

Audience Participation in Symphonic Music

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Abstract

Audience Participation in Symphonic Music is a project of a proactive nature to develop collaboration between a higher music training center, Musikene, and a symphony orchestra, Bilbao Orkestra Sinfonikoa. The aim is to experiment with a model of innovation involving audience participation in symphonic music. Two editions of the project have already been developed: Kisoboka (2023) and Quijote LF (2024).

Audience Participation in Symphonic Music est un projet visant à développer activement la collaboration entre un centre de formation musicale supérieure, Musikene, et un orchestre symphonique, Bilbao Orkestra Sinfonikoa, dans le but d'expérimenter un modèle d'innovation concernant la participation du public à la musique symphonique. Deux éditions du projet ont déjà été développées : Kisoboka (2023) et Quijote LF (2024).

Das Projekt Audience Participation in Symphonic Music ist eine Zusammenarbeit zwischen der Musikhochschule Musikene und dem Bilbao Orkestra Sinfonikoa. Ziel ist die Entwicklung und Erprobung eines innovativen Modells zur Publikumsbeteiligung in der sinfonischen Musik. Bereits zwei Editionen wurden erfolgreich umgesetzt: Kisoboka (2023) und Quijote LF (2024).

La participación de Públicos en la Música Sinfónica es un proyecto de carácter proactivo para desarrollar la colaboración entre un centro superior de formación musical, Musikene, y una orquesta sinfónica, Bilbao Orkestra Sinfonikoa. El objetivo es experimentar un modelo de innovación que implique la participación del público en la música sinfónica. Ya se han desarrollado dos ediciones del proyecto: Kisoboka (2023) y Quijote LF (2024).

Keywords

Collaboration, Audience Participation, Symphonic Music

Introduction

If we look at music institutions, we can see how they position themselves, their philosophy and their ideas through their approach to concert programming. On the one hand, orchestras, concert halls, performance spaces and festivals have a double life: most of their resources, both human and material, are focused on the main programming of the season, aimed at the same, stable, regular audience (González-Castelao 2021), whereas their educational and social programmes, aimed at wider audiences, are often maintained with limited resources. This status quo shapes the professional outlook and work of musicians, who are used to working in front of audiences that are mostly older (Oropesa 2023, 230-231; Pascual 2015, 34-35; Ministerio de Cultura 2024, 245). On the other hand, institutions of higher music education are focused on providing musical excellence training. The young students are focused on reaching the highest level of musicianship. In practice, they have little time and few opportunities to get involved in external, socially connected experiences. Outside these two microcosms is the majority of the population, which is articulated and interrelated in multiple ways, generating a great diversity of perceptible expressions of real life. In this context, music mediation offers a possible way to establish an authentic and effective connection with diverse people and communities. A notable example is the Audience Participation in Symphonic Music project, an initiative of the Musikene¹, the Higher School of Music of the Basque Country and BOS, Bilbao Orkestra Sinfonikoa², with their aims of developing and experimenting with innovative models of audience participation in symphonic music. Two editions of the project have been developed: *Kisoboka* in 2023 and *Quijote LF* in 2024.

The project is a proactive initiative that focuses on designing and implementing an alternative connection between approaches developed by music institutions and potential audiences of symphonic music through an open and collaborative methodology. Instead of treating the general public as an abstract subject, targeted through solely conventional communication and marketing tools, new connections are generated with wider audiences, collectives, and specific groups in civil society.

After establishing the overall framework of the project, the following sections will introduce its key components in detail, including objectives, methodology, design, projects developed, discussion and recommendations.

¹ [musikene.eus](https://www.musikene.eus) (accessed December 6, 2024).

² www.bilbaorkestra.eus (accessed December 6, 2024).

Objectives

The purpose of this project is to use an innovative intervention with music institutions to:

- (1) establish spaces of knowledge and convergence between orchestra, musicians and non-traditional audiences,
- (2) develop innovative music mediation projects adapted to specific contexts,
- (3) promote new paths of professional growth among top-level musicians,
- (4) generate alternative means of active audience participation in symphonic music,
- (5) expand the social and community activities of the music institutions involved.

