

Music Mediation as a Game Changer: Envisioning the Music Sector in 2035 Panel Discussion as Part of the Conference *Transformations* at Anton Bruckner University, Linz/Austria, February 28, 2025

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Abstract

Music mediation is increasingly being positioned as a transformative force within the music sector. This panel discussion, held at the Anton Bruckner University in Linz, explored how music mediation might act as a “game changer” in the face of societal, technological, and political transformations. Experts from orchestras, universities, cultural policy, and independent practice reflected on future scenarios for 2035, addressing structural change,

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resource allocation, digitalization, and superdiversity. Key themes included structural transformation, the integration of participatory and diversity-sensitive approaches, and the role of music mediation as a fundamental attitude. The discussion emphasized the urgency of embedding questioning and collaborative practices in higher education, fostering resilience and democratic values, and making the impact of music mediation measurable and visible.

Musikvermittlung wird zunehmend als transformative Kraft im Musiksektor verstanden. Die an der Anton Bruckner Universität Linz veranstaltete Podiumsdiskussion ging der Frage nach, wie Musikvermittlung angesichts gesellschaftlicher, technologischer und politischer Transformationsprozesse als „Game Changer“ wirken kann. Expert_innen aus Orchestern, Hochschulen, Kulturpolitik und freier Praxis entwickelten Zukunftsszenarien für das Jahr 2035 und diskutierten strukturelle Veränderungen, die Verteilung von Ressourcen, Digitalisierung und Superdiversität. Zu den zentralen Themen gehörten die strukturelle Transformation des Musiksektors, die Verankerung partizipativer und diversitätssensibler Ansätze sowie die Bedeutung von Musikvermittlung als grundlegender Haltung. Die Diskussion unterstrich die Dringlichkeit, kritisches Hinterfragen und kollaborative Praktiken in der Hochschulbildung zu verankern, Resilienz und demokratische Werte zu stärken und die Wirkung von Musikvermittlung messbar und sichtbar zu machen.

La médiation de la musique est de plus en plus présentée comme une force transformatrice dans le milieu musical. Cette table ronde, tenue à l'Université Anton Bruckner de Linz, explore comment la médiation de la musique peut agir comme « game changer » face à des transformations sociales, technologies et politiques. Des expert-es venus du milieu orchestral, universitaire, du milieu politique et du secteur indépendant ont réfléchi à des scénarios prospectifs pour 2035 prenant en considération des changements d'ordres structurels, d'allocation des ressources, de numérisation des pratiques, de l'intégration d'approches participatives et sensibles à la diversité, ainsi que le rôle de la médiation de la musique en tant qu'attitude fondamentale. Les panelistes ont insisté sur l'urgence d'ancrer la remise en question et les pratiques collaboratives coopératives dans l'enseignement supérieur, de favoriser la résilience et les valeurs démocratiques, et de rendre l'impact de la médiation de la musique mesurable et visible.

Keywords

music mediation, cultural transformation, institutional change, cultural policy, diversity, participation

Hans Georg Nicklaus: When we look into the future, we always do so from the perspective of the present, which we simultaneously reflect on. Which structures in the music sector will need to change, dissolve or remain rigid? And what does this mean for music mediation? What will the music scene look like in ten years? Beat Fehlmann, from your perspective as an orchestra director, considering political and technological changes: What will the operations of a concert hall look like in ten years – regarding the audience, the artists, and the relationship between them?

Beat Fehlmann: First, you have to be strong, dear music mediators, because I believe that in ten years, music mediation as we know it will no longer exist. Not because you have done your job so well that mediation is no longer necessary. Not because of budget cuts or new priorities, but because institutions will have transformed to become more permeable and connected. Future institutions will be audience-oriented, thinking and acting from this perspective. For these institutions, music is both a means and a medium to foster belonging within society. In my view, the major transformation process is happening in such a way that ultimately, everyone will become an active ambassador and bridge builder for music. Because that is what we will need. We cannot delegate this task to a department, a staff unit, or any other isolated entity; rather, it must be the core, the strategy, the fundamental orientation of an institution. I am optimistic, or rather, I dare to take a positive view of the future today: we will succeed in this and I am truly convinced, institutions will only survive if they achieve this. So, you will not be abolished, as it may have sounded pessimistic at the beginning, but you will move to the centre, the hub from where everything radiates, constantly linking music and its societal impact.

