

On the Potentials of Hybrid Concert Formats

Why analog-digital realities interact in Music Mediation and the dramaturgical approaches they offer.

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Abstract

Communication, reach and participation can take on new significance in the artistic engagement with digitality, especially when combined with analog experiences. This article reflects on the development of hybrid concert formats, exploring the dramaturgical possibilities and potentials that they can offer for the practice of music mediation.

La communication, la diffusion et la participation peuvent prendre une nouvelle dimension lorsque le numérique est utilisé dans des projets artistiques, en particulier lorsque cette technologie est combinée avec des expériences analogiques. Cet article se penche sur le développement de formats de concerts hybrides, en explorant les possibilités dramaturgiques et le potentiel qu'ils peuvent offrir pour la pratique de la médiation de la musique.

Kommunikation, Verbreitung und Partizipation können eine neue Dimension gewinnen, wenn digitale Technologien in künstlerischen Projekten eingesetzt werden, insbesondere in Kombination mit analogen Zugängen. Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der Entwicklung hybrider Konzertformate und untersucht die dramaturgischen Möglichkeiten sowie das Potenzial, das sie für die Praxis der Musikvermittlung bieten können.

Keywords

Hybridity, Digitality, Participation, Concert Design, Concert Performance

Whether in engines, linguistics, or research – hybridization is everywhere. Though originally meant to convey the fusion of two different systems, phenomena, or approaches, the term “hybridization” has, since the COVID-19 pandemic, come to be

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more commonly associated with the blending of analog and digital elements. In the world of performing and musical arts, it is very common to combine various elements: interdisciplinary art is *en vogue*, with the resulting artistic works often defying classification into a single genre or category. As artists immerse themselves into new, innovative formats, they strive to be as fluid and intangible as possible. This is reflected in the various ways they are described: artists become “genre-busting”, they are “navigating between worlds”, musicians call themselves performers. There is generally a lack of succinct terminology for something which, as an artistic representation, describes the state of the world: difficult to categorize and simultaneously demanding connection, exchange, and the transcendence of boundaries.

Music mediation, an interdisciplinary discipline often working in the “in-between” spaces, epitomizes hybridity. This makes it all the more intriguing to observe that a significant aspect of our lived reality – the interweaving of the digital and the analog – is seldomly artistically addressed in music mediation.

This text is not a lament about how livestreaming has become obsolete. Rather, it aims to explore how we can artistically engage with the simultaneousness of the analog and the digital in the context of music formats. So far, and even in the post-pandemic era, digitalization has primarily meant the static filming of live music performances. The following discussion, from a dramaturgical and cultural mediation perspective, will highlight why it is worthwhile to engage with digital hybridity in the context of music mediation.

In 2022, we, as part of the artistic collective Godot Komplex¹, together with media artist Ella Estrella Tischa² developed a hybrid concert performance (another commonly used term for hybrid artistic forms that aim to be more than just a standard concert) entitled *Let’s Play: Connection Loading* which premiered at the Konzerthaus Vienna³. In this performance, we combined digital and analog elements so that the participants navigate an open game landscape offsite as well as online, where they tackle various musical challenges and solve quests to unlock new playing fields. The Berio Hall of the Konzerthaus Vienna was recreated using the nostalgic aesthetics of 90s 8-bit game worlds on the video conference platform *gather.town*, while digital and interactive

¹ Godot Komplex was founded by the two singers and project developers Johannes Worms and Franziska Hiller, together with the oboist and directress Hannah Baumann. The collective creates aesthetically engaging musical events and positions itself as a think tank for stage formats and participatory experience spaces (www.godotkomplex.de, accessed November 5, 2024).

² Ella Estrella Tischa is a multimedia artist and directress and part of the rockband Atomic Lobster, with whom Godot Komplex developed the performance concept as well as the interactive elements.

Illustrator, graphic designer and animation artist Christina Mäckelburg created the digital landscape of *Let’s Play* and also hosted the digital and analogue audience through the room (christina-maekelburg.de, accessed November 5, 2024).

³ A trailer to the project can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NirhJ_OUbj4 (accessed November 5, 2024) Godot Komplex, ‘Let’s play:Connection Loading (Godot Komplex/Ella Estrella Tischa/Christina Mäckelburg) ©2022’, YouTube.

elements in the analog space created a connection to cyberspace. In both spaces, the audience was invited to explore three different musical islands through shared quests, including the use of handheld cameras, improvisational opportunities with touch-me playtronics, and dressing up avatars. We aimed to connect people from the audience, wherever they were experiencing it.



Figure 1. People from the audience filming close-ups of the stage with handheld cameras for both audiences.



Figure 2. People from the audience improvising together with oboist Hannah Baumann and Touch-me Playtronics hidden in the stage design.

