who was sitting in front of the orchestra. The piece starts almost like a rehearsal and turns into a jazz theme. In the first movement an English horn plays mournfully with the piano whereas the final movement is like a perpetual motion. The last piece, *Daphnis et Chloé*, originally written for The Ballets Russes, contains not only a love story, but also an aural description of nature, with birds, ripples in the river and the sound of the wind (a wind machine is on stage). Furthermore The Royal Danish Opera Chorus was on stage singing without words (in the score the use of a choir is optional). This piece is rarely performed with

an entire symphony orchestra and full choir, which was the case on the 14th May.

During the concert Pascal Rogé gave an encore, a piano piece by Erik Satie (1866–1925). The interval was held just after this. The orchestra was placed on stage, and the musicians were dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns. The concert ended with standing ovations. In between the movements in the first piece some of the audience applauded, but soon they joined the convention of only applauding at the end of the entire piece.

Research set up:

Purpose:

To study how distance in time affects the conversation when articulating the experience of performing arts.

Performance:

'French transformations' Symphony Concert #3 with The Royal Danish Orchestra.

Settings:

- Auditorium (where the performance was experienced).
- Foyer (small café tables).

Basic structure:

Alternating talks in pairs, with strangers and group talks.

Questions:

- Describe your experience today
- Name your first memorable experience with performing arts

Sub-questions:

- How do you prepare before the visit?
- What are you going to do/did you do after the performance?

Time frame:

- Saturday 14th may 9.30 pm and Thursday 19th may 4.30 pm duration 1 hour.

Groups:

- 2 groups of 7–9 audience members found through our ticket database.
- Groups with a combination of ticket-buyers and those who accompanied them, with different ticket categories (inexperienced and habitual participants).

- Groups ages from c. 20 to c. 80 years old.
- with people from Copenhagen and suburbs.
- with those who bought the tickets at least 5 days before the concert.

Recruitment:

A combination of telephone calls and emails, depending on the ticket category.

Rewards:

All participants received a voucher code to The Royal Danish Theatre.

Documentation:

Notes and photos.

Memory and forgetting

To recall and talk about an experience is an act of remembering and forgetting. To do it right after the concert or five days after might evoke different memories. In order to better understand what is at stake two different approaches to memory studies are brought into play; a cultural and a cognitive.

Cultural memory

'There is some kind of deep transformation in what might be described as the meaning of life based on shared memories, and that meaning is eroded by a structural transformation in the life spaces of modernity' (Connerton 2009:5)

The English anthropologist Paul Connerton distinguishes between different sorts of forgetting (Connerton 2008). In other words he has been studying what is not remembered and why. He challenges the cultural assumption that forgetting is negative. Instead he points at the need for forgetting in order to go on living. In our case three of his categories are interesting, namely what he names 'repressive erasure', 'structural amnesia' and 'forgetting as planned obsolescence'.

The 'repressive erasure' points at what we do not tell as a society or as curators – in the case of the concert it is the choice of French composers presented, choice of soloists and the conductor. Why are those composers chosen – and others not? By making a choice the institution is a part of the creation of a cultural memory, and forgetting.

'Structural amnesia' is defined as what is not structurally important for a person to remember in a social context. For example, the male line of ancestors might be more important to remember than the female in some societies. Or today we do not need to remember recipes; we can just read a cookbook. In the case of the concert it becomes interesting – what do we need to remember in order to place ourselves in a social context when we do an after-show talk?

Finally 'forgetting as planned obsolescence' becomes interesting in the discussion on what an artistic experience is in modern society. According to Connerton the capitalist system of consumption has planned obsolescence built in to its very core. He mentions how material goods such as washing machines are created to crack, but points also at entertainment as having a far shorter lifetime. This statement might seem very provocative to an art institution that aims for creating unique experiences – in other words, experiences that are remembered. Nevertheless it becomes interesting when we look at how audiences talk about their experience as a whole and include the bicycle ride to the venue or the boat journey back. But

also how they describe the rupture they feel when they leave the venue and the lack of a space for sharing their experience.

In 2009 Connerton followed up on his article with a book, where he emphasises how the place and social relations as well as the connection between body and topography are core to our ability to remember. If we use Connertons argument in a performance art context, it is key to keep the audience at the venue in order to help them transform the experience from pure consumerism to a lasting experience while still together. Some venues are already intuitively doing this like the small Danish theatres as Momentum, Grob, the pop-up theatre Teatergrad or in an international context French Théâtre du Soleil, just to mention a few.

Cognitive memory and music

'Even quite novel events are usually experienced as deviations within some kind of framework of pre-existing knowledge. If we do not have such a framework within which to frame an experience (for example, hearing a complex piece of music in a style about which we know nothing), we are not likely to remember much about it. Another way of saying this is that everything is experienced and remembered as a part of a context. The connects consist of both individual and shared cultural knowledge'

(Snyder 2000:72)

When we hear something we have to recognise or be surprised before the auditive impression is kept in the long-term memory. Most of what we hear is layered unconsciously and therefore it becomes impossible to verbalise. This is the fundamental challenge that we are facing in this project, where we want to talk about experiences and especially

art experiences that are outside of everyday life.