Methodology

The methodology of the project includes a collaboration between two music institutions, Musikene and BOS, each with their own differentiated roles related with the stated objectives. To this end, it is necessary to set up a multidisciplinary mediation team that acts in four areas: design and coordination, music and scene, intercultural engagement and evaluation.

The design and coordination teams work together to develop the project and the necessary materials, establish institutional relationships, and monitor progress in real time through continuous communication with the other members of the mediation team. Music mediators responsible for music and scene focus the initial action on incorporating the musicians into the project team. Afterwards, they set up the best possible conditions for each phase, acting with the audience according to a corresponding script. This process is constantly related to intercultural dialogue and social engagement. The intercultural and social mediator is the one who informs and progressively establishes a network of connections with the groups, through contact with the leaders of each one of them, including them in the project, resolving doubts and agreeing on the logistics of their participation. She participates in every step, especially in relation to the audiences, together with the music mediator and evaluation team. The mediator involved in evaluation carries out the fieldwork and the necessary activities to collect data and evidence, and is in direct contact with the musicians, audiences and the mediation team, sometimes, collaborating in a participatory way, depending on short-term needs. At each step, audiences and musicians have a direct relationship with each other and interact according to the design of the different phases of the project. Figure 1 shows the scheme of relationships within the mediation team.

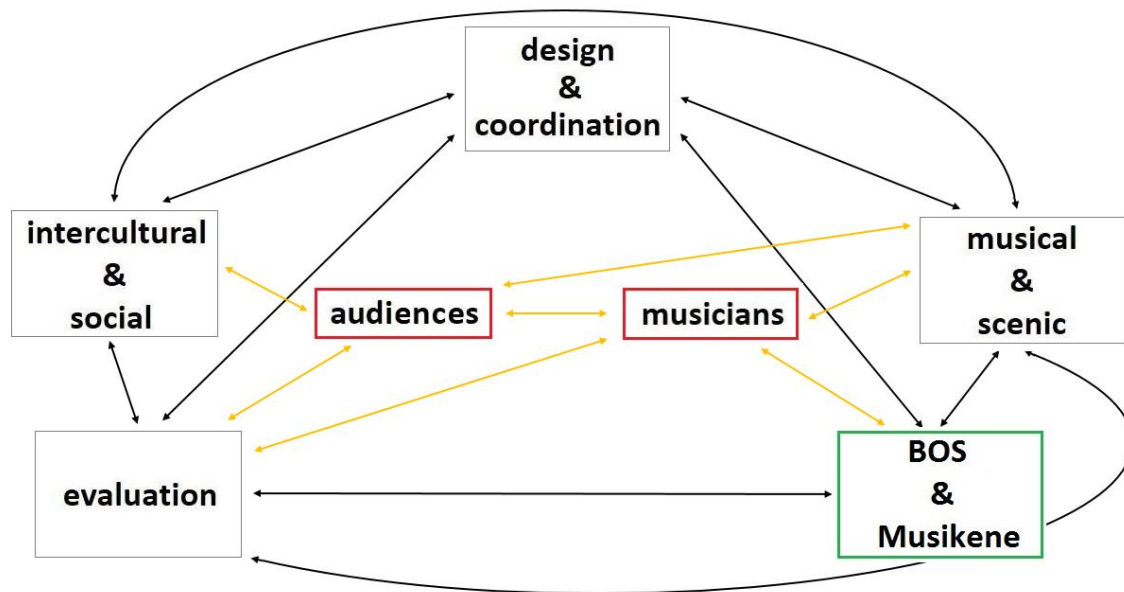


Figure 1. Mediation scheme.

The project promotes active audience participation not usually found in concert halls and includes work with social groups from the immediate urban surroundings. Their personal references connect with the main themes of the works of the seasonal symphonic concert.

In *Kisoboka*, a composition that portrays the reality of life in sub-Saharan Africa and the power of music to transform lives, seven associations and NGOs from Bilbao integrated immigrants from different African countries. In *Quijote LF*, the five participating groups were entities that integrate people who are users of Easy Reading in libraries and reading clubs in Bilbao, who were asked to take an interest in *Don Quixote*, the work on which Strauss' composition is based.

