

Designing Solo Recitals for the Modern Audience -

Increasing Audience Engagement through Innovative Presentation

Introduction

I first became interested in how we present solo music while beginning to plan for my graduate recital. As a performer with a particular interest in new music, I had programmed exclusively new works on that recital. Looking at the planned program and envisioning what the recital would look like I found myself coming back to the same questions: Why would I play new and innovative music in the same traditional setting that is typical of solo recitals? Shouldn't the presentation compliment the music? As I began looking critically at the way in which we present solo music it became increasingly clear that there are many ways in which we can make our performances more engaging for our audiences. Through a combination of academic sources and direct observations at the 2023 *Long Play* festival hosted by the contemporary music organization *Bang on a Can*, I examined alternative methods of presenting solo music that may improve audience engagement.

Concept

This research is intended to serve as a guide for designing more engaging solo recitals. Specifically, it will examine the non-musical elements that impact how audiences experience recitals. Much of this research focuses on reducing or eliminating the barrier between the performer and the audience to create a more intimate experience. The primary topics covered will include environment, communicating with the audience, and performance flow.

Relevance of Research

In an ever changing world, it is important that music adapts to fit the times. Audiences today are constantly inundated with new opportunities to experience music and in turn,

performers are required to justify the value of their music. One way to increase an audience's perceived value of a performance is to keep them engaged throughout the event, and modern performance practice often does not achieve that. Using this research as a guide, artists can consider innovative methods of presenting their music to better engage their audience. While this research is specifically aimed at solo recitals, it is my hope that it is expanded upon to take into consideration a large variety of ensembles.

Environment

One of the most crucial factors in determining how an audience experiences a performance is the environment. Careful consideration should be put into key aspects such as seating layout, lighting, and social pressures that often permeate performance venues. While these factors are largely dictated by the physical (and usually permanent) design of the venue, they may impact a performer's venue selection or how they use a given space to best fit the environment they want to create.

Most halls designed for solo recitals have a similar layout, the seating is highest near the back of the hall and follows a slope downward toward the stage, which is elevated above much of the seating. During the performance, the lights in the audience section generally dim, as the stage is lit with greater intensity. This arrangement creates a clear separation between the performer and the audience and a feeling of formality that makes it difficult for the performer to address the audience in a candid manner. The earliest vocal recitals, performed in the 1830's were often performed in private homes and other small venues where proximity to the performer was desired by the audience (Nova, 2005). Examining alternative venues and seating arrangements may lead to a more intimate performance. There are two primary options to consider as alternatives to the traditional recital hall; a hall with a thrust stage or a blackbox style venue laid out to accommodate thrust style or 360 degree seating.

A thrust stage is similar to a traditional performance hall but rather than the stage meeting the audience on a single flat or slightly curved line, it instead has substantial seating

on 3 distinct sides. This puts the performer closer to the middle of the hall and brings a larger portion of the audience close to the performer. In terms of lighting, thrust stages generally have similar lighting options to traditional concert halls.

A blackbox style venue is a simple rectangular space that generally has no permanent seating or staging area. Stages of traditional concert halls can often be used as a blackbox venue by closing the main curtain and bringing the audience onto the stage. Because these venues generally have no fixed seating, chairs can be arranged to match the needs of the performance. It is common for blackbox performances to mimic the seating arrangement of a thrust stage, but it is also possible to arrange the audience on all sides of the performer. This arrangement could feature a primary seating area on one side with less seating options on the other. This would allow the performer to face the same direction for the duration of the performance as is typical in a recital setting. Alternatively, seating around the performer could be designed to be symmetrical. This setup would require the performer to face different directions throughout the performance to connect directly with different portions of the audience. This style of seating was used by the ensemble ExoTech while performing in a blackbox setting at the 2023 *Long Play* festival and served the ensemble well in that it brought the audience much closer to the musicians and created a feeling of collective experience among the performers and the audience.

Moving from seating arrangement to lighting, there are some common principals that should be considered when selecting a space. First, lighting should serve to subtly enhance, but not distract from, the performance. The first goal in any nontraditional lighting should always be to match the lighting to the mood set by the music. If any lighting changes occur during the performance it is important to have a knowledgeable operator who is confident in when the changes should occur. If using static lighting, remember that the greater the difference in lighting between the performer and the audience, the less intimate the performance may feel. A solo artist looking to create an intimate performance space should

consider lighting the audience with a similar light that will be on the performer. Blackbox style venues tend to excel at lighting flexibility and may be a preferred option for that reason.

While designing a performance environment it is important to consider what an audience will be doing immediately before and after the recital takes place. It is common to see audiences speaking in hushed voices before and after a performance and this may be a reflection of a feeling of discomfort or judgement in a performance hall. One effective way to counteract this is with music. The performer may opt to curate a short playlist that can be played over speakers before and after the performance. The exact music selected should be determined by the mood the performer is aiming to set in the space, but there are some qualities that make certain music more effective for this purpose than others. First, music with lyrics or music that features a very clear sense of progression are not ideal. Better options would be music that features substantial repetition, gentle articulations, and little feel of progression. Genres such as minimalism, impressionism, and synth wave are often a good place to start. The ultimate goal of this is to put the audience at ease and make a more welcoming space while also establishing a mood that complements the performance.

Communicating with the Audience

Every aspect of how a recital is designed is in some way communicating with the audience, but there is particular power in how we speak and write to the audience during a performance. Some of the primary areas of interest within this topic are how we greet the audience, how we design our program, and how we speak to our audience during the performance.