Furthermore it is possible to distinguish between 'episodic' and 'semantic memory'. 'Semantic memory' is the primary type of memory involved in *recognition*. 'Semantic memory' is often used implicitly, without us even being conscious about it.

'Our knowledge of music – knowing the names of notes, recognizing particular chords, the sound of particular instruments, and musical styles – would all constitute semantic memories, whereas a memory of a particular performance would be episodic' (Snyder 2000:78).

The journey for an impression to go from an 'episodic memory' to becoming a 'semantic memory' can take months (Squire and Kandel 1999). Slowly, experiences allow us to identify certain elements, and it thus becomes 'semantic memory'.

The memory of the audience

Now what kind of 'structural amnesia' had hit the audience after the concert? And how did the episodic and semantic memory come into play in the conversations?

The immediate reactions

'I have no words' was the spontaneous reaction from a woman in her 40s when she came out from the concert (K4/140516). 'I felt blown away. I do not know if I can talk after this' another one stated (K2/140516). A third exclaimed 'It is fantastic. Harp, flutes, violins and percussions are lifting together. They are creating a grand community together' (K3/140516). Whereas the first two doubted their ability of putting their experience into

words the last one combined her semantic memory with an interpretation.

Those spontaneous reactions were of course not available when the focus group was held five days later.

Strangers in conversation

In order to help the memory process along the participants were asked to join a stranger and place themselves in the auditorium – the physical setting where they had the original experience. This is in accordance with the theory of Connerton on the relation between social relation, body and topography.. In the focus group that was held just after the concert there was a vivid and intense atmosphere. In the one held later, there was a more meditative ambience, where the energy was clearly used to recall the memories.

Preparation

In the plenum dialogue afterwards we realized that we hadn't been aware of one element in the screening of the focus group: whether the participants had attended the introduction before the concert, held by the solo-oboist Henrik Goldsmith. 'What a start to the concert!' (K4/140516) one stated. And the rest agreed. 'It didn't matter that it lasted longer than what was written in the program. You really just wanted to stay and listen to the very last minute. I was filled up with energy when I entered the auditorium' (K5/190516). Everybody in the first focus group had been to the introduction whereas only one in the second group had attended (by accident). It came up that the framing by Goldschmidt, e.g. the way he had emphasised the third piece

and revealed details about the music, affected the way the participants remembered the music. He would draw the attention to special elements in the music by saying:

'After one hour you hear the 24 carat gold flute. That's the solo you are asked to play when you want to enter the orchestra, and all flute players are eager to play it',

And the participants would talk about the flute and how that part was played. Several of the other elements from the last piece that was mentioned by the participants in the first group were echoes of Goldschmidt's introduction. According to the cognitive memory process this made a lot of sense. To be able to recognise details or aspects is central if a long-term memory is to be turned conscious. This sort of preparation affected the audience's state of mind and their ability to experience and remember the music. But advance preparation can also affect the experience in a negative way: 'I have heard the interpretation of the piano concert several times on a disc at home. To me the interpretation was so different to what I am used to, that it felt wrong' (K2/190516). The frequent listening to the piano piece has become a 'semantic memory' that clashed with the new 'episodic memory'. Apart from the preparation on a 'content' level, some had a quite different approach. A lady in the first group explained how she always was well rested in order to be able to fully appreciate a concert. Another said 'I like to be unprepared. I read the programme afterwards. I want to be surprised and experience on my own' (K3/190516). Both approaches are about staying open to the

experience and through their own cognitive process, almost testing their own ability to sense and perceive.

The experience of the concert itself

It is possible to distinguish between the technical description of parts of the concert, 'semantic memory', associative impressions 'episodic memory', and what the concert did to the participants 'transformative impact'.

Technical descriptions

In the first group the semantic memory and analysis was overwhelming. As one lady explained: 'I only hear the music in its detail. I do not associate' (K4/140516). Another described her experience in a different way: 'The contrasts between fortissimo and the pauses were significant and breath-taking' (K2/140516). This group was in general able to place the orchestra of the evening, The Royal Danish Orchestra, in a context and compare them to other orchestras. For some of the participants this act of knowledge sharing and demonstration of intellectual capacity became socially important to articulate during the conversations. If we use Connerton's terms, it was a demonstration of structural memory (vs. structural amnesia).

Associations

The second group was less detailed in their description of the pieces on a semantic level; instead they entered the associative level describing the music through metaphors or concepts. Like:

'The piano concert was very poetic. The pianist was almost transparent. He merged with the

music' (K5/190516). And another said: 'It was very delicate, one could hear the drops of water in the music, very French' (K1190516). According to the participants the word 'French' is covering the impression of soft music that invites the listener opposed to German romantic music, that consists of grand gestures. The participants disagreed on their experience with the pianist; some found him too 'pale', others just wonderful. Whereas the first group mainly were centred on the last piece, each participant in the second group had picked just one of the pieces in the concert for a description. One of the reasons for this can be found in a statement from a lady 'It was like different worlds' (K5/190506).

