Der Berggeist vom Schöckl
Opera Graz and the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz Take Opera to the Countryside

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Abstract

Graz Opera and the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz developed a mobile miniature opera based on a Styrian legend, to be performed in small regional cultural initiatives in Styria. The first part with an open end took place in 15 locations, the second and final part once in the opera house in Graz. This article deals with the artistic realization of the project and illuminates the Berggeist vom Schöckl *from the perspective of music mediation and ethnomusicology. Of particular interest for both fields are the conditions and approaches of audience development elaborated here in relation to the field of tension between city and countryside.*

L'Opéra de Graz et l'Université de musique et d'art dramatique de Graz ont développé un opéra miniature mobile, basé sur une légende styrienne, afin de le présenter lors de petites initiatives culturelles régionales en Styrie. La première partie, avec une « fin ouverte », s'est déroulée dans 15 localités, tandis que la deuxième partie finale n'a eu lieu qu'une fois à l'opéra. L'article aborde la mise en œuvre artistique du projet et examine le « Berggeist vom Schöckl » du point de vue de la médiation de la musique et de l'ethnomusicologie. Il met notamment en évidence les conditions et les approches du développement du public dans le contexte de tension entre la ville et la campagne, un sujet qui présente un intérêt particulier pour ces deux domaines de recherche.

Die Oper Graz und die Kunstuniversität Graz entwickelten eine mobile Miniaturoper, die auf einer steirische Legende basiert und in kleinen regionalen Kulturinitiativen aufgeführt wurde. Der erste Teil mit einem offenen Ende fand an 15 verschiedenen Orten statt, der

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zweite Teil in der Oper Graz. Der Artikel behandelt die künstlerische Umsetzung des Projekts und beleuchtet „Berggeist vom Schöckl" aus der Perspektive von Musikvermittlung und Ethnomusikologie. Insbesondere geht er auf die Bedingungen und Zugänge von Audience Development im Spannungsfeld zwischen Stadt und Land ein, die für beide Felder von besonderem Interesse sind.

Keywords

Musikvermittlung, audience development, countryside, opera, Austria, ethnography, ethnomusicology

Introduction

> Come hear an opera in the country! Itinerant, lively, and very close to YOU, its audience. Loaded to the roof with four instrumentalists, two singers, and a technician, the Graz Opera's Puch Buggy will visit 16 towns in the seven regions of the province of Styria to surprise people of all ages with an interpretation of the legend of the ghost of Schöckl mountain. It's a miniature opera – in local dialect – and we invite everyone into the world of opera. (Promotional material developed for *Der Bergeist vom Schöckl*[1])

A new artistic director took over at the Graz Opera in the 2023/24 season. Ulrich Lenz is a dramaturge who previously worked in Linz, Mannheim, Hannover and Berlin. The position at the Graz Opera is his first artistic directorship and immediately from the beginning of his first season, Lenz's personal dramaturgical approach could be felt to characterize the entire season. Under the motto *Opera, open up* [Oper, öffne Dich], Lenz and his team set out to create new forms of communication and interaction between the audience and the opera, including its performers, on many levels.

A while before the beginning of his first season with the Graz Opera, Lenz contacted the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (KUG) with a proposal to plan and produce a mobile production with a local focus that would not only take the opera out of its building but that would bring a story of their own to the people of the Austrian province of Steiermark, or Styria – the province which the Graz Opera calls home. How exactly this idea would develop had not yet been fully imagined by Lenz, but in partnership with his primary interlocutor at KUG, Constanze Wimmer, they set forth with a commitment to creating something truly local.

Lenz knew he wanted to work with artists with strong connections to Styria, in particular those with a knowledge of local legends, dialects, and particularly, music. Christoph Breidler, a composer with Styrian roots, was commissioned to write the music.[2]

[1] Translation by Sarah Weiss.

[2] christophbreidler.com and de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanne_Wolf.

Susanne F. Wolf is German, but has been living in Austria for a long time and has written many comedies in dialect for theaters in Austria. In her approach to writing the libretto for the opera she employed an artistically exaggerated dialect mixed with critique and commentary from her Austrian colleagues.[3] In her search for a suitable subject she soon settled on a legend about Schöckl, Graz's local mountain. The original legend involves profiteers and their search for gold in the mountain, and an unsuspecting farmer who is drawn into their evil machinations, but who in the end is richly rewarded by the mountain spirit, or *Berggeist*, due to his kindness. To turn this legend into a miniature opera with all the necessary ingredients, a love story was added.[4] Using a combination of approaches from the music disciplines of music mediation and ethnomusicology, in what follows we examine the development of the opera itself, the goals of Opera Graz in initiating the production, describe the performances, analyze the reactions of the audiences around Styria and consider it all in the context of approaches to audience development.