Through our intensive engagement with the interweaving of digital and analog realities, a lengthy conceptual phase, and numerous “dry-runs” required for the technical aspects, we aimed to understand hybridity as a potential rather than a deficit. It is this very experience, the bringing together of different interfaces where people interact, that we see as a great potential for music mediation and new artistic stage formats.



Figure 3. Providing new perspectives on the scenery through handheld cameras.



Figure 4. The digital audience deciding the stage outfit of singer Johannes Worms.

One key insight was that a hybrid concert format cannot function without participation. Hybrid concert formats can only work if the audience is engaged and feels part of the experience and event. Hybrid concert formats can only work if there is a connection to what is happening offsite. Hybrid concert formats can only work if there is a bridge between the worlds where different realities meet at supposedly different places simultaneously.

How do we achieve this?

To highlight this interaction, the hybridity, those of us who have experience in music mediation and creating in the analog space must first ask ourselves what potentials the digital realm has. Often, this parallel digital reality is treated as an addition to the irreplaceable analog experience. However, in this case, the final goal should be to understand the digital not as a translation of the analog but instead to use its own digital means to achieve artistic objectives and initiate a mediation process – and even to create its own artistic language.

The Communicative Aspect

One particular potential of the digital realm is its unique forms of communication, such as chats, video messages or reels, which have become ingrained in our daily use. Sign language has also found new everyday applications through emojis and abbreviations, extending beyond verbal communication to offer expanded means of expression and interaction through media. Utilizing these tools, which most people handle intuitively, can be especially interesting for participatory engagement. By incorporating everyday interaction functions like chat, video calls, or break-out sessions into music formats, a new kind of storytelling can be unlocked. This approach is less about innovation but more about changing perspectives on the functions' daily use as well as artistically reinterpreting them. In our Let's Play performance, we gave the digital audience the possibility to communicate with the digital community as well as with the Berio Saal, through a group chat and the use of emojis. Through these tools, they were actively involved to (dis)agree, vote and even decide on the dramaturgy of the performance.



Figure 5. Offsite and online audience meeting through a big screen in the middle of the room.



Figure 6. The digital audience expressing their emotions by activating personalized emojis.

This approach also involves redefining collective experience spaces through non-physical but still human presence, offering approaches to musical experiences where individual experiences are placed in a new tension with the communal. The fact that every action in the digital realm is an expression of a person interacting with digital tools has been a topic of discussion which occurs more frequently especially with the rise of AI. This awareness should be integral to the artistic use of digital tools. The video game industry has recognized these possibilities, enabling the creation of large, global communities. This potential can also offer a new awareness of globalism that the analog cannot.

Moreover, the social reach afforded by the globally connected web (the so-called world wide web,) offers a new form of networking and connection. Seemingly distant, unknown people can suddenly appear close and familiar. This is partly because the digital functions both locally and globally. The paradox of physically distant people appearing simultaneously reachable, while we ourselves maintain a certain distance and anonymity in our private spaces with our devices, can encourage people to participate more readily, even in a low-threshold, observational role, without being observed themselves. In Let's Play we experienced that the direct invitation to the audience to share personal feelings, combined with the visual, non-verbal, and low-threshold response through emojis, led to intimate, affectionate reactions from the digital audience during the listening process and increased the willingness of those in the room to participate.

The Spatial Aspect

We are accustomed to 2D interactions via screens, which, because they are seemingly “flattened”, are not comparable to real spatial experiences. While it is true that physical spatial experiences are not fully reproducible, significant progress in AR/VR/XR is being made, though it has yet to be widely adopted in concert contexts. Nevertheless, it is worth examining the potentials these parallel spaces can offer: while analog and even public spaces impose limitations, digital spaces can be modified at will. In computer gaming, entire worlds are built where people can move using interfaces like keyboards, mouse cursors, or avatars. The freedom of movement without physical barriers offers new artistic points of contact for rethinking space, especially concerning the much-discussed aspects of accessibility and inclusivity.

Access to digital spaces is less about physical or social characteristics and more about access to technology and the experience or prior knowledge which the digital audience brings with it – anyone with internet access and a compatible device can, in principle, participate.