Transformative impact

A male participant mirrored himself in the musicians: 'I relate to the musicians. How they communicate through the music, how they act while they work; their body language and concentration. I myself have a job where I have to be on' (M1/140516). Another one explained what the music did to her: 'The music took me to a meditative place. Not that I dozed off, but I relaxed. Especially during the piano part' (K1/140516).

The second group did not say that much about the transformative impact on this level in the conversation. This might be explained by the fact that they had to recall an experience they have had five days before.

Down memory lane – or how did you become addicted?

In order to examine how performing arts affect the audience and how the addiction to the art

form started, the participants in the focus groups were taken down memory lane. They were asked to name their first memorable experience with performing arts.

It is possible to divide the memories of the group into two categories.. The first is the accentuation of intellectual details presenting the storyteller as a 'good cultural consumer'. The other one is exposing a very personal story sometimes revealing a complex pathway to the performing arts. Statements from the first group that belonged to the first categories included 'My first opera was when I was aged 5. My first concert was with Bernstein and I was caught by the fantastic energy' (K4/140516).

Through childhood memory it can be possible to access the motivation for attending the performing arts. An elderly lady said: 'I grew up with ballet music as I danced ballet as a child. And when I listen to classical music I dance inside' (K3/140516). In other words her reason for returning time after time is an almost childish lust for movement. 'Another participant would through her child and youth memory reveal what role the art form played in her marriage as a social platform for community: 'I started playing piano when I was six, but I did not have an ear for music. It was when I married that I was introduced to classical music for real. It became defining for our relationship. That was the thing we did together' (K2/140516). Different art forms seem to have an ability to strengthen social relation. To share the experience with someone makes the experience last, and so become a long term memory.

The discovery of one art form can go through another. As one person said: 'I do not know if it fits in to this context: I got my first very intense experience with music when I was young. I went to a concert with Poul Dissing and I was struck by the power of liveness. The classical music came into my life through my wife' (M1/140516).

To open and talk about long term memories from particular points in the individuals life is a way to get insight to the individual's cultural habits.

After the art experience

To the participants in the first group it was beneficial to extend the experience through the conversations that we held. Although many of the participants in this group regularly frequented classical concerts, they did not have a space for digesting their experience. As one said: 'Normally we try to get out as fast as possible in order to catch the first boat home.' She experienced it as a harsh rupture, and all agreed spontaneously, that it would be nice to stay a bit and drink a glass of wine. E.g. the need for the topographic and social relation in order to avoid the planned obsolescence was formulated intuitively by the audiences themselves.

Also the second group missed a space for conversation and analysis afterwards. Faced with the question of what they actually did after the concert, an elderly woman suddenly blushed ' Oh, I cannot tell. It was Saturday night'. We blushed too, until she revealed that she had gone home to see the end of the

Eurovision Song Contest 2016. To appreciate not only the fine arts but also popular music, was to her like a taboo. And it is an example of how quickly a new experience can replace another for the audience.

The forgotten parts/Structural amnesia

Nobody mentioned the encore of the pianist. This was astonishing to us as interviewers, because this was a surprising incident and therefore had the potential of turning into a long term memory. Neither did anybody mention the misplaced applause or the standing ovations at the end. This only emphasizes how subtly our memory works.

Challenges

The practical reason for testing how time affects the memory when we talk about art experiences is, that the performing arts are often performed in the evening. Therefore a focus group interview is often held after 9.30 p.m. which puts a natural limit to the duration of the conversation. It is hard to conduct a focus group discussion for more than one hour, since the participants are often eager to get home. Although we did not do it in this case, it would be possible to conduct a longer meeting in the afternoon. But to conduct a focus group that is separated in time from the performance makes it inconvenient for many audience members to attend. In this case it was only the ticket-buyers and not those who accompanied them who would attend.

Summing up

The focus group held immediately after the concert contained spontaneous impressions

and there was a larger variation in the use of language for the entire experience. But the main focus was on the last part, either because it had been described in great detail in the introduction, which made it easier to recognise and thus place the experience in the conscious long-term memory, or because it simply is the last elements that are most easily remembered. Another explanation is that it is easy to be caught up in group dynamics and the group's discussion of what is important to remember.

In this group the transformative impact of the actual performance was also easier to articulate with words like 'trance' or 'meditative' whereas the other group quickly agreed on the term 'poetic'.

The second focus group had time to consume the experience. Each of them where focusing on different elements in the different pieces. It was like the experience was condensed. But time does not help in the difficult process of verbalising an auditory experience.

Even though the study is not extensive enough to point at definite conclusions, it indicates that the displacement in time embeds the experience But also that the spontaneity and the ability to articulate the transformative impact is stronger immediately after the experience.

Thanks to Solo-Oboist Henrik Goldschmidt for redoing his introduction for the authors of this report and to Oliver Baird for proof reading.

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