What Did We Want to Find Out?

Audience development usually looks for ways to interest new audiences in a cultural institution's existing offerings. A lot of energy then goes into accompanying formats, such as introductory talks, discounted ticket prices, social events after performances or collaborations with schools, in order to attract visitors to the venue. Together with KUG - Kunstuniversität Graz, the Graz Opera took a different direction and produced a tailor-made format with which the cultural institution could reach out to the audience and communicate with them in the place where they actually live: in this case, in the countryside.

In our accompanying research, we were interested in how the production was developed with a focus on a rural audience, whether the audience really found the tailor-made production suitable for them, and which aspects were particularly attractive. We wanted to know whether interest in a later visit to the opera could be aroused, and whether the specific music mediation format of talking with artists and audience immediately after the last note was sung could create a real dialogue between the two parties. Two performances were selected from a tour of 16 venues: the premiere and first performance in St. Radegund and a particularly small venue in southern Styria in St. Stefan ob Stainz during the course of the tour. Finally, we wanted to know whether this approach of artistic dramaturgy and music mediation and true curiosity about venues outside of one's own institution can be a new benchmark for audience development that really changes the cultural institution as it opens up to a wider audience.

[3] Three of the seven musicians and three of the four singers involved all had roots in Styria, with the fourth singer coming from South Tyrol in Italy.

[4] A short documentary about the making of the production, giving some glimpses into the performance, can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgfrJPcpRKM.

Why Bring Music Mediation and Ethnomusicology Together?

Music mediation and ethnomusicology are two distinct research fields that might not normally be expected to overlap in content, but they do share some methodological approaches. The term *Musikvermittlung* [music mediation] was originally coined in German-speaking countries to describe a broadly defined field of practice that works to bridge the gap between music performance and the listener. The community of practice includes musicians, music educators, ensembles, concert halls, educational and social institutions, all of whom work on enabling and deepening aesthetic experience through music and establishing relationships between the audience and the performers. Practitioners of music mediation want to involve the audience in the performance process more than was previously expected, to encourage them to participate actively and to find new perspectives on the musical activity. Today, the subject has not only established itself as a field of practice, but also unites a young research community that scientifically investigates its approaches and methods.

While ethnomusicology was originally associated with research specifically about the traditional and classical musics of the 'non-West' (often represented somewhat negatively in comparison to European art musics), it has long ago freed itself from those difficult-to-map geographic limitations (Blum et al. 1993, Rice 2013). Ethnomusicologists primarily employ ethnographic methods, whether their analytical focus is on performance details or on cultural contexts and social meanings. In addition to the traditional research foci, contemporary areas of research in ethnomusicology now include popular musics from around the world, indigenous studies, comparative aesthetics, projects with applied or activist goals, and also European art musics in practice. There have been several extended ethnographic studies of European art music contexts such as Henry Kingsbury's (1988) ethnographic analysis of an American music conservatory, Kay Shelemay's work with the Boston Early Music Festival (2001), and Laudin Nooshin's 2014 edited volume entitled *The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music*, to mention just some examples. Anna Bull's (2019) study on the connections between social class and classical music has been intensively discussed in the context of music academies. Even if the study only touches on our project marginally, since the differences between urban and rural populations in Styria are not comparable to class differences in Great Britain, we see connections in her analysis that the social setting of classical music differs significantly from the informal, dialogical and participatory style of music in working-class culture. For us, this opens up an interesting analogy to the practice of folk music in Styria, as well as lines of connection in the composition of the miniature opera and the informal talk between musicians and audience following the performance.

In conversation with one another about music mediation and how to develop intersections between the fields, we came to the realization that ethnographic approaches, and a keen interest in understanding what people actually think, and how they construct their worldviews with respect to music and performances in general, easily connect the two fields. Ethnographic research is committed to the value of understanding

individual experience, which necessarily involves considering cultural, social, economic (etc.) contexts and their impact. Ethnographic approaches involve documenting, observing, collaborating, interpreting, and comparing the opinions and actions of individuals, rather than trying to define individuals through an averaging of responses to surveys as is common in other social science research. As the method is common to both music mediation and ethnomusicology, we decided to bring an ethnographic approach to gathering and interpreting opinions and responses from audience members who had attended performances of *Der Berggeist vom Schöckl*, in order to determine not only if the expectations of the production team and the management of Opera Graz were met, but also to begin to investigate the role and meaning of European art music in the lives of people who live away from urban areas and who may or may not be personally familiar with the repertory, the performance rituals or the venues.