Each project involved musicians with different profiles and backgrounds, professionals from orchestras and higher music education students.

Musikene offered the activity to the students according to the instrument family closest to the project. Thus, in the first two phases, a wind trio took part in *Kisoboka* and a string quartet in *Quijote LF*. BOS proposed that the orchestral staff participate in each project according to its own projects. In *Kisoboka*, two brass players and one percussion player also participated; in *Quijote LF*, four string players. The soloists of the concert associated with each project participated in the workshop of the second phase, interacting with the audience: the ensemble Brass for Africa in the *Kisoboka* workshop and the cellist Asier Polo in the *Quijote LF* workshop.

Project Design as Work in Progress

For several months, the mediation team worked continuously with musicians and social collectives to prepare the actions that would be implemented in three steps: ensemble concert experiences, workshop, and symphonic concert.

In a first step, several open and unconventional musical concert experiences were planned in spaces closely connected to the surroundings of the participating groups. At this stage, the participating musicians from BOS and Musikene proposed the musical works to be performed, aligning their suggestions with their availability, the project's main thematic axes, and the sonic universe of the work programmed by BOS. The mediation team created the musical and scenic script for each session, integrating selected works and the social themes of the participating groups, in connection with the musical work programmed by the BOS. The musical experience concerts had a performative approach to enhance musical expression and communication, including the possibility of different levels of audience interaction and participation. The stage design aimed to create a welcoming layout with visual transparency in any direction, conveying accessibility to the music and at the same time an absence of directional hierarchy: the aim was to blur the boundaries of the conventional concert-setting.

As a second step, the group of people who had attended the concert-experiences, together with the musicians and the mediation team, actively participated in a practical workshop that took place in the rehearsal room of the BOS. The mediation team prepared a specific script for the session focusing on the expressiveness and musical material of the symphonic work they would hear in the concert. The soloists of the concert also participated in this workshop.

Finally, everyone attended the symphony concert programmed by the BOS at the Euskalduna Symphony Hall³, in Bilbao. Before the concert, a specific activity was performed in the foyer of the hall, in order to make the project visible to the general public. As mentioned above, these are symphonic concerts included in the orchestra's seasonal programme, which are attended by subscribers and ticket-holders. The participants in each mediation project, invited by the BOS, also formed part of the audience.

The project's design, conceived as an evolving and collaborative endeavour, inherently involved a degree of uncertainty for all participants, including the audience, musicians, and mediation team. This open-ended approach allowed for dynamic interactions and adjustments throughout the process.

Projects developed

Table 1 shows the groups participating in each project's actions and the number of people involved: audience, musicians and the mediation team. As may be seen, the number of people in the audience varied in the three phases of each project. When it was smaller, it was due to occasional absences depending on availability. When it was larger, the people who had to accompany the participants increased. Especially in *Quijote LF*, some people needed different external support, especially for reasons of reduced mobility. Table 1 details the actions carried out.

³ www.euskalduna.eus/en (accessed December 6, 2024).

Kisoboka

	Concerts - experiences			Workshop	Symphonic concert
	19 April 2023	20 April 2023	21 April 2023	26 April 2023	27 April 2023
Groups	BaoBat	Mulisol, Norai, Zehar	Solidaridad, Itaka, Novisi	All	All
Public	15 people	36 people	37 people	79 people	96 people
Musician	3 BOS	3 Musikene + 11 Norai	3 Musikene + 8 Novisi	3 BOS 2 Musikene 6 Brass for Africa	BOS + Brass for Africa
Mediation	4 - design and coordination / musical and scenic / intercultural and social / evaluation				

Quijote LF

	Concerts - experiences		Workshop	Symphonic concert
	11 March 2024	18 March 2024	20 March 2024	21 March 2024
Groups	Lantegi Batuak, IMQ Igarco Fundación S.Down	Lectura fácil Euskadi Euskrania	All	All
Public	32 people	23 people	58 people	80 people
Musician	4 BOS	4 Musikene	4 BOS + 4 Musikene + Asier Polo	BOS + Asier Polo
Mediation	3 - design and coordination / musical and scenic / intercultural and social			

Table 1. Project actions.

