

Growing Audiences through Presentation

While good repertoire is the reason listeners should come to concerts and return repeatedly, it is not enough. The music has to be well-played and heard easily to have the full effect. And the listener's attendance should be rewarded with thoughtful hospitality.

The Performers' Responsibilities

Everyone hopes for a "good" performance, but what exactly does that mean? Many things: it means that the performers are not only in technical command of the music but hopefully possess superior and distinctive ability. It means that the performers deliver intelligent interpretations of the works. It means that they possess charisma, that they "come across the footlights" and communicate the composer's intentions with forcefulness and clarity. It means that they appeal to the audience naturally: that they don't throw themselves around the stage looking for attention but instead focus on delivering the music. It simply means they sound good. This, as you see, can go on and on.

The Acoustics

Music sounds better in good acoustics. That's what good acoustics are for! So don't try to present music in cool or trendy spaces that don't sound good because the music has less of a chance of making an impact. Spaces that are too dry or too wet in terms of natural reverb make the music sound either uncomfortable or unintelligible. And the performers don't appreciate those challenges one bit, having to alter their natural interpretations and playing styles in order to try to compensate for naturally bad sound. Any – and we mean any – space that sounds good is worth trying to make into a concert venue. Asking a real musician's opinion, in this instance, is the way to know.

The Lighting

Unfortunately, the way things look can affect the way people hear. It's unavoidable. It can also affect the way musicians perform. Simply put, if the light isn't good enough, the musicians can neither see their music (or each other) and the audience can't see them. Not good. Bright and ugly light is also not desirable – who wants to look at that for two hours? Without much trouble, inadequate lighting for the musicians can be remedied by clip-on music stand lights. Even in a space with no stage lighting, like a church, brought-in standing lamps can lend a touch of intimacy reminiscent of a living room. Here, a presenter needs simply to call upon the same aesthetic sense with which they decorate their homes.

The Quiet

More than anything else, a concert space should as quiet as possible. We are not even talking about car horns or people mixing drinks, but elements such as heating and air conditioning hum, or other constant sounds which raise the base level of room noise. Room noise – often low enough not to be noticed at first – compromises music in serious ways. It wipes out or diminishes certain frequencies; it can make detail hard to perceive, which, especially in chamber music, is extremely detrimental to the listening experience.

Hospitality

A good presenter monitors the concert like a hawk and should take full responsibility for everything that happens leading up to the concert, during the performance, and after. Everything – from how tickets are picked up and collected at the door, to seating and late seating, to the level of house lighting and concert lighting and the timing of the changes, to post-concert artist greeting – is the presenter's responsibility. Keep in mind if you are a presenter that your concerts are likely not the only ones your audience members attend or have attended, and they'll compare venue/presenter performance in a heartbeat. Are the bathrooms clean? Are the ushers nice, attentive, trained in their duties? Is there enough light in the hall during the concert to read the program? Ditto the musicians: they, for sure, have played in hundreds if not thousands of venues, and will compare the treatment, the amenities, the acoustics, and yes, the behavior of the audience and staff to places they've played around the world. You may not have gold-plated faucets but you don't have to, as long as everyone can tell you care and have made a maximum effort to attend to details.

The Magic

We believe that the concert space is in many ways a sacred one. It's a place where great art comes to life, where the activities of concentration, meditation, catharsis, remembering, imagining, and expanding of the soul take place. A good place for music is one that allows all that to happen easily. As it is when one enters a hallowed space – whether it's a church, a monument, a ruin, or even a natural wonder – one should feel as though simply being there is already a step away from the humdrum of normal existence and you're elevated to a higher plane. The great music spaces do that, through either their storied histories or the atmosphere they generate. When listeners are entranced by the venue in advance of the music, they are readied for the sublime, the challenging, and the transforming. So, if you can select a venue with an eye to that potential, or do what can be done to bring those qualities to a space somewhat lacking in special quality, everything should be done to that end which is reasonably possible.

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