The Performance

The performance was designed to be small and mobile, as the idea behind the production was to bring opera to the people in their own towns. The four musicians, a music mediator from KUG, and 2 singers from Opera Graz arrived at each of the 16 venues around Styria in a small van with the KUG logo on the side. In the performance, however, it should be noted that the performers all arrived together in one tiny Puch 500 buggy. Puch is a car factory located in the south of Graz, making small city cars and trucks, as well as motorcycles and bicycles. Although the brand and the production lines were sold to an Italian company in 1987, there is still a strong residual pride in the Graz-based company and its locally famous products. These kinds of references to local aspects permeate the text of the opera.

The premiere performance took place on Schöckl Mountain itself, in the town of Sankt Radegund on 10 March 2024. The other 14 performances of the first half of the opera took place around the province[5] finishing before the middle of May. One clever aspect of the production was that it was constructed in two intentionally separable halves. The first part was performed multiple times around the state and ended with a cliffhanger: Will the boy named Gruber, after surviving hexing from the *Berggeist*, find his inner hero and rescue his love from marrying the competition who lives next door or not? As the boy rushes off to Graz to stop the betrothal, we hope so. The second part was performed one time only in the opera house in Graz and the story is resolved, leading to a happy ending. Thus, within the artistic project itself, a tension was created in terms of content: of course, the story and the performance in and of themselves were intended to awaken a desire in its audience to experience the end of the opera. But where could one do that? Naturally, only in Graz and at the opera house. But would the

[5] The first part of *Der Berggeist vom Schöckl* was performed in the following locations: Bad Mitterndorf, Liezen, St. Georgen am Kreischberg, Judenburg, Leoben, St. Radegund bei Graz, Köflach, St. Stefan ob Stainz, Leibnitz, Kirchberg an der Raab, Feldbach, Gleisdorf, Pöllau bei Hartberg, Passail, Neuberg an der Mürz.

audience members actually decide to come to the city? If not, why not? And if not, could the project be considered a success?

The venues in which the first part was performed were all small cultural initiatives or organizations in the various regions. The proposed venues were selected by a member of staff at the KUG according to whether there was local interest in the project and whether the respective venue was suitable in principle. None of the spaces had a traditional proscenium-arch stage, but all of the spaces had previously been used for performances. Ideally, the space should not hold an audience of more than 100 people, in order to ensure the greatest possible proximity between the performers and the audience. The performances ultimately took place in converted movie theaters or old train stations, small libraries, galleries, music schools, multi-purpose halls and in the Puch Museum.

The performing musicians (clarinet, viola, Styrian harmonica, tuba) also had to be actors, since the score required them to speak, sing, wear and change simple costumes on stage, and take on acting roles while they played their instruments. In the course of the opera, they transformed themselves into horses, weather witches and 'predatory Viennese' who want to plunder the mountain of its gold and other treasures. The titular mountain spirit himself was embodied by the tuba player who developed an extended technique for playing and speaking into his instrument in order to perform the part.

The set, make-up, costumes, and props were designed to be simple and practical, so that there would be no need for lengthy set-up and dismantling work. This meant that the artists could take time to talk to the organizers and hosts before each performance, in order to solve the many minor difficulties arising from working on different stages for each performance, and negotiating the idiosyncrasies of each local venue. For all the performers, especially the students, but also the organizers, these negotiations and subsequent accommodations provided a realistic glimpse into some of the challenges of doing cultural work outside of the urban locations in which they were used to operate.

Immediately after each performance, which lasted around 50 minutes, there was an opportunity for audience members to engage in discussion with the actors and musicians. The audience was encouraged to ask the performing professionals questions about singing or musicking or anything else. The conversation was initiated and moderated by the accompanying music mediator. In an ideal form, these conversations would actually have been a simple and direct conversation between the audience and the performers. Nevertheless, all the music mediators were skillful in helping the audience bring their ideas and questions to the group. Some audiences were naturally more loquacious and braver than others. The following topics were addressed at nearly every performance: What motivated the audience to come to the performance? Did they have any previous experience with opera? What, in particular, did they appreciate about the performance? What did they think might happen in the second part of the opera? Further: How difficult is it to play an instrument and sing and speak at the same time? What difference does it make when a singer can look the audience in the eye? What difference

does it make to the audience if the performers speak in dialect? (More on these themes later.)