Kisoboka

Kisoboka is a music mediation project that promotes the participation of various social groups made up of immigrants of sub-Saharan origin in the seasonal symphonic programme of the BOS. The project, developed in 2023, involved a multidisciplinary mediation team, seven social groups from Bilbao with African references (BaoBat⁴, Itaka⁵, Mulisol⁶, Norai⁷, Novisi⁸, Solidaridad Internacional⁹, Zehar¹⁰), as well as musicians from BOS, Musikene, and Brass for Africa¹¹.

The organization was designed in relation to the work *Kisoboka*¹² ('everything is possible'), a composition by Guy Barker¹³ and Alan Fernie¹⁴ that portrays the reality of

⁴ asociacion-baobat.webnode.es (accessed December 6, 2024).

⁵ www.itakaescolapios.org (accessed December 6, 2024).

⁶ mulisolong.wordpress.com (accessed December 6, 2024).

⁷ www.asociacionnorai.org (accessed December 6, 2024).

⁸ www.novisielkartea.org (accessed December 6, 2024).

⁹ www.sol-inter.org (accessed December 6, 2024).

¹⁰ zehar.eus (accessed December 6, 2024).

¹¹ Brass for Africa is an award-winning charity that delivers music and life-skills education to over 1,500 disadvantaged children and young people across Uganda, Rwanda and Liberia. www.brassforafrica.org (accessed December 6, 2024).

¹² www.brassforafrica.org/kisoboka (accessed December 6, 2024).

¹³ Guy Barker (1957) is a jazz trumpeter soloist, bandleader, composer and latterly one of the most in-demand arrangers in Europe. In 2013 he was appointed Associate Composer for the BBC Concert Orchestra. He is also Associated Artist with Irelands RTÉ Concert Orchestra. Guy Barker is Patron of Brass for Africa.

¹⁴ Alan Fernie (1960) is one of the world's best known composers of brass music. He, has composed pieces especially for the bands and young people involved with Brass for Africa and he visits Uganda periodically to train and mentor his teachers. Alan often talks about how he

life in sub-Saharan Africa and the power of music to transform lives. Musically, *Kisoboka* is a Concerto Grosso for Brass for Africa and Symphony Orchestra. In April 2023, six Brass for Africa musicians from Uganda travelled to Spain to premier *Kisoboka*. The composition has a five-movement structure: Dawn, The Parade, Desolation, The Awakening and The Celebration. The story that inspires the overall approach and the five movements of the *Kisoboka* work is in line with the experiences and life aspirations of most of the migrants involved in the mediation project. That is the key to connecting. It therefore presents areas of contact with aspects and challenges of our society, such as cultural diversity and inclusion, development cooperation, migratory movements, social cohesion, health and well-being.

Mediation started with a prior identification of the possible participating groups. Based on their response, the interest and willingness to participate in the project was determined, as well as the specific profile of the people in each group. It was a process of constantly informing and communicating with each of the groups so that they knew, understood and were interested in the project. For the concert-experiences of the first phase, a script was created, integrating texts, stories, tales and songs from different African cultures in the same story, together with the works of various composers proposed by the musicians of BOS and Musikene: Aaron Copland, Gilles Senon, Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic, August Msarurgwa, Jacques Ibert, Erwin Schulhoff, Eugène Bozza, Gino Paoli, Béla Kovács and traditionals¹⁵. In the second phase workshop, the participation of the audience and musicians was based on the proposals and music of the members of Brass for Africa. At the beginning, they presented the central work of the programme, *Kisoboka*, giving some specific musical examples of what they would later hear in the concert. This was followed by guided improvisation on a series of popular African songs, where all the groups joined in making music with small percussion instruments and movement, creating a very special bond among the participants. Musikene musicians took part in the first two phases and BOS musicians took an active part in all three phases, including the symphonic concert, in which in addition to *Kisoboka*, Sergei Prokofiev's *American Overture* and Aaron Copland's *Symphony No. 3* were performed.

