

New Concert Formats and Music Mediation at Stegreif – The Improvising Symphony Orchestra

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Music Mediation at Stegreif

Without a conductor, without sheet music or chairs: Stegreif demonstrates new ways of what a modern orchestra can look like. In radical recompositions, the group combines symphonic music with improvisation and influences from other genres, and integrates the audience in a unique auditory and spatial exploration. Using these innovative formats, the young ensemble continues to inspire a growing audience with different backgrounds and interests.

Furthermore, since its foundation, the Stegreif Orchestra has focused its artistic work on music mediation. Music mediation in this sense is used as an important tool to bring together certain social and musical fields, in order to work on a common artistic idea (Petri-Preis 2022, 89). This field of activity is quite diverse, as the orchestra positions itself as both an initiating and performing entity frequently collaborating with various partners. In 2020, for example, the community music project *BE:community* was created in close collaboration with the Konzerthaus Dortmund, bringing together neighborhood residents with different musical backgrounds to become part of a new production of *#bfree*, based on Ludwig van Beethoven's *9th Symphony*. Additionally, the orchestra has developed and implemented various formats tailored for children such as the *symphony of change* concert for children and young people at the Elbphilharmonie in 2023, workshops (including 16 workshops in 16 federal German states as part of the *#bechange* project) and concert introductions for young audiences as well. The two-year *#bechange* project, focusing on the intersection of music and sustainability from 2021 to 2023, was pivotal in the further development of the orchestra's music mediation activities. As *#bechange* serves as a demonstration of the orchestra's engagement with diverse audiences, including those with varied backgrounds, the following sections will further introduce this project.

The #bechange project

With the #bechange project, Stegreif approached the topic of sustainability from a wide variety of perspectives. Over the course of two years, four premiere programmes and the final premiere of *symphony of change* were developed in line with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on four historical female composers. Consisting of the works of Wilhelmine von Bayreuth (1709–1758), Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), Clara Schumann (1819–1896), and Emilie Mayer (1812–1883), musical and scenic productions were created, arranged, and recomposed by members of the Stegreif Orchestra.

However, the core identity of #bechange was laid with 16 workshops in the 16 federal states of Germany. The focus was on highly diverse dialogue groups, different sustainability topics, and a playful, musical approach. Many of our general workshops and all the workshops that form part of #bechange take place under three thematic focal points: music, sustainability, and education. These three concepts are always at the centre of our preliminary considerations and always relate to each other to varying degrees. The central question, however, is what we mean by such a comprehensive term as sustainability. First of all, for us, it means breaking up and questioning old structures, focusing on female voices and new perspectives on ecological problems, as well as sustainable music-making and the creation of a social community. Added to this is the very specific discussion in the workshops: What is a lively and sustainable sound installation? What do the 17 Sustainable Development Goals sound like?

A special feature of the #bechange workshop format was that the focus of the content also resulted from the topics that the cooperating institution and the workshop participants brought to us, as the workshop leaders. The differentiation of the major topic of sustainability, the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the associated artistic exploration, was therefore not achieved through a definitional limitation, but through the workshop group. Based on the concept of “artistic citizenship”, this approach assumes that every individual sees themselves as a social actor in a diverse field. Accordingly, his or her artistic output is not an end in itself, but rather a socially aware endeavour to create something new, especially in a collective development process. (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016, 64f.)

The participants in the workshops came from very heterogeneous social environments, cultural contexts, and age groups. In addition to organising school classes, music school ensembles, visits from social institutions, and professional orchestras, workshops were held with, among others, young international musicians, people from an initial reception centre for asylum seekers and students of music education and social work.

#bechange Workshops – No Two Days are the Same

In the *#bechange* workshops, six Stegreif musicians spent a total of three to four days working with varying groups of 10 to 30 individuals. The aim was always to develop workshop concepts that provided a structure, while remaining open to the creative inputs of the participants. For that purpose, a well thought-out and flexible daily structure constitutes an efficient and sustainable tool for organising the workshop content in the best possible way for everyone. This is why the first day of a *#bechange* workshop always looks similar on paper, but is never so in reality.