The cast and the musicians who performed in the second half were the same ensemble as had performed on the tour. These were supplemented by members of the Graz Philharmonic Orchestra and two additional roles, one that was played by the conductor of the evening and the other by the composer of the work.

Tickets (20 euros each) for the second part of the performance at the Opera Graz were available for purchase on site before, during, and after the performances of the first part. On the evening of the grand finale, a total of around 600 visitors actually attended the second part of the opera. By any assessment, this should be considered a great success, even though the hall seats 1,200. The number of people who actually saw the first half totaled somewhere near 1,000. We expect that people who had not seen the first half of the opera would not have been inclined to attend the second half. Therefore, we can conclude that more than 50% of those who attended the first half, many of whom had never before attended an opera, actually traveled to Graz from their home villages to attend the performance.[6] The fact that many audience members were visiting the opera in Graz for the first time could be seen in the general hubbub and excitement as people encountered the grandeur of the broad, carpeted staircase and the extravagance of the decorations in the hall. Many selfies and group photos were taken in the foyer and auditorium and an exuberant and cheerful atmosphere prevailed in the audience.

Listening to the Audience

While Wimmer functioned as the music mediator for the performances, Weiss adopted the role of an interested outsider, circulating among the audience before the performances and striking up friendly conversations about why people had decided to come to the performance, asking questions about people's experience of having an opera in their community hall or hearing dialect spoken on the stage in such a context, and interviewing people after the events. Weiss is an American and has only been studying German since she has been in Austria. The fact that she is a non-native German speaker meant, perhaps counterintuitively, that many audience members felt comfortable chatting with her. Most often people were surprised to hear a non-native speaker in the small-town context in which the performances took place. The surprise was enhanced when Weiss indicated that she was working with the *Berggeist* project and was also Professor at KUG. This information almost always led people to ask how it was that Weiss was involved in a project engaging and investigating the interest of Styrian communities in European art music and new operas. Their curiosity and her friendly responses to the questions of the individuals with whom she spoke, primed

[6] No official survey was taken to determine whether the audience had attended the first half somewhere in Styria. So this percentage is based on a logical surmise.

interlocutors to want to talk more. And, once the conversation had begun, it was easy for her to keep asking other questions and to exchange ideas about the expectations and reasons for attending the event. The following paragraphs are drawn from Weiss's field notes scribbled during the events and then rendered into legible text. She intentionally documented no names in her interviews but recorded details about their experiences when they were given. Each conversation began with her introducing herself and explaining that she was researching audience opinion about the performance. Because these stories are anecdotes recorded in Weiss's fieldwork notebook, in which she used the first person to record her thoughts, we preserve that tone here.

In Sankt Radegund bei Graz

At the first performance on 10 March 2024 in Sankt Radegund, the audience was packed, every seat taken. Many audience members were dressed up for the occasion. As I circulated the room, avoiding cables and nodding hellos to colleagues, I found an elegant couple sitting quietly and looking expectantly at the stage as the production members were finalizing the setup. I introduced myself and asked the couple if they had ever been to an opera before. They immediately said that they had been regular attendees at the Opera Graz for years and that they had only recently moved, in their retirement, to Sankt Radegund. We laughed about the fact that it seemed like then opera had followed them there. After the performance I asked them to share their opinions. They both thought that the initiative to bring the opera to the countryside was a worthy endeavor and they supported it. They thought the idea of creating an opera specifically based on a Styrian legend and using dialect meant that the opera would probably not be that popular outside of Styria or Austria and they wished that it might be possible to find a way to bridge that cultural gap. I pointed out that in its original importation to German-speaking lands, Italian opera was certainly foreign to most people and yet people managed to appreciate the performances. Now, with the aid of supertitles, did they think that the cultural gap could be bridged? One of the couple responded in the following way: "I think the gap could be bridged, but the palpable pleasure of feeling a deep cultural connection to the music, the story lines, and even the instruments used (especially the Styrian accordion and the tuba) would be missing. Maybe if a whole genre of similarly miniature operas set in Austria were to be developed, then they could be exported to other lands as a kind of genre, the way Italian opera had developed and been exported and ultimately imitated by other composers. This would of course be possible only as long as there were supertitle translations into the local dialects" (interview with an anonymous audience member, 10 March 2024).