For an overview of the project, a video¹⁶ summary and another video¹⁷ are available. For further information, a report¹⁸ with design, development, evaluation and accompanying documentation, script and questionnaires is also available. Figure 2 shows the overall scheme of the project.

has been creatively inspired and influenced by his visits to Africa and this is sure to be reflected in *Kisoboka*.

¹⁵ For the development of the script we worked on the documentation and research of texts, stories, tales and songs related to different cultures of sub-Saharan Africa: diola (Senegal), mandenká (West Africa), bambara (Mali), vachopi (Mozambique), bantú (Cameroon), edo (Nigeria), shona (Zimbabwe), kati (Mali), yoruba / igbo (Nigeria), hunde (D.R.Congo), wodaabe (Chad), xhosa (South Africa), tsuana (Botswana).

¹⁶ goo.su/LAjIUrl (accessed December 6, 2024).

¹⁷ goo.su/VxXcjm (accessed December 6, 2024).

¹⁸ goo.su/XC7PbZ (accessed December 6, 2024).

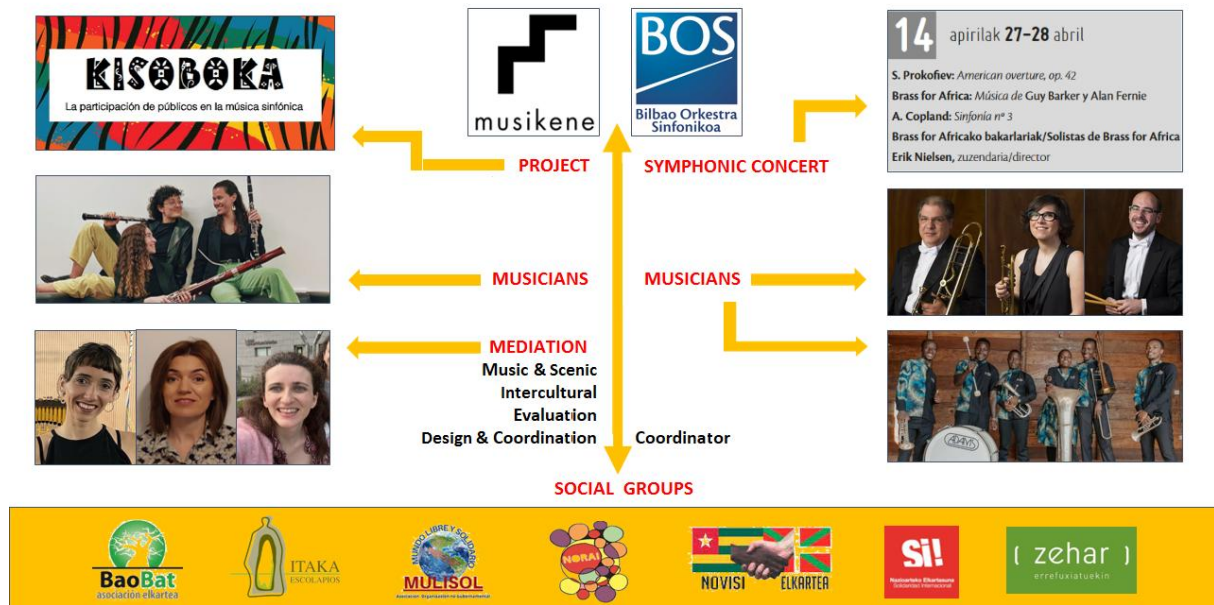


Figure 2. Kisoboka scheme.

Quijote LF

The *Quijote LF* project, developed in 2024, was proposed to the Bilbao Easy Reading clubs and, in the end, five of them took part: Lantegi Batuak¹⁹, Fundación S. Down²⁰, IMQ Igorco²¹, Lectura Fácil Euskadi²², Euskrania²³. Easy Reading is aimed at people who have transitory reading difficulties (e.g. due to immigration, late incorporation to reading, poor schooling) or permanent difficulties (e.g. learning disorders, disabilities, senility)²⁴. Figure 3 shows the groups participating in the project and their link to each area of Easy Reading.

¹⁹ www.lantegibatuak.eus (accessed December 6, 2024).

