

Case study:
Experimenting with and Renewing the Concert Form –
The «Innovatoires» Competition at the Paris
Conservatoire

The Origins of the Project

How does one renew the concert, both in terms of form and content, and how does one develop a new relationship with one's audience? How does one experiment and take risks, integrating other art forms, integrating the relationship amongst the works to be performed, the relationship to the venue, to the audience...?

The challenges all artists now face gave rise to a competition entitled "Innovatoires", open to music and sound engineering students at the Paris Conservatoire.

Created by an ad-hoc committee composed of professors and department heads which met three times in the fall of 2006 to explore what might be meant by the renewal of the concert form, the competition took as its point of departure the following questions:

- How does one create a new relationship between artist and audience?
- How does one create and indeed encourage a desire for music on the part of spectators?
- How does one handle space, lighting, and the architectural realities of concert venues?
- How does one build a program in which works interact (dialogue) amongst themselves?
- How does one take advantage of the flourishing world of exhibits and museums?

Two evenings entitled "les Innovatoires" in December 2007 and March 2008 were offered to the two winning teams. The financial costs of realizing the winning projects are borne by the Conservatoire – and it is this opportunity to realize one's "dream" project that constitutes the prize. The competition was launched in December 2006, and required submissions by April 2. The ad hoc committee then reviewed the proposals and invited a select number of finalists for interviews, based on originality, innovativeness, and the precision and realism of the projects.

After the two "Innovatoires" evenings take place, the winners will provide a written evaluation of their experience and meet once again with the working group to provide feedback. Given the response to this year's proposal, the Conservatoire intends to extend to 3 the number of evenings dedicated to the "Innovatoires" concept in 2008-09.

The Competition Rules and Objectives

- Candidates are to propose a written project for a concert of one hour in duration;
- Two projects will be selected;
- The renewal of the concert form is at the heart of the competition, and as such projects need to participate in a reflection and form of experimentation taking into account:
 - Concert progression (rhythm, duration, organization of time over the course of the evening);
 - Program (coherence, interaction between works);
 - Scenography (lighting, architecture);
 - Relationship between the performer and the audience
- Concert projects are to be proposed by an interdisciplinary team, involving students from different departments and disciplines, extending eventually to artists from outside the Conservatoire (actors, painters, sculptors, etc.)

- Projects proposed need to take into account the concrete realization of a concert, including a detailed description of technical requirements, a communication plan, and the concert program.

The Conservatoire provides:

- A fully-equipped Interdisciplinary Hall, with lighting and production technicians at the students' disposal;
- Audiovisual support;
- Instruments from the Conservatoire collection (orchestra or keyboard)
- Realization of the PR plan proposed and printing of the concert program written by the students.

All appropriate departments (production, audiovisual, communication, library) made themselves available to answer student's questions as to the feasibility of particular ideas.

The Results

Fourteen projects were received, and five teams were interviewed. The two projects selected were "In Futurum" and "Scènes de Mains" (Hand Scenes). Herewith a short summary of the winning projects, in the students' own words.

In Futurum

The project involves 7 people: a trio (violin/viola, saxophone, piano), an actor, a jazz composer, a sound engineer, and a painter. The idea took root in the traces left by Erwin Schulhoff, the central character: first, the discovery in a catalogue of an unpublished work entitled "Jazz Concertino for violin, saxophone and piano," then the subsequent confirmation following a correspondence with Prague that the manuscript existed, and the exploration of the composer and his works. A student of Reger, discovered and oriented by Dvorak, advised by Debussy, Schulhoff left behind an opus largely influenced by Duke Ellington. Linked to Berg and Hindemith, Schulhoff spent his nights dancing to ragtime, and 23 years prior to his death wrote a work entirely composed of silences, entitled "In Futurum" – well in advance of John Cage.

An actor and the three musicians lead the audience towards its future, a future at times worn down, or present elsewhere... lighting changes and projections of images of the past announce new music and a visual response to the repertoire. Through a constant dialogue between narration, performance, and visual projections, borders between interpretation, improvisation, creation, classical music, jazz, concerts and theatre disappear, leading to a free-form pathway in which fragments of things seen, heard or dreamed of subsist. Schulhoff, Hindemith, Milhaud, the writer Artaud, and the painter Grosz are all present, at once serious and joyful, never alone, always surrounded by silence.

Scènes de mains – «Hand Scenes»

The project, while not pretending to give birth to a totally unknown form of performance, is nevertheless the result of an innovative approach based on the mixture of different art forms, a strong interaction between the public and the performance, and plays on lighting. The project involves seven tableaux, with a number of transitions: a narrator recites short original texts on the fingers of his hand while 14 musicians, 2 dancers and 5 visual artists intervene periodically. The musicians use the "sound painting" improvisation technique to highlight the importance of hands in the making of music via an original form of musical performance, part way between concert, theatre, ballet and exhibit.

Text by Gretchen Amussen