The couple were most impressed with the use of dialect, marking it as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the performance. They confirmed that they would certainly attend the performance of the second half in the opera house and that they looked for-

ward to it. Whether or not this couple came from the demographic that the opera production group had hoped to cultivate is neither here nor there. Rather, it indicates that at least some people with regular opera connections were enthusiastic about the idea. One member of the couple exclaimed that they had been dubious that it would be possible to create the necessary musical fullness and complexity expected from opera scores with only four instruments. “We were amazed that with only four instruments, and with this unusual grouping, such an experience was possible. The music was complex and new. Certainly not music for a predictable musical. It really was an opera. Small, but real” (personal communication, 10 March 2024).

I was surprised to have met this opera-savvy, folk-cultural knowledgeable couple in my first interview in the project. Such a combination of knowledge and appreciation is, in my albeit limited experience, unusual. Urban Austrians I have interviewed often know about Styrian folk traditions, but do not necessarily feel connected to them. Conversely, rural-living, folk-music and -dance interested-Austrians I have interviewed in the context of research for this project expressed some surprise that folk music or instruments might be used in an opera. “Really?? An accordion on the stage for an opera?” exclaimed one interviewee. Other folk dancers I invited to attend the *Berggeist* opera said they would not come, suggesting that they have a sense of personal distance from the European art music world. One Styrian dancer I know stated that opera and the Opera Graz are “not really my world. I know where it is but I have never been inside” (personal communication, 12 March 2024). These conversations took place at a weekly Styrian dance session in Graz that I attend regularly. On that Tuesday I was encouraging the dancers to attend one or another of the performances of *Der Berggeist vom Schöckl*. Several others expressed interest, with one stating, “that it would be fun to hear an opera in Styrian dialect” (personal communication, 12 March 2024). In the end, to my knowledge, none of my dance colleagues attended one of the opera performances in the countryside.

In Sankt Stefan ob Stainz

In St. Stefan ob Stainz on 16 March 2024 I conducted a long interview with an elderly lady who said she attends everything that happens at the Stieglerhaus because it is her community theater, and she likes to support it and to be seen there. The woman seemed to enjoy herself throughout the performance, laughing mildly when the musicians suddenly slapped on their horse caps and started speaking and neighing at the same time. She listened intently during the arias and looked on with a certain disbelief when, after being hexed, Gruber, the male love-lead, found himself caught in a child’s play tunnel and began to sing his aria of despair at the thought of losing his beloved Anna through the small circular entrance of the tunnel.

After the performance, I asked her if she might be willing to talk a bit about how she felt having this performance come to her town. She immediately responded that they often have performances of all different kinds in St. Stefan ob Stainz and that this

one was simply more proof that their Stieglerhaus, a local cultural venue, was important and was able to attract people from all over. This strong sense of local pride was further confirmed when she reported that she was not likely to attend the performance of the second half, unless it were performed at the Stieglerhaus. Graz was just too far away and not interesting, not even if a shuttle were to be provided.

At the same performance, I noticed that a mother and her daughter were sitting in the middle of the audience. Throughout most of the performance the little girl watched and listened quietly. She was clearly following the story, rising to stand on her chair to see better when the musicians put on their horse hats. She was giggling and pointing. She stayed standing through the performance until Gruber was hexed and trapped in the play tunnel at which point she sat down immediately and scrambled quickly onto her mother's lap. She turned away from the performance and looked directly at me and then hid her face in her mother's shoulders. She turned once again to the stage to gauge whether it was safe to watch again. On seeing that Gruber was still caught in the child's play tunnel, she whispered something to her mother, and they got up and left the theater.

