

Case study: Stichting 'De Kamervraag' (Support organisation for chamber music)

The core business of the support organisation De Kamervraag is realising the development and quality of chamber music in the Netherlands. First of all this means support for musicians and stages. But the organisation is also a connecting partner for governments, foundations and other organisations. An important task of De Kamervraag is to give information and transfer knowledge, to advise and guide projects. The chamber music server plays a pivotal role in this process.

The support organisation De Kamervraag is subsidized by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Research.

This profile is to be read together with the SWOT analysis of De Kamervraag.

'It is very important to seize all opportunities'

Taking an analysis made about the profession of chamber orchestra musicians as a starting point, Leo Dijsselbloem, project leader of the Stichting Kamervraag in The Netherlands (Support Organization for Chamber Music) takes a closer look at a number of the signalled trends.

Broad offering

Let's begin with a number of remarkable issues from the total picture that the analysis shows (analysis below), and one of them is breadth. The Netherlands have a large offering of chamber music and right now there is great interest for it as well. In absolute numbers, more than a million people a year attend a chamber music concert, and this is quite a lot. There is great diversity in forms of expression as well, from traditional to modern to authentic. This is confirmed by people from abroad. When you ask someone from outside the Netherlands to give a picture of the Dutch music practice, they always mention this broad offering and the diversity. There is also a great support structure in The Netherlands, more so than abroad. There are opportunities here for concerts and also financial opportunities. However, you do not become rich making music in Holland, salaries are not high. When you compare them to salaries in other European countries (countries with a similar standard of living and concert offering), then they are certainly lower here. The only country where a musician earns less these days is Great Britain.

Preference for classical music

With 'Tradition' in the column 'Strengths', we mean that tradition is a continuous source of inspiration. Pieces by composers such as Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart are still performed in string quartets, piano trio's etc. This is chamber music in its original form, traditional. There are still many musicians who choose to work like this and the number of young musicians in these ensembles is remarkable. There may not be another performing art where the age difference between the public (often 55+) and the people on stage is so big. Especially in smaller venues, where many young ensembles play, the average age of the musicians is about twenty-five. It is often said that you don't appreciate classical music until you are of a riper age, but it is these young musicians who show great initiative in working with it. They see the possibilities. This trend does not apply to young people and youth culture in general, most will not become very enthusiastic about classical music. But the audience does consist of people who want to listen to classical music, rather than modern music. This is very different for music than for an art form such as literature; hardly anyone these days reads the

literary contemporaries of Beethoven and Haydn. Most people only read contemporary literature, but are not very interested in modern day composers. There are opportunities here, but this does not mean that there are opportunities for everyone. Competition is huge and seizing chances can be difficult. In our country alone there are about 1100 ensembles, or 'entities' as we call them. And with this we mean all initiatives that offer themselves, that give concerts or that are represented by an agent. A pianist with a soloist programme and the same pianist working with a cellist are two separate entities for us. All initiatives count. Next to this we also know that there are between 5000 and 6000 concerts to distribute each year. On average this comes down to five concerts per ensemble. So there is not exactly an abundance of possibilities.

Fertile ground

With the 'Broad humus layer' in the 'Strengths' section, we also mean this offering of young musicians and the infrastructure of small venues that comes along with it. We are talking here about young talents that find a place, the layer you find in small venues, often ran by volunteers. This is where the special talents get an opportunity to develop itself. Big names such as Janine Jansen and Pieter Wispelwey also performed in these venues. This broad humus layer in these small venues is a fertile breeding ground for musicians and ensembles that eventually outgrow the small venues and find their way to the large ones.

If we look at the column 'Weaknesses' we see a 'tendency towards conservatism'. With this we do not mean that the profession of chamber musicians as a whole is conservative, because there are certainly innovative developments here, but that the concert situation itself is very established. There is a certain 'museum' attitude, not only concerning repertoire, but also in visual presentation, setting, publicity and the ratio musician/audience. There are silent agreements about this and there is no great inclination for change. Much more could be done than just to 'preserve what is beautiful'. Of course there are discussions about this, but they are mostly about musical content, such as new interpretations, much less about setting.