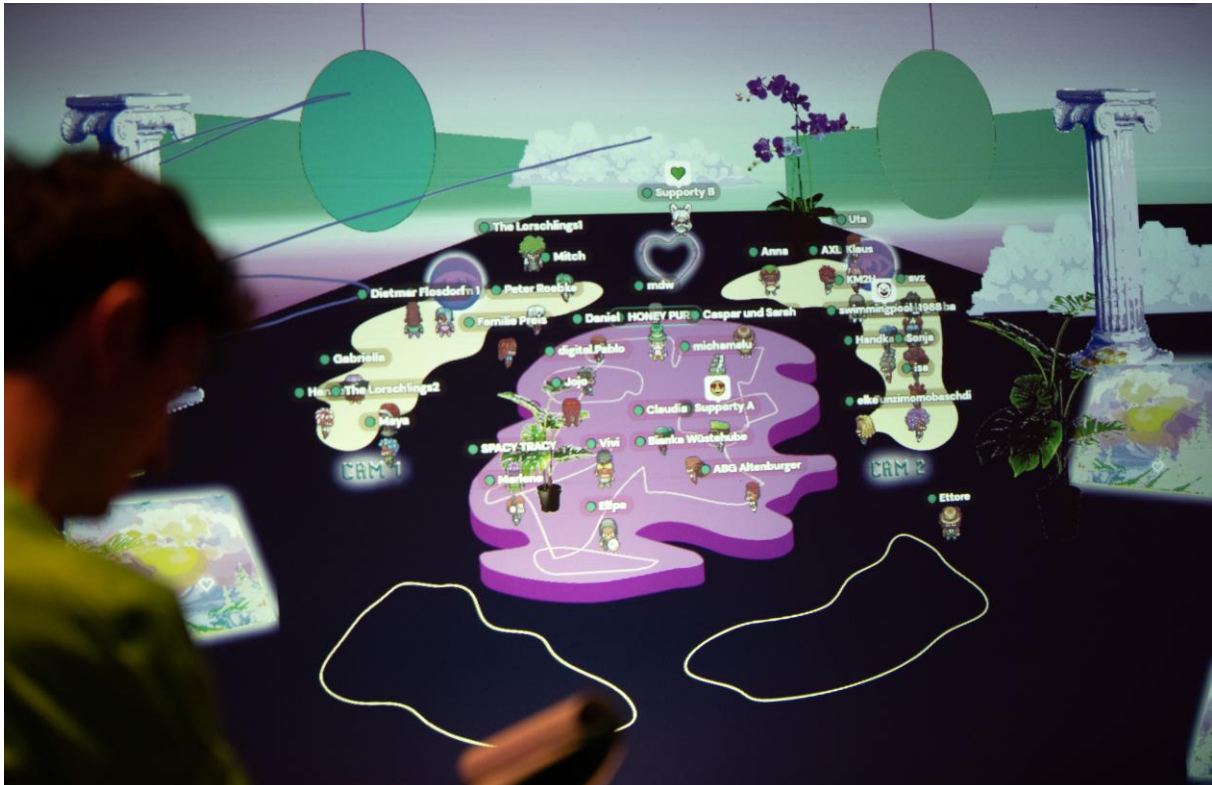


Figure 7. Online audience as avatars deciding for different camera angles through their position in the digital landscape.

The Potentials of Hybridity

Can we bring the best of both worlds into a concert experience through hybrid formats? It sounds enticing: combining both analog and digital possibilities simplifies access to music, extends reach, connects people globally, and engages digital natives.

However, implementation involves a certain complexity inherent to the nature of hybrid formats:

Simultaneously navigating two audiences, each with different qualities and modes of operation. One essential factor to consider is the significantly shorter attention span of the digital audience in front of their screens, while the analog audience physically moves and interacts with others. The analog audience enjoys live music, while the sound and image quality of the transmission heavily depend on individual home equipment. The digital format demands our visual sense and intuitive interaction with an interface. If music formats primarily involve active listening, different access points need to be created for the digital audience. This is where the potential of the digital comes into play, with its emphasis on playfulness and discovery – and the buzzword gamification.

Our response was to offer the audience numerous opportunities for interaction in both digital spaces and via streams, in order to actively shape their experience.

Whether it was creating small soundscapes to improvise along with the live music, voting on the concert's progression, or sharing thoughts via chat, the goal was to foster a sense of community that transcends the physical space.

For the analog audience, the presence of a digital audience also expands the concert space. The digital audience (visible on a large screen in the concert hall) opens a window to the outside world, encouraging interaction within the hall.

Hybrid concert formats can bring together two seemingly different audiences in one space, be it social, aesthetic, or even political. By granting them the right to co-create, they are given responsibility, potentially even shifting the interpretive authority from the artists to the audience. Additionally, the digital space has its own aesthetics, largely dependent on the skills of the designer, which can also influence the analog space.

Just as we consider the digital space as one inhabited by people, so it follows that it is a place where art is created. Digital spaces should be art spaces. Hybrid formats can help utilize digital spaces not only for consumption, research, and networking but also as sites of artistic expression. Perhaps we can even create a small utopia using artistic means: since certain (social) codes in the digital realm are not yet cemented, we might be able to redefine them through art.

Author Biography

Hannah Baumann works as an oboist, dramaturge, author, and music mediator. Her music-theatrical stage formats combine sound, language, scene, and participation as she reflects on local realism, human everyday life and the great universal themes. She co-founded the award-winning collective Godot Komplex, which develops aesthetic experiential spaces through collaborative practice. Productions have been created for institutions such as the Wiener Konzerthaus, Montforter Zwischentöne, and the Beethovenfest Bonn.