The little girl was both terrified and unable to look away, so they watched the rest of the opera from outside the room, looking through the window. I found them in the café after the performance and asked if they had enjoyed the performance. The mother explained that she liked to bring her child to all kinds of events and did so often. I asked the little girl what she thought, and she reported that it was very scary, even when she could see that Gruber was not actually gone or hurt. The mother thought it was fantastic to bring such activities to places outside of the city. Although she thought that she would like to attend the final performance, she did not think it would be possible, as it would be too late for the little girl and the mother had to work in the morning on Wednesdays. I asked her if, in the future, she might take her daughter to the opera. She responded that she thought this might be possible, because it would be good for her to see a performance in that kind of iconic building. When I queried what she meant by that, she said that it was important for her daughter to experience high culture and the opera house was one place where that could happen. Here it is unclear if the mother likes classical music and thinks that her daughter might enjoy experiencing such music, or if she thinks that the daughter will be improved, socially or intellectually, if she experiences performance in the opera house. Cultivation of an appreciation of classical music for personal enjoyment, or cultivation of classical music to provide skills/experiences needed for improved social status? Either or both of these together are possible.

Observations on After-Performance Audience Engagement

In the question-and-answer sessions after the performance, the discussion leaders often asked some of the following questions: What motivated the audience to come to the performance? For instance, was anyone there because someone else made them come? Usually there were at least two people who admitted that this is why they were there,

much to the amusement of the rest of the audience. Did they have any previous experience with opera? Usually, the response to this question was mixed, indicating a certain permeability between the urban and rural worlds, and not necessarily only through urban people retiring to small rural communities. In one particularly engaged conversation in Kirchberg an der Raab, several audience members identified themselves as life-long residents in the village. They indicated that, nevertheless, they felt quite connected to the art worlds of both Graz and Vienna, insisting that they regularly visited both cities to attend performances and exhibitions and then came back to their village to live their lives. This, they said, provided them real satisfaction, as it allowed them to have the best of both the urban and rural worlds. Responses to questions asking for their opinions about the performances were generally positive. But in the context of conversing directly with performers who had just finished their work, what audience member would criticize them to their faces in the moment. That said, most respondents indicated that they especially liked the fact that the musicians were doing much more than simply playing. Audience members were impressed that the musicians actually had to act as well as play and they wanted to know if the musicians found that challenging, and if they enjoyed it. Audience members also said that they found it exciting to be so close to the performers and the stage in general, especially to the singers. This led to questions about whether the performers found it hard to perform with the audience so close and also if they found it hard to negotiate different stages and performance setups in each location. It seems that the proximity of the performers encouraged audience members to feel more connected and to imagine and empathise with what it must be like to be a performer. This was mentioned by many people I interviewed as one of the most impactful aspects of the entire experience. Several of my interlocutors suggested that they had never really contemplated what it would be like to be the person on the stage. One woman at the performance at the Puch Museum in Judenburg said, “of course, you know they are humans and you admire their art, but you don’t really think of them as people until you feel them run by you, feel the wind they create through their motion, and even smell them, as you sit here” (personal communication, 27 April 2024). The combination of the professionalism of the performers and their proximity to the audience was clearly important for many audience members. Pretty much every audience agreed that Ana and Gruber would get together in the second half of the piece. But no one really knew how it would happen. We note here that this was also true of the composer and librettist at the time of the first couple of performances when they were still creating the second half.

One particularly generative question was what difference it makes to the audience if the performers speak in dialect. Some audience members could tell that not all speakers – whether musicians or singers – were native speakers of the Styrian dialect. Yet every audience member laughed hilariously when the speakers, whether musicians or singers, uttered any of the common Styrian insults and other specifically local turns of phrase. The pleasure, amusement and sometimes surprise at hearing dialect enunciated by the opera singers on stage was visible on the faces of the audience in every performance.

But what is the net effect of these measures designed to bridge the cultural and physical distance between urban and rural communities, and to bring opera and classical music into the community halls of Styria? The responses described above indicate that some of the goals set by the team may well have been met. But was it a success? Will some of those audience members who have not regularly attended classical music and opera performances actually change their habits and start going to the opera? The answer is, that we really cannot know without doing a long-term study. For instance, it might seem that relatively few people who attended the performance in St. Stefan intended to accept the invitation to come to Graz to see the second half of the opera. But it would be wrong to assume that there was a uniform reason for this. Their individual stories and personal trajectories have a great impact on whether people show up to see a performance or not. Even if we were to personally interview everyone who attended the performance in St Stefan ob Stainz, it is unlikely that there would be a dominant reason for people not choosing to attend the second half of the performances.