²⁰ www.downpv.org (accessed December 6, 2024).

²¹ igurco.imq.es/residencias/imq-igorco-bilbozar (accessed December 6, 2024).

²² lecturafacileuskadi.net (accessed December 6, 2024).

²³ euskrania.com (accessed December 6, 2024).

²⁴ For more information: www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read (accessed December 6, 2024), www.lecturafacil.net/eng (accessed December 6, 2024), lecturafacileuskadi.net/que-es-lectura-facil-euskadi (accessed December 6, 2024).



Figure 3. Quijote LF project.

The sound universe of the project was designed around Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote* and the expressiveness of variations in musical creation. Musicians from BOS, Musikene, and the concert's soloist, Asier Polo²⁵, took part.

The script of the concert-experiences of the first phase, based on texts taken from *Don Quixote* and contemporary authors related to Cervantes' text, was structured around five main themes: *Don Quixote*, book of a life and of many lives; Reading to imagine, reading to know; Reading, a journey that changes us; Free women in *Don Quixote*; Music sets the mood.

As a whole, it was an original and alternative take on Cervantes' text, with special attention to women and reading, integrated with the musical repertoire proposed by the musicians of BOS and Musikene: Johann Sebastian Bach, Aleksandr Borodin, Max Bruch, Pau Casals, George Enescu, George Gershwin, Sergei Prokofiev, François Rab-bath, Dmitri Shostakovich, Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. For the second phase workshop, the mediator briefly introduced Richard Strauss and his work *Don Quixote*. Then, the solo cellist of the concert, Asier Polo, played the theme and some variations. Afterwards, the audience and the musicians were split into small groups to experiment with the possibilities of the variations by improvising and playing on simple melodic themes proposed by some of the participants. In the third phase, the participants and some of their companions attended the BOS season concert in the symphonic hall of the Euskalduna. In addition to Strauss' *Don Quixote*, the orchestra performed Andrés Isasi's *El Oráculo* and Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*.

²⁵ www.asierpolo.com (accessed December 6, 2024).

The installation of a roll-up and monitors to make the project visible to the general public, with information and videos in easy-to-read format was planned for the foyer of the hall: Project presentation²⁶, Easy Reading²⁷, Quijote texts²⁸ and Music glossary²⁹.

Quijote LF integrated the participants into a mediation process directly connected with a BOS symphony season concert, promoting equal opportunities, inclusion, social cohesion and well-being. For more information on the project, a video³⁰ and report³¹ are available.

Discussion

The music mediation project *Audience Participation in Symphonic Music* is defined by two key characteristics that create value for all involved: the audience, musicians, mediators, and the music institutions themselves.

One characteristic is the collaborative attitude of mutual learning among the mediators, musicians, and participating groups, facilitated through an open, collaborative, and contextualized methodology. Before joining the project, the collectives already share common interests, needs, desires, motivations, values, beliefs, and lifestyles. In other words, these groups are already connected by shared characteristics and experiences. This differentiates the project from other mediation projects that seek to involve a general, ‘anonymous’ public. Something similar happens in the musicians’ collective. The project presents a shared, compelling purpose that sparks curiosity and interest among all participants. As they engage in various activities throughout the process, mutual recognition and a collaborative mindset gradually emerge.

The second characteristic is the convergence and integration of diverse factors. Through design and practice, a professional mediation team, musicians from a higher music education institution, symphony orchestra musicians, and members of organized civil society groups outside the music field are brought together. This multi-faceted connection is centered around shared interests derived from a piece included in the orchestra’s symphonic season programme. It unfolds across three intervention phases, occurring at different times and in varied spaces.

Therefore, the project does not follow a traditional design and production model involving specialists, mediators, and musicians. Instead, it unfolds through an interpretative process that actively incorporates the audience. The production phase incorporates the project’s audience, the participating collectives, from the very beginning

²⁶ goo.su/RZLM (accessed December 6, 2024).

²⁷ goo.su/b5r4zuL (accessed December 6, 2024).

²⁸ goo.su/zVLwN (accessed December 6, 2024).

²⁹ goo.su/27SfAS (accessed December 6, 2024).

