

Visitors to Music Displays – An Ethnographic Approach

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In this paper, I present some initial results of a project, which is funded by the German Research Foundation and affiliated with the Folkwang University of the Arts. The title of the project is “Music on Display - Presentation and Reception of Musical Topics in Museums”. It is based on fieldwork conducted at various museums in Germany and neighbouring countries. The exhibitions present musical instruments, local musical traditions, famous composers, popular music, and world music. We carry out museum analyses and ask for curatorial intentions as well as the ways that visitors – with their unique requirements – explore these exhibitions. This paper deals with the latter question. In accordance with museumologists such as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, we consider museum visitors to be “active interpreters and performers” (HooperGreenhill 2006: 362) who perceive displays depending on different variables, including previous knowledge, interests, and communication with companions. Consequently, we have adopted an ethnographic approach that investigates in detail what is important for the visitors, what motivates their modes of reception, and how they act. Discussions on methods in ethnology often connect these kinds of questions to intensive, long-term field research. For instance, in referring to Clifford Geert’s term “thick description”, German ethnologist Gerd Spittler speaks about “thick participation”, which requires “social closeness” and “common experiences” (Spittler 2001:12). The exchange with museum visitors, however, is normally short, and it is hardly possible to develop social closeness. We thus carry out interviews with rather general questions and attempt to inspire a general conversation. Following Maurice Bloch, our aim is to let ourselves “be guided” by our interview partners (Bloch 1998: 52). The interviews are connected with observations of behaviours and conversations with museum guards and other staff members.

In what follows, I introduce a few case studies to outline different forms of reception; subsequently, I discuss their signification for various displays. I begin with the Mozart House in Vienna, whose current permanent display was opened in 2006. The building (where Mozart lived between 1784 and 1787) is situated in the centre of Vienna, very close to the Stephan Cathedral. Different curatorial concepts can be found within the museum. The general tour begins on the third floor, which is dedicated to the cultural environment with which Mozart

came into contact. The second floor deals with biographical aspects and with Mozart's music, especially his famous operas. The first floor, where Mozart actually lived, deals with his private family life. An audio guide is extremely important for the third floor, as it is possible to learn a great deal by listening. The artefacts (mainly portraits and manuscripts) are minimally described and generally serve as illustrations of the audio guide's narrative. Mozart's music is presented predominately by multimedia installations on the second floor. The first floor, Mozart's apartment, is equipped with only a few artefacts. Certain objects should indicate the respective function of each room. An information board contains the following lines:

How did Mozart live and work in this apartment? Where were the writing desk and the piano? How noisy was it? Who lived here altogether? How fashionable were the furnishings? There are no descriptions of the original interior and very few specific indications. We are reliant on assumptions, and our imagination. We therefore invite you to join us as we retrace history.

According to Joachim Riedl, the curator of the exhibitions on the second and third floors, the presentation is seen by tourists who, as he states, "do not necessarily need to know much about Mozart". Riedl deliberately wanted to impart socio-cultural contexts via a story that was not derived from the artefacts since it was not an art exhibition. "It is a story", he said, "that suits the artefacts". The exhibition of the Mozart apartment is not targeted towards a certain group of people. One of the curators, Werner Hanak-Lettner, did not want to make a tourist attraction out of it. He tried to be, as he said, "not too academic" and "not too pop-cultural. The display is intended to be "creative and challenging" and maintains the goal of inspiring visitors' imaginations (which corresponds to the text of the information board).

The vast majority of the visitors are actually tourists. Some do not know much about Mozart and his time; however, many are familiar with the topics and are music enthusiasts, Mozart fans, hobby musicians, or music students. The majority claim to have learned a lot about Mozart, particularly about his character and his private life. When we talked to them at the end of the exhibition, they predominately described their impressions of Mozart's apartment. We therefore also spoke with people on the second and third floors and obtained critical comments there. The fact that the audio guide often does not correspond to the artefacts was significantly criticised as many visitors had expected a stronger object-related narrative.

The Mozart apartment was more positively described. Auratic values were important here – that is, the fact that it is possible to move through the same spaces and touch the same walls as Mozart did. In addition, the idea of using one’s own imagination was widely valued.

I now come to my second example, the Museum of Musical Instruments of the University of Leipzig, Germany. Opened in 2006, the museum presents a chronologically organized permanent exhibition of instruments from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, with a focus on local contexts. The instruments are presented as aesthetic objects. Eszter Fontana, who was the director of the museum from 1996 to 2013, wanted to reach a diverse public. “History and beauty”, she says, “are aspects that appeal to everyone”, and “chronology is understandable for everyone, even without education”. Fontana wanted to present the instruments such that they could “talk by themselves”, and she wanted the visitors to ask themselves questions by viewing the exhibits. The explanatory texts by the cabinets are accordingly short and limited to general data. More information can be found on flyers, which are available in certain rooms. The concept has been criticized by the current director of the museum, Josef Focht, who feels that the instruments are presented as valuable art “for astonishment and awestruck admiration”. He would prefer a display that is more strongly directed towards organology, playing techniques, and performative contexts.