These examples show a mere sample of the breadth of the experience and diversity of world views of the audience who attended the performance and their decisions: on the one hand, experienced opera-goers who are curious about the special approach of this miniature opera in the countryside, culturally interested families in the countryside who are looking for opportunities to have artistic/culturally enriching experiences with their children close to home and, on the other hand, people who did not come primarily because of the opera, but because of the place where it was shown, with which they feel very connected for different reasons, or because they were forced to attend by family members or friends. This diversity indicates that it is necessary for music mediation research to consider this variety of motivation for participation, and therefore also to focus on cooperation and collaboration (not only with production houses and artists, but also with performance venues and individual audience members) in order to make this possible. This is particularly true when audience development is necessarily part of the project.

Music Mediation and/or Audience Development?

During the development process of the project, some decisive ideas took shape that paradigmatically positioned the project between audience development and music mediation. In view of this project, how can we differentiate between the objectives and goals of audience development and music mediation?

Birgit Mandel defines audience development as a cultural policy concept that originated in the Anglo-American world, but which can certainly be traced back to cultural management strategies in the German-speaking world. These were summarized in the 1970s in Germany, for example, under the slogan *Bürgerrecht Kultur* [citizens' right to culture] and were intended to become effective in a *Neue Kulturpolitik* [new cultural policy]. At that time, the question was already

> (...) how the existing, traditional cultural institutions could be preserved in the long term by attracting more visitors from social milieus that had previously been less well-reached. The goal of involving a broad, socially diverse population in the publicly provided, institutional cultural offerings, especially theaters, concert halls and museums, remains unachieved to this day. (Mandel 2016, 19)

In order to work towards this goal, the first fields of education emerged in the 1980s: *Museumspädagogik* [museum education], *Theaterpädagogik* [theater education] and *Konzertpädagogik* [concert education]. In view of the ageing audience, the institutions were looking for ways, outside of school, to introduce young people to museums, theaters, concert halls and opera houses. In the first stage, formats and workshop series were tried out in order to develop young audiences who would subsequently grow into the art and culture sector independently. A socio-political component was soon added – children from so-called educationally disadvantaged backgrounds in particular were to be reached, in order to guarantee the right to art and culture in publicly funded institutions:

> Both of the objectives formulated to date, i.e. attracting an 'audience of tomorrow' and addressing social groups who, as 'non-attendees', had previously not made use of publicly funded cultural offerings, can be subsumed under the term 'audience development'. (Petri-Preis 2023, 253)

What role does music mediation play in this? Even if it was born out of the fear of a dwindling audience, it always wanted to refuse to be seen 'only' as a marketing tool, or as music education within cultural institutions, and to address an audience of tomorrow by means of low-threshold projects so that subscription figures would not collapse in the long term. Very soon, music mediation broke free from this narrow, instrumentalizing focus and began to develop ideas for the audience of today in all its diversity and, in turn, to pursue artistic strategies and audience development from within. In other words, suitable formats and approaches were first developed in order to reach different audiences, because obviously they have a right to attend interesting art projects both then and today. Meanwhile, this is part of good programming initiatives in a cultural institution, and so serves audience development perfectly. The Arts Council England provides a concise definition of audience development that clearly expresses this shift:

> 'Audience development' is activity to help develop relationships with new and existing audiences. It can include aspects of marketing, commissioning, programming, involvement in decision making, education, customer care, and distribution. (Arts Council England 2018, 3)

Much of this applies to the design of the miniature opera *Der Berggeist vom Schöckl*: Opera Graz and KUG were looking for a way to inspire audiences in the countryside with enthusiasm for the genre of opera and to make them want to visit the opera house in Graz. With this in mind, they developed their own idea (an opera in two parts), looked

for a subject that people would generally find easily accessible (a local saga) and commissioned a composition.

Der Berggeist vom Schöckl is explicitly aimed at an audience outside the major conurbations and therefore pursues strategies different on several levels to those that would be adopted for music mediation projects in a big city. For example, *Selam Opera!* is the name of the portfolio of projects and formats that the Komische Oper Berlin has developed for different audience groups in Berlin over the last 13 years. In 2010, employees from management, dramaturgy, music mediation, public relations and sponsorship met with experts concerned with the intercultural opening of Komische Oper Berlin at a closed meeting. Together, they developed target group-specific measures such as the Turkish translation of the libretti for the surtitles, intercultural training, and children's operas with material from the world of Turkish fairy tales (Ostrop 2014, 35-37). It also features the Operndolmuş, a small bus that fits six people and a double bass and sets off on a journey to German-Turkish meeting places, migrant associations and educational institutions in districts of Berlin with a high proportion of people from different cultural backgrounds. Instead of a specific work composed especially for the occasion, a pasticcio of arias and ensemble scenes are performed and presented in an entertaining way. In the subsequent audience discussion, mutual experiences are shared and a lasting dialog is created.