10.00 a.m.: Body Warm-Up, Games to Get to Know Each Other

It starts with the body. Arriving in the room. The here and now. All participants and the workshop leaders get to know each other through play and feel their way around.

11.30 a.m.: Room of Opportunities

Now it's time to get down to business: the first sorting, teasing, and testing of content begins. Participants receive an initial thematic overview and their reactions influence the content of the next few days.

1.00 p.m.: Break and Silence

One of the most important tools in the Stegreif catalogue: providing enough space for quiet voices, for taking a step back and reflecting, enabling new contexts. Whether through lunch together or a short walk.

2.00 p.m.: Immersion and Deepening

After a lunchtime warm-up, a broad topic, such as aspects of sustainability and free improvisation, will be addressed in the large group, followed by the first musical work in small groups. All participants have their say and their ideas take centre stage.

4.00 p.m.: Presentation

After everyone has rejoined the large group, the first small beginnings of the group work are shared. In this way, participants learn right from the start to share their results in front of the others and to listen to each other without judgement.

4.45 p.m.: Feedback Round

What was good, what was not so good, what should be improved? In the final feedback rounds, each person is invited to express their opinion. An invitation, not a must!

5.00 p.m.: Collective Closing Ritual

A short, end-of-day ritual helps to bring the workshop day to a close together. Have you ever tried clapping your hands together at the same time, without anyone leading the way?

Sustainability and Social Responsibility

Every music mediation format by the Stegreif Orchestra raises the question of social responsibility, in one way or another – especially when both the content and the dialogue group specify certain thematic focuses or approaches. In the best-case scenario, sustainable partnerships are created that extend beyond workshops and projects and provide meeting spaces for mutual learning and musical diversity. Open stages, community engagement and small, sustainable rituals are among the many wonderful results of the *#bechange* workshops, which are already bearing fruit for many of our workshop partners and participants. For example, the workshop concert in Augsburg has already been recreated twice and has led to an ongoing music mediating partnership. In this respect, we always see our music mediating practices as reciprocal processes, in which we – for example as facilitators in a workshop – learn just as much as the participants. On a small scale, social processes of togetherness are negotiated and given a new form through musical engagement.

The aspiration to enable high-quality mediation work for every institution and every participant often hangs like a sword of Damocles over the planning, but is resolved in action on-site. The knowledge of having thought, laughed, and worked together, of having collectively shaped change on a small scale, along with the confidence to listen to and respect each other is a core element of every encounter. After all, this is also what sustainability means to us: the healthy use of our own resources and letting go of what is beyond our reach.

Integrated Music Mediation at Stegreif

Having discussed the so-called ‘classical’ music mediation practice of the Stegreif Orchestra through the example of the *#bechange* workshops, the following section will build a bridge to the orchestra’s general artistic practice, which

sees itself as explicitly mediating. To this end, we assume that most of Stegreif's artistic formats consider the participants or the audience as a constant in the creative process, thereby enabling a transfer process between all subjects in the space. This naturally takes place under certain rules associated with a kind of ritualised concert practice, but is disrupted by moments of irritation. Among other things, this can be described as the practice of integrated music mediation, as it does not necessarily follow an explicitly music-educational approach, but is nevertheless understood as an immanent part of Stegreif's musical-scenic work. Integrated music mediation for us means an interplay of collective culture, artistic work, and the deliberate blurring of the areas of concert and mediation.

Current Performance Practice and the Breaking of Conventions

With the constant development of the practical performance possibilities of music, there is nowadays, in addition to the approach of the Stegreif Orchestra, an almost endless variety of forms of the so-called classical concert. Once considered as a "holistic act [and] flawless event" (Heister 1983, 516), progressive institutions and ensembles are now increasingly abandoning its grandiose reputation and attempting, among other things, to create a reception-aesthetic event that actively integrates the audience as a constant. The spectrum here ranges from direct one-to-one interaction between musicians and the audience during a concert situation, to shared musical moments – such as collective singing – and to the guidance of the audience through various spatial aspects of the production. Other parameters of the concert event, such as the use of space and movement, are also being rethought and integrated into the existing practices. This can be described as an ongoing trend that can be attributed, among other aspects, to a stronger social connection between space, active subject, and the event itself (Bourdieu 2006). If one agrees with the assertion that the "crisis of art music [...] is less a crisis of the music itself than of its form of performance" (Tröndle 2011, 9), then a progressive approach goes hand in hand with a breaking up of concert conventions.