At almost all solo recitals the performer separates themselves from the audience prior to the performance, then returns to isolation during intermission and in the few moments after the performance has finished. These practices solidify the idea of separation between audience and performer, as if the moment the musician enters the performance space they are a

stranger and have no connection to the audience. A performer at the 2023 Long Play festival demonstrated a very effective alternative to this approach.

At the Long Play festival, the solo artist Time Wharp performed a set on the very intimate backroom stage at Public Records in Brooklyn. Rather than remaining out of sight before the performance, she was present in the room for roughly 20 minutes leading up to the performance. During this time she would freely enter and exit the stage area to make quick gear adjustments but was primarily mingling with the audience. Even while on stage making minor gear adjustments she continued to acknowledge audience members and bring them into conversation. This practice gave her greater control over the mood of the room and overall left the audience feeling more comfortable and invested in her music, having had personal interaction with the artist. In a solo recital. Performers may find it worthwhile and even enjoyable to greet their audience at the door of the performance venue or mingle within the performance space prior to the performance. Performers should be sure to connect with most or all of their audience during this process, rather than sticking with a couple close friends or family, the more interaction the more effective this practice will be. Quick pleasantries such as thanking the audience for coming and answering brief questions about the program go a long way in making the audience more invested in the music. While socializing, the performer should be sure to have a positive attitude and make a particular effort to connect with audience members that they do not personally know.

Another significant way in which performers communicate with their audience is through their written program. The program is generally the first thing the audience encounters that directly informs them about the music, so it is important to consider how they are receiving that information. A crucial step for any effective program is proofreading, typos and design issues quickly detract from the content of the program and should be eliminated before printing or sharing a link. Regarding delivery, some younger audiences may favor a digital program, but a large majority of audiences still prefer physical programs. Consider the likely makeup of your audience carefully and decide what would work best, either method can be

effective in delivering the content. One of the most critical elements of a program is design. Musicians should consider seeking out training or self education on principals of graphic design or consider hiring a professional. Spending a few extra hours to craft a program that matches the mood of the recital can serve to reinforce the message of the music and better prepare listeners to hear the music the way that the performer hears it (Pasler, 1993). The text of the program is the most direct opportunity to convey interpretation and meaning to the audience prior to the performance. Writing should be considered carefully to ensure that it delivers the desired message in the most effective way possible.

Beyond the written program, performers can also provide information about their performance by speaking to the audience directly between pieces. During his 1995 study, Glen Gillis found that the majority of audiences found the performances more impactful when preceded by verbal notes from the composer. This increase in musical impact was even more dramatic among audiences that already had an academic background in music. While addressing the audience, performers should be sure to match the energy of their voice and body language to the message they are aiming to convey. Professional performers often favor calm, slow speaking to set their audience at ease. This was demonstrated by several artists at the Long Play festival including Caroline Shaw, Time Wharp, and Gyan Riley. Speaking with the audience should feel like a typical conversation and over scripting the statements is generally not effective. The content should be planned and even rehearsed in advance, but still have an improvisatory feel. To this end, speaking notes should be avoided and the performer should have all of their verbal statements committed to memory.

Performance Flow

One of the greatest weaknesses in the way in which recitals are typically presented is the flow of the performance. The common approach is for the performer to leave the stage between each piece and there are often prolonged silences or even staging changes that occur before the next piece (these silences are exacerbated if the performer chooses not to address

their audience during the performance). This practice serves to isolate each piece on the program and eliminate any possible arch or long form goal that the performer may have hoped to convey with their performance. Examining other genres of music makes it clear that this is an issue that is somewhat unique to recitals (though also present in orchestral, wind band, and other genres). Looking at the contemporary music ensemble ExoTech, which has substantial influence from pop and rock music, reveals an interesting solution to this issue. During their performance at the Long Play festival there was practically no silence between pieces. The ensemble paused just long enough for the audience to know that the piece had ended and begin clapping before beginning the next piece. While speaking to the audience they did so while the other ensemble members were making music. This tied the entire performance together and created a much more cohesive experience. With some simple arranging, this method can be applied to solo recitals. Performers can take various themes or harmonic progressions and arrange them for the accompanying instrument (usually piano) in such a manner that the material can be repeated several times. This arranged introductory music should begin before the audience stops clapping for the previous piece. The soloist can then take this time to speak to the audience while the arranged introduction helps establish the mood for the coming piece. When the soloist is done speaking a quick nod to their collaborator can indicate that they are ready to begin the piece and smoothly transition from the arranged introduction into the body of the piece. Repeating this for each selection means that audience members will always have something to listen to and the recital becomes one cohesive event rather than the presentation of several disjointed selections.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is significant room for continued research on this subject. One of the major concepts left out of this research is how memorization of music impacts an audience's perception of a performance and this would be a very worthwhile avenue of research. Another method to consider would be to expand this research to different types of ensembles and

consider how that would impact the findings above. Finally, this research would benefit significantly from more concrete, rather than philosophical sources. Imperial research studies could help confirm the accuracy of the observations found above.

Conclusion

The solo recital is one of the most flexible performance settings available to musicians. It allows the soloist to have significant control over every aspect of the performance and truly make it their own. Performers can use this flexibility as an opportunity to make their performance more engaging for their audience by thinking critically about how they present their music. Key elements of environment, communication, and flow can transform a performance and help performers form stronger connections with their audience.

Sources

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