'Trends' sometimes paint wrong picture

In the column 'Weakness' is also mention of 'Trends and hypes', and the question is how these relate to my ideas about conservatism. With trends and hypes we mean that specific government policies can be very directional in relatively short periods of time. When for example a state secretary declares that we have to focus on attracting a younger audience, we see a shift in focus of funds and subsidy suppliers as well. Applications are written according to these demands and suddenly we have a 'trend', because this is where the money is. And apart from this, what also happens is that ensembles experience brief times of being 'in' or 'happening'. For a while they are very popular with the audience, but unfortunately this does not last and after a while they are forgotten. So with 'hype' we do not mean a change from winter- to summer fashion in chamber music, because for this conservatism still plays too large a part.

Beer good example for music

Another weakness is the too great supply of chamber music. This makes it difficult for venues and audiences to make choices. There are not many clear distinctions between what is being offered, and if there are they are usually about content. 'They play Haydn, we play Beethoven.' This has resulted in a diffuse offering and you may wonder what good this is to anyone. This may be a good place to make a comparison with the great supply of beer brands. There are so many kinds of beer on offer that at the end of the day you cannot distinguish between one and the other. Or perhaps you can, but only if you are a great connoisseur. In beer brands now, it is the industry that makes you believe that one brand is totally different from another. This focus on 'being different', of positioning a brand, is something we hardly do in chamber music.

Lacking world class?

A last word of explanation concerning the column 'Weaknesses' I would like to give about the remark: 'Not much absolute world class'. Of course this is not unique for The Netherlands, but it is an assessment. And it is a conclusion you can draw when you look back to the already mentioned 'Broad humus layer' in the column 'Strengths'. From this layer, which offers great opportunities, not much great talent finds its way to international venues. And with this I do not mean the musicians, who also play in smaller venues abroad, but real talent that performs in great concert halls and venues that are known to a large audience. There is a discrepancy here, between this broad layer and the absolute top. Holland tends to invest more in a broad development than in excellence. We also see this in the decentralization that our social-cultural policies aim at. We are a densely populated country and this decentralization makes it possible for every town or city to have its own theatre and enable you to find chamber music everywhere. And this is all of good quality, but not world class. In this The Netherlands differ from France, for example, which has more of a festival culture. And these exclusive festival stages only programme what is really good. Because of this, excellence is much more important and the broad base is developed much less. Decentralization as we know it is a very prohibitive and difficult issue in France, because large areas of the country are very sparsely populated. Although we have to make a reservation here that it depends on the kind of festival, but in general the readiness to give festivals big budgets is greater in France - and also in Austria, Germany and Scotland - than it is in The Netherlands. Take Avignon for example, which hosts the absolute European top. Although of course France also has smaller festivals with more modest budgets and artists. To round this off, chamber music does not have a clear profile or product and this is also a weakness. Chamber music is very diverse and many things can be counted as chamber music, modern, old, new, traditional, you name it. Ask an outsider to describe chamber music and you will hear something different every time. Even for the people involved it is difficult to give a clear definition.

Create a clear profile

The opportunities presented in the analysis also deserve some attention. Of all opportunities mentioned for students of the conservatoire, an innovation such as 'Full opportunities for new initiatives' is very important. The way this innovation will take shape of course greatly depends on the kind of creative effort that is put into it. We have a tradition and we know that we lack a clear profile. To create a clear profile as an ensemble you will have to make bold choices. It will certainly take musicians some time to get used to this idea, and not just musicians but also venues and audiences. As an example of this kind of profiling, I would like to mention the Kronos Quartet. The way they positioned themselves and their way of working also made venues apprehensive, but by now they have created their own following. With this I do not mean that musicians necessarily have to be 'playful' to distinguish themselves; quality itself can be enough. And that is what classical music usually starts with. Take for example the Rubens Quartet, a young, very good, but traditionally oriented string quartet, which is very popular and gives many concerts.

Another opportunity lies in 'New media and new forms of presentation'. In this also, opportunity is closely linked to the input of creativity. There are opportunities, but you have to be willing to be bold. The BBC initiative for example, that allowed people to download Beethoven, was a huge success. And there are many more ways of using new media. With more creativity chamber music can be freed from its lacklustre image. I again mention the Kronos Quartet: they attract a very different audience than the average string quartet. That is very interesting and unbelievably valuable to see, certainly for a new, young generation, that already has so much more experience with new media than the present and older generations.