³⁰ goo.su/e9jSW (accessed December 6, 2024).

³¹ goo.su/mUHwe (accessed December 6, 2024).

through intercultural and social mediation. In addition to configuring the specific conditions for the participation of the people from each group, they provide a space in their immediate environment for the different concert-experiences of the first phase. In other words, the first contact between the musicians and participants takes place in a space that is familiar to the public but unknown to the musicians. In addition, the measurement script that leads the session bases the repertoire on motifs that are close to the reality of the participating groups.

A few days later, the common workshop of the second phase is moved to the orchestra's rehearsal room, so that it is a familiar space for the musicians but not for the participants. The initial connection they had in the first phase and the participatory nature of the session facilitates the mediation action, focusing on musical aspects of the composition that will be heard in the concert.

For the people who participate in the project, the third phase includes making their collective identity visible in the foyer, attending the concert together with the regular audience of the symphony season, and the concert itself in a large hall with orchestral music. So the three phases of the mediation project, as a whole, represent an experience with a significant impact on the perception and appreciation of music.

Audience Participation in Symphonic Music has received positive feedback and a high overall rating of its actions, according to the evaluation. In *Kisoboka*, the mediation team had an evaluator who carried out observation tasks, wrote field notes, took photos, recorded videos, and conducted 32 interviews during the development of all the activities. In addition, at the end of the project, an online questionnaire was distributed, with quantitative and qualitative questions, and with two different versions: one for the public (17 questions, bilingual Spanish-French) and one for musicians and the mediation team (47 questions). In *Quijote LF* only the questionnaires, photos and videos were used. All the questionnaires, data obtained and a complete analysis can be found in the *Kisoboka* report and the *Quijote LF* report. Figure 4 shows the overall assessment of the project.

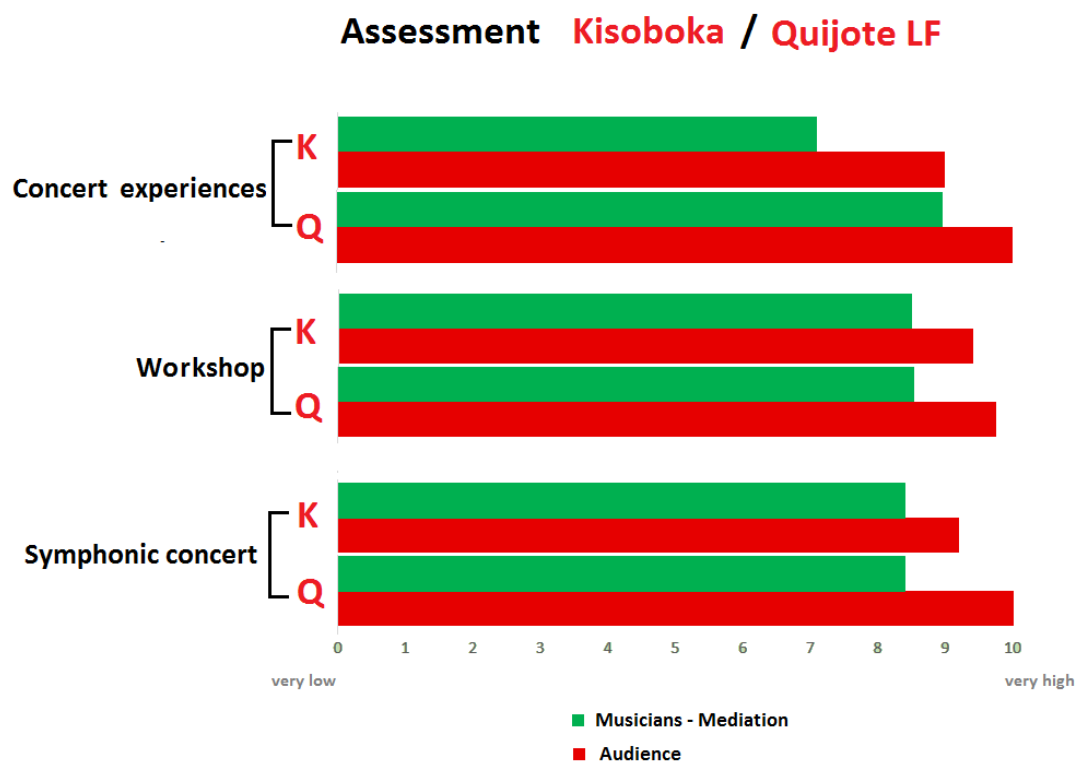


Figure 4. Level of assessment project.

