

The transactional culture of chamber music performance now and into the future

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Background

Professional chamber musicians, the venues that engage them and the audiences in attendance interact, deploying values related to artistic skill and endeavour, public engagement and entertainment, prestige and financial viability. Plans, actions and responses feed the scope, quality and outcomes of the experience and require in-depth understanding particularly as we grapple with the challenges COVID-19 presents to the live music performance ecology.

Aim

This study investigates the experiences of professional chamber ensembles as they encounter musical and social demands, manage communications and deliver performances in a concert series within a premier venue. It aims to offer insights into micro (interpersonal) and macro (organisational/cultural) experiences between musicians, venue and audiences.

Method

Case study data come from 15 chamber ensembles (each comprising 2-5 players) participating in a concert series in a renowned Australian live music venue. These were first collected across 2019 and included: contextual information provided by the venue and the ensembles via email; field observations of the performances; and focus group discussions with performers, venue staff and audiences. Data were prepared (transcribed where necessary) and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Additional data have been collected following the first two waves of COVID-19, to offer insights into prospects for the ensembles and the venue entering the 2021 concert season.

Results

Emergent themes include the delicate balancing of economic, esteem and diversification values for both performers and venue in planning and accepting the work. Music cohesion offers a further point of emphasis, the 'art of the ensemble' being a key value for all stakeholders. A related theme of importance is interpersonal social interaction, at all levels and across all stages of planning and executing the performances. Pivotal factors surrounding the audience experience include depth of emotional experience, a balance between familiar and novel encounter, informality and experience of social inclusion.

Conclusion

Specific and often subtle transactions shape the motivations, planning and execution of ensemble performances. While stakeholders inevitably have different and varied experiences, their interactions are pivotal in determining satisfaction and continue the virtuous cycle of transactions that constitutes chamber music performance.

Implications

Fluid and responsive transactions seemingly sustain stakeholders in seeking routes to realise a 'Covid Normal' future in which the culture of ensemble performance can continue, now to be moderated using socially distanced, no-interval live performance and online variants suitable for potential lockdowns.

Keywords: Chamber musicians, transactions, interactions, interpersonal, organisational