A wealth of opportunities

In fact there is not just one other important opportunity in the column of opportunities mentioned. All opportunities are important to take a look at and to seize. Right now aging

audiences can form an opportunity because it makes for larger audiences. But in ten years' time this will have changed. It is a start, but not a long term aim. From this point of view an opportunity like this can also be a threat. Small scale initiatives are also important to mention. In the form we know it now chamber music can be applicable in many situations. This is very different for an orchestra, for example, which is much more cumbersome. Small scale initiatives and flexibility allow chamber music to be much more versatile, far less static. We once had an initiative, here in Amsterdam, where every twentieth or so person who subscribed to a certain series of concerts, received a concert at their home for free. These are great ideas of course.

Professionalizing small venues

In the next column we find the word 'Threats' which is quite strong. It sounds a bit scary but it does not have to be. Here we are talking about remarkable developments to which we have to remain alert and which we have to make use of. If we do this, they can become opportunities. The 'Lack of clear identity' indicates the broadness of what is on offer. It is amorphous, unclear, does not distinguish itself enough, although, as we have seen, it does attract many people. This 'Lack of clear identity' becomes especially clear in policies concerning chamber music. Before, hardly anyone knew how much there was on offer, what kind of audiences in what kind of numbers were interested in it or which venues were available. We know more about this now. It is not that we signal that this 'Lack of clear identity' is getting stronger, but it is something we have to remain alert to.

Of great importance is the increasing demand for professionalizing volunteers. The smaller venues, think for example of traditional locations such as manor houses, castles and churches, are often ran by volunteers, who have sometimes been doing this for years. The government now exercises increasing pressure on these volunteers, which comes from changes in the subsidy structure. It has become much more difficult to obtain money and it requires specific knowledge and skills to be able to deal with this problem. Volunteers will have to become more professional to be able to keep up with the changes. In many cases this requires a different and better management of venues than there is right now. The government also has an interest in making management more professional, because they want the whole to become more manageable. In many cases however, the volunteers have been part of this management from the very beginning. In the course of time they have developed habits and ways of dealing with daily challenges. They do not like this pressure that requires them to become more professional and sometimes this even leads to the loss of a venue. Bringing in 'new blood' that is better able to cope with these demands on their professionalism, might be a solution. But often management does not know how to find these people and this could also lead to the loss of small venues. On the other hand, this creates opportunities for new initiatives and we see this actually happening. So we are not seeing a decrease in the number of venues, right now. For each venue we lose, another comes into place. But many musicians do feel that things are getting worse, concerning venues. The problem lies in increased competition rather than in a decreased number of venues. The 1100 ensembles we have are quite a lot for the small number of venues available.

Music has to compete

We have not specifically gone into the multicultural aspect and chamber music in this analysis. But there are initiatives in this area as well and they have been going on for some time. Ton de Leeuw, for example was already working with this in the seventies. And still there are new developments, such as with the Atlas ensemble. Chamber music is also making crossovers and this provides opportunities. We do see multicultural influences in the last column row, but here it is put in the context of the large offer of entertainment there is today. The changes in how populations are made up these days and the consequences this has for taste, interest and preferences, plays a major part in this. If people decide what to do on a Saturday evening and see that it is raining, chances are they will choose to entertain themselves with a new DVD, rather than a concert, for which they will have to go out. There is a definite decline in public interest per event, even though I do not have exact figures to

support this. It is more of a feeling, perhaps. People feel that there is too much and that they do not want to go everywhere. They ask themselves how much it matters if they miss this concert or that show. This large offering has reduced people's interest in going to chamber music concerts or other cultural events. It is no longer unique, because there simply is too much. The connection with specific ensembles or special venues is no longer felt or built up. Before, the Holland Festival used to be key where new presentations were concerned. If a new play had its premiere, it could count on great interest from the audience. Now there is a wide offering of this kind of events as well and this makes it more fragmentary. The Holland Festival is still important and innovative, but it is no longer unique. In The Netherlands we now have more of a festival culture as well. This may seem unique, just like in France, but a difference with France is that the offer there really is unique.

Text by Rineke Smilde