As can be seen, the musicians' and mediators' assessment of the project, although positive, is more limited than that of the audience. This could be due to a more critical view of the development of some aspects of production and communication. In addition, in the case of musicians, it could be due to insufficient knowledge or understanding of the project.

The value created by the project is linked to how participants perceive their experience. This includes how the artistic experience affects their personal growth, the relationships they build within the community, and the overall impact on their lives. In other words, the value would not be located so much in the quality of the project as in the appreciation of the project by its protagonists. Along these lines, different types of value (intrinsic, instrumental and institutional) could be considered for each sector involved in the project: public, musicians, mediation and institutions. In summary, here are some reflections:

The project is highly complex due to the diverse range of elements it connects. The mediation processes dealt with both material and experiential aspects, in relation to the establishment of links. In practice, issues which had not been taken into account have been identified, such as the religion of the participants, poor communication between professionals or insufficient shared knowledge of the project's foundations. All this has limited the development of the actions designed. The most positive aspects highlighted by all participants have been the cultural mix, coexistence and active participation.

The methodology used is based both on adaptation to a specific context and audiences, and on the premise of active participation. For this reason, communication and cooperation between the different agents involved was one of the fundamental pillars of the project. For most of the informants, communication was insufficient, being one of the least valued aspects. The main reasons identified were lack of time and the absence of specialized structures adapted to the development of this type of project within the music institutions involved.

The possibility of actively participating in the selection of the musical repertoire, the opportunity to interact with people from very different cultures, and the exchange of different ways of practicing and experiencing music were the aspects most highly valued by the musicians³². In addition, the contact between them has been described as enriching. It is perceived that, both in the case of professional musicians and musicians in training, social and educational projects are considered to be of interest, on a generic level, but not that they are central to their professional sphere and inherent to their performance as musicians.

The generation of alternative means of audience participation in symphonic music has been approached from three perspectives – collectives, musicians and mediators – and in three practical phases³³. The public's response has clearly shown their positive assessment, and their willingness to participate in further similar activities – they would even like to attend symphonic music concerts. However, the perception and assessment of all the professionals involved in the project is uneven. These results invite us to reflect on the way in which music institutions connect with society. What is the current role of symphonic music? What kind of cultural activity do the institutions develop? How can music contribute to transforming the cultural life of a city?

With regard to the expansion of the social and community action of the music institutions involved, the absence of external projection and public visibility of the project has been highlighted as being fundamentally due to the institutions' own inaction. This has been pointed out as one of the most relevant weaknesses. Finally, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Share the project's experience and outcomes.
2. Build on the lessons learned to design and develop new music mediation projects.
3. Align the projects with the core activities of the institutions, such as curricular practices and concert programmes.
4. Foster regular collaboration between music institutions through mediation projects, including reviews of internal structures, protocols, and procedures.

³² "It's the first time I've heard of a project that brings an audience so far away from classical music so close to it" (musician).

³³ "The idea of connecting programming with these kinds of social projects has a lot of potential for the future" (orchestra staff).

5. Establish multidisciplinary mediation teams that support initiatives and projects in professional conditions comparable to those of musicians and management staff, on a stable and ongoing basis.
6. Create a Music Innovation Centre to promote and coordinate initiatives, projects, and research focused on audience participation in music.

The music mediation project *Audience Participation in Symphonic Music* invites reflection on how music institutions connect with society, and highlights the need for specialized mediation teams to address the relationship between orchestra, musicians and audiences. The project has the potential to be transferred to other contexts, fostering integration between music institutions and society as a whole within existing structures. In this way, it could be adapted and multiplied on different scales. In short, music mediation can contribute to the democratization of culture by promoting access to and participation in classical music concerts for all audiences..

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