Challenges for music mediation in rural regions

When music mediation and the audience development strategies of big cultural organizations are considered together, thoughts quickly turn to providing low-threshold access to art and culture. Potential visitors are sought out in districts with a high proportion of immigrants or a weak social structure. This is an obvious strategy, one that is always somewhat in danger of not focusing on collaboration and learning from one another (performers, organizations, and audiences), but rather on providing a well-meaning offering to those who are imagined to suffer a supposed lack.

From the outset, *Der Berggeist vom Schöckl* was conceived as a project that would appeal to audiences in the regions of Styria. Not necessarily in the countryside, but also in small towns and municipalities, with the largest town on the tour being Leoben, with 24,850 inhabitants, and the smallest municipality being Neuberg an der Mürz, with 1,300 inhabitants.

Figure 1. © Oper Graz.

Since 2021, Styria, which is divided into seven regions, has been undergoing a participatory process to redesign a cultural strategy for 2030 (Kulturstrategie 2030, 2023). Round tables and impulse discussions with local cultural stakeholders have already taken place in all regions. It was therefore logical that the Opera Graz and KUG project would also travel to these seven regions in order to support one of the five fields of action already identified in the Kulturstrategie 2030, namely "Regional profiles and cooperation between initiatives and institutions", through its project.

When urban institutions such as Opera Graz and the KUG seek proximity to the countryside, on the one hand they want to reach out to and to connect with people who, for reasons of mobility, do not easily have the opportunity to come to the opera in Graz in the evening. However, on the other hand, they want to inspire people who may never have seen an opera before to actually experience opera and then to travel to the urban center to experience opera in its own natural habitat, as the urban cultural program has not played a role for them so far.

This in no way means, however, that a diverse cultural program is not experienced, made, and celebrated by people in rural regions (Bender 2023). It was only the already established infrastructure of all those small cultural venues and their programming strategies that allowed the visit of the *Berggeist vom Schöckl* production to each village location. In addition, quite a few of the students at KUG were previously trained at music schools around the region, something that indicates there is already a healthy music

culture in rural areas throughout Styria. In turn, musicians involved in the *Berggeist vom Schöckl* also teach at music schools and are members of music bands in the countryside. It was not least this proximity of the performers to the audience, through their work and upbringing, that made the project so appealing to so many of the local towns and villages.

Conclusion

Audience development is not perceived as exclusively positive by all practitioners and researchers. Steven Hadley (2021) analyzes the current practices in audience development quite critically and, above all, puts his finger in the wound of the large cultural institutions of high culture that want to make their offerings accessible to 'all people':

> If audience development is about democratizing the arts – whether that be concerned with the means of cultural production and/or consumption – then we might start with a straightforward observation. Anything in need of democratization is, by definition, undemocratic. (Hadley 2021, 5)

The same finding applies to music mediation strategies. With *Der Berggeist vom Schöckl*, Opera Graz and KUG wanted to take a path that would make the genre of opera fundamentally accessible. On this journey through Styria, however, many unique encounters with regional cultural initiatives and people took place, which were at least as valuable for the employees of the opera and the university as they were for the visitors to the miniature opera. In the spirit of Steven Hadley (2021) and Mark Terkessidis (2019), audience development was able to act as a change agent in this way. Perhaps "it was the arts sector that needed audience development, and not the audience." (Hadley 2021, 161). In the many interviews with attendees at the performances, in exchange with all the cultural venues, and in adapting to all sorts of stages, halls and audiences, Opera Graz and KUG have learned a lot on this tour: about the immediacy of opera on every stage, no matter how small, about the passion and resilience of cultural organizers in the region, and about the unbroken curiosity of the audience when the artistic product is performed authentically and with relish.

In our selected interviews, we received responses that showed us on the one hand that the miniature opera was indeed very well received aesthetically. The visitors made it clear to us how important the connection with the different venues was for them to come, and therefore let us hope that the visit to the second part in Graz by more than 50% of the visitors reached in the country side will now also lead to a connection with the opera house in Graz through the intensive contact beforehand in the audience discussions. On this trip through Styria, the artists and employees of Opera Graz and KUG involved in the project have themselves gained significant new experiences that will help to transform the audience development strategies of both institutions in the long term.

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