Irena Müller-Brozović: Lydia Grün, as president of the University of Music and Theatre Munich and professor of music mediation, how do you see the music sector in ten years?

Lydia Grün: Thank you, Beat Fehlmann, for this utopia. It would be wonderful if it came true, and we are all working towards that. I see different tensions, especially regarding resource distribution. In ten years, we will be talking about a much smaller music market and training students for it at university. Regions that finance musical education [musikalische Bildung] will continue to have functioning civil societies. Those that choose not to will not. We will then see the effects at the ballot box, among other places. We will also see new production forms, particularly regarding musical creation, and the integration of artificial intelligence. I find this highly relevant for our field of music mediation, and it still raises many unanswered questions, including critical ones. It is an integral topic, as is music mediation itself. As the person responsible for university education, another integral issue that concerns me is the tension between art, speech, and freedom of expression. I believe that in ten years, the situation will be different: what will be happening on stage, in public spaces, and in terms of free speech, free expression, and free science? This is a somewhat pessimistic view; however, I believe we must prepare ourselves for this and uphold our values. This influences my work at the university: first, by defining a clear profile for each institution, whether a university, orchestra, stage, or music school; and second, by representing this profile

assertively in public and political discourse. This is our toolkit for the next decade and will also shape music mediation.

Hans Georg Nicklaus: Let's take the cultural policy perspective. Anke Schad-Spindler, you work on the evaluation of cultural and educational programs in the context of resource allocation. How do you see the next ten years?

Anke Schad-Spindler: I find the title of this conference very inspiring: *Music Mediation as a Game Changer*. I asked myself what kind of games are being played in society, and how will they develop? Is it the martial, existential *Squid Game*? Or the *Monopoly* of billionaires? Do we want to play along or play against it? Or are there perhaps completely different games that create entirely new utopias? New visions of the future that focus on social cohesion, resilience, democracy, equal opportunities, and providing the best possible education for children and young people, above all for their future. Institutions often seem carved in stone, requiring immense pressure to change, which breeds resistance. The writer Paul Auster said that maybe they are not stone, but soap. We see how quickly institutions can be dismantled in a negative way, as in the U.S. But perhaps it is simply a matter of developing images that are as positive as possible. And, as Jagoda Marinić (2024) says, entering institutions with a gentle radicalism and playing with them.

Irena Müller-Brozović: We have heard a lot about institutions. Annemarie Mitterbäck, what will your work as an independent music mediator look like in ten years?

Annemarie Mitterbäck: In my view, given the increasing diversity of our societies, the fields of participation and community music will certainly become more significant in ten years' time and will be a crucial, integral part of institutions. In this regard, I believe three aspects are essential. Firstly, diversity-sensitive, participatory engagement and community music, in order to truly be able to negotiate aesthetic perspectives, open up scope and spaces for transcultural possibilities, engage in mutual exchange, and initiate a collaborative coexistence rather than a competitive struggle for resources. I also see this as forward-looking from an artistic perspective, enabling us to co-create contemporary, transcultural music with diverse actors from the communities, in multifaceted forms of interconnection. The second point concerns the socio-political acceptance of superdiversity as a social reality. This goes hand in hand with a self-understanding that embraces the need for multi-voiced approaches and perspectives, in order to make participation and involvement attractive to a wide range of people, as well as enabling a trans-traditional coexistence and collaborative action in a superdiverse society. Thirdly, I see community music and music mediation as a process of learning – and, above all, of unlearning – in the sense of raising awareness of classist structures within institutions: how can we come together in a spirit of collaboration and move forward in a new direction?

Hans Georg Nicklaus: Norbert Trawöger, you lead a traditional institution, the *Bruckner Orchestra* in Linz. What do you think about gentle radicalism and institutions made of soap? How do you see the future?