We now turn our attention to the visitor’s reception. One morning, we met a gentleman from Switzerland, a radiologist (about 50 or 55 years old) who was in Leipzig to take part in a radiology congress. He had come alone and asked the woman at the cash-desk if the museum housed “the world’s oldest fortepiano”. The woman looked at Mar Alonso, a member of our project team who was nearby, and asked her if she could help. Mar Alonso accompanied the man to see an instrument built by Bartolomeo Cristofori, which is considered the oldest preserved piano by some people. As they discussed the instrument, it became clear that the man already knew a lot about it. He took a picture of the information board in the room, and then he continued to the Renaissance section. The man looked shortly at the corresponding flyer, and then he continued on. Upon reaching the end of the display, the man praised the exhibition. For him, it presented sufficient information, and he said that he had learned a lot about the variety, technical aspects, and developments of

keyboard instruments, in particular. However, he would have liked to have heard more music and to have played some of the instruments. He was apparently a very attentive visitor while also being representative in some ways. Many visitors are musically educated and play musical instruments, and many of them appreciate the exhibition. Single instruments are of particular interest because they are often very old, beautiful, special, or odd. Many people claim to learn a lot of things, particularly regarding the instruments' development and technical aspects. The visitors apparently understand the intended associative access, as can be seen in a statement by a teacher of an American group of music students regarding a "sense of the history" and "*the feel and the flavour of how music has developed*". There was some criticism when we directly asked for suggestions for improvement. This criticism was directed at the lack of playing music most of the time. Only a few visitors wanted more information about the instruments.

The third case study takes us to the small town of Gronau in north-western Germany, a town known by insiders as the birthplace of the German rock star Udo Lindenberg. Gronau hosts a so-called "rock'n pop museum" and features a permanent exhibition devoted to the history of pop music in Europe and America while focusing on developments in Germany. Its current permanent exhibition, which opened in 2004, is located in a big hall within a former factory building. The exhibition presents a combination of displayed objects, such as stage outfits music instruments and audio equipment as well as pictures, videos, audio files, and interactive installations. The exhibits are arranged chronologically along the walls of the hall, and many different music examples are played together. The open sound was part of the concept since the organizers wanted a "museum of communication", as curator Thomas Mania refers to it. For Mania, it was important that the visitors be able to "walk through the house together and talk about the things they see".

Apart from student groups, the majority of the visitors are over 40 years old, and personal access to the exhibits is of great importance to them. Many visitors search for individual points of reference and go on a sentimental journey. Interactive stations are used extensively. Visitors prefer to select songs or films by themselves as they like being active. Furthermore, the museum is a very communicative place. People call attention to certain kind of things, discuss issues, dance, and even sing with each other.

In summary of the case studies: Three issues, in particular, characterize the visitors to the Mozart House Vienna:

- the demand for a more object-related narration
- the affinity for auratic (emotional) elements
- the willingness to use their own imaginations.

For the Museum of Musical instruments in Leipzig, the following three issues are important to visitors:

- the affinity for auratic (emotional) elements
- the fact that instruments speak for themselves
- the demand for music examples.

Many visitors to the rock'n pop museum are characterized by

- the affinity for interactive offers
- manifold communication
- personal approaches.

Concepts that allow object-related conclusions are the norm at museums, and we can find such concepts in many presentations of musical themes, for instance in Leipzig. The Mozart House is an exception and a special case because the curators do not display any original objects and instead use only copies and pictures.

The appeal to auratic feelings is another feature typical for all kinds of music displays, with the possible exception of ethnographic collections. In the case of the Mozart museum, the building itself appeals to visitors' emotions. Other exhibitions present things that are very old or used or made by famous people. A sense of supposed authenticity is responsible for bringing forth auratic feelings in all these cases.

The idea of using fantasy and imagination, which is well accepted by visitors to the Mozart apartment corresponds with open concepts in which people can draw their own individual conclusions, as claimed by George Hein (1999) and other promoters of constructivist

pedagogy. The museum in Leipzig also realizes such a concept to some extent with the idea that instruments can speak for themselves. However, this proves to be an exception. Curators of music exhibitions very often try to be most unequivocal when they want to impart their knowledge.

The demand for more music examples in Leipzig corresponds with the extensive use of interactive stations at the rock'n pop museum in Gronau. Visitors to music displays want to listen to music, see videos, and select music examples by themselves.

The affinity for communication at the museum in Gronau corresponds with the fact that the house deals with popular music. Nevertheless, the music played on loudspeakers is also important. Other houses dispense head phones, which can lead to an entirely different, sometimes almost solemn atmosphere.

The personal approach and the search for individual connecting points – as we have seen in Gronau – is very typical of displays of popular music. This approach can also be found in other music displays, but to a lesser degree. For instance, visitors look for the instruments that they play and sometimes complain if they cannot find the pieces they are looking for.

Our initial findings may be summarised as follows: The structure of visitors to music displays is heterogeneous, though many of them are musically educated in some form, and the demand for information is accordingly high. Nevertheless, visitors accept concepts in which people can draw their own individual conclusions. The affinity for interaction and the demand for audio and video files stem from entertainment values as well as from the fact that music belongs to immaterial culture and needs media to be presented. The affinity for electronic media goes hand in hand with the demand for object-related information. An accordingly balanced relationship of electronic installations, 3D objects, and other elements proves to be a central challenge for curators of music displays.

References

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