One pivotal moment in the founding of the Stegreif Orchestra was a breach with conventions, when horn player and Stegreif founder Juri de Marco stood up during a rehearsal in a professional orchestra in order to better see the solo trumpeter and thus be able to better synchronise with him. Among other things, this gave rise to the idea of an improvising symphony orchestra that moves freely in space and is close to the audience, incorporating sensory experiences of the listeners through the addition of movement, scene, dance, light, video, singing, proximity, and silence. The individual components of what

we call integrated mediation are so subjective on the one hand and so diverse on the other that they cannot be described here in their entirety. However, certain parameters can be demonstrated on the basis of the different concert programmes of the orchestra.

Concert Programmes and Formats at Stegreif

One of the Stegreif programmes that presumably enjoys the greatest musical and performative freedom, as it is not based on a genuine work of the classical canon like the other Stegreif programmes, and therefore leaves the greatest possible scope for interpretation and active participation of the audience, is *#improphonie*. Here, the audience can move freely between the musicians and decide for themselves how closely they want to engage in the programme. Large parts of the musical programme are improvised, which means that everyone in the room can respond to impulses, most of which can come from the orchestra, of course, but also from the audience. The latter is not only actively involved in the scene, but also in the sound, such as through improvised choral moments. For example, the premiere of *Giovanni. Eine Passion* [Giovanni. A Passion] at the Neukölln Opera, which was performed as a concert in Berlin's Prinzessingärten, was an affectionate departure with the conventions of opera, merging musicians and singers. In addition to the described moments of connection between orchestra and audience, we incorporate participatory elements into our performances. For example, during our performance of the *symphony of change* at the Philharmonie Berlin, cardboard boxes were passed from the stage into the auditorium, which then travelled through the rows of seats. There are also repeated rupture-like elements, such as the premiere of *#bechange: Thinking* at the Dresden Philharmonie, in which the workshop participants from the previous workshop were integrated into the programme and became part of the concert with a spoken chorus from the audience.

This list of examples is complemented by parameters related to the framing of the concert. These include an active concert introduction, which can be tailored to the audience. In some cases, there is also a musically staged introduction to the actual concert programme, such as at the premiere of *#bechange: Feeling* in Bad Kissingen, where the audience was led from the foyer into the concert hall with excerpts from *#freemahler*. In addition, there are post-concert discussions, accompanying programmes, etc. to enable as many visitors as possible to take part.

Reflection and challenges of the Stegreif approach

The described approach of the Stegreif Orchestra is of course accompanied by some difficulties and problems, which should be briefly mentioned here in the sense of self-reflection.

Each Stegreif programme is adapted to the performance space after a relevant rehearsal phase. This is necessary because scenic and choreographic elements play a major role, so that one has to take into account the spatial conditions. In addition to time and resource-related factors, there is above all a dispositional problem here, as other professional orchestras require significantly less rehearsal time at the performance venue than we do.

In addition to this production-specific ‘sand in the gears’, there are also content-related hurdles and complexities that the orchestra has to deal with – sometimes more, sometimes less, but continuously. These include ambitious and large-scale programmes such as *#bechange*, which, over the course of a year and a half, includes five separate premiere programmes and 16 workshops on topics (in this case, Sustainability) that some experts have been dealing with for decades. Although working with complex social issues creates social relevance and topicality, it can also be overwhelming in terms of content, and can increase the gap between collective creative power and artistic overload. Working in a collective is incredibly productive in many ways, but of course some processes, especially when it comes to focusing on artistic content at a premiere, are not necessarily easier.

Last but not least, the described extensive mediation formats in musical-scenic concerts and in classical mediation formats can appear ingratiating and pretentious. By attempting to create and allow closeness in the moment, Stegreif very consciously runs the risk of appearing pathetic or even empty of content. In our opinion, this can only be countered by active action in the form of professionalism, persuasiveness, and the unconditional will to fail with relish and a twinkle in the eye. The Stegreif Orchestra has been pursuing this for ten years now – and has a lot of fun doing it!

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