Norbert Trawöger: I can't predict ten years ahead, but I know what we must work on now. After all, we hold some creative power to shape the future. I share Beat Fehlmann's vision that mediation should become a fundamental attitude of institutions and orchestras, not a department. Perhaps we also need to learn to communicate within political networks, get much more involved in politics, and engage in dialogue to raise awareness.

Irena Müller-Brozović: Lydia Grün, you mentioned financial cuts and the question of resource allocation. Under these circumstances, what might a concrete example of music mediation look like in ten years?

Lydia Grün: I think we need to reflect on what it looks like now, rather than imagining music mediation in ten years. I can only answer this from the perspective of our university. We are trying to embed the questioning attitude that Norbert Trawöger just mentioned into all elements of our work. This means we are attempting to transform almost every element, which in turn places excessive demands on both the structures and ourselves. For example, when we establish a new competition at the university, we could do it the old way: everyone competes higher, faster, and further. The best (whoever decides which criteria are used to select them) wins a prize or the next career step. Or, we could open this competition format as a space for artistic personality development. We give freedom to those who want to explore and experiment. This applies to students from all disciplines, even collaboratively, in a cooperative spirit. For me, this is not a question of ten years from now, but rather: we must train today's students so that in ten years they have the tools to prevent or creatively counteract the dystopia I outlined earlier. This attitude is not the norm, and I want to emphasize that it must be consistently implemented. This is a task for management, but also for the main subject teachers [Hauptfachlehrende]. It is also a task for the grassroots movement [Bewegung von unten], i.e. for the students themselves, to actively demand this basic attitude. The university work of the future must begin now, not in ten years.

Hans Georg Nicklaus: Beat Fehlmann, your vision of all of us becoming active ambassadors is wonderful. Where does one start as a managing director in order to achieve this?

Beat Fehlmann: With the structures. When it comes to changing a culture, I am truly convinced that we must change the structures. Culture follows structure. That is the key factor, the quick answer to a very complex problem. But that is where it begins: creating the conditions for change so that the mindset can shift. However, I don't believe this works, or at least I don't feel that I have the power within an institution to perform a kind of brainwashing. But I do have the possibility to provoke a mindset shift through very specific changes in everyday work: the reality of working, collaborating, interacting, and engaging with society.

Hans Georg Nicklaus: Can you give an example?

Beat Fehlmann: Value creation and appreciation are, from an institutional and leadership perspective, the two most important factors that make change psychologically possible. Change often creates fear, and when fear is present, we see defensive reactions. We retreat to what is familiar and resist the new. That is why I believe we always need moments of experience and self-efficacy. For me, that is the most important driver. I am still speaking on a meta level, but I hope this example suffices.

One more thought on the topic of soap: when soap meets water, it creates foam. I don't mean this in a superficial sense, but foam has a fascinating property that I sometimes wish institutions had. Namely, the ability to adapt extremely well to an environment and to constantly form new connections. You know how those bubbles connect with each other: something small suddenly becomes something bigger, and it keeps going. It is a moment of transformation, of constant movement. Of course, at some point the foam usually disappears. That is where my metaphor ends abruptly. But until then, I think it works quite well.

Lydia Grün: A brief addition on structures: Yes, I agree. You need people with the right competencies within these structures and, above all, tangible results in the daily work of everyone involved. Then it becomes clear what it is about.

Irena Müller-Brozović: I would like to return to the topic of conflict, as change management and structural transformation are closely linked to power and interpretive authority, both of which may need to be relinquished. Anke Schad-Spindler, you work on conflictual cultural policy. Can you give us some insight into such processes, also in relation to music mediation?

Anke Schad-Spindler: I think it's important to recognize the enormous economic pressure on all music institutions. In Vienna, I believe they are operating at fairly high capacity, but the pressure is still there. From the audience's perspective, ticket prices are a major barrier. Last weekend, I went to a music theatre performance in Vienna with two teenagers over 15. We paid well over €100. We sat right at the top and couldn't see a third of the stage. These are very basic issues; we don't need to talk on a meta level to see them. The economic pressure exists, and it is passed on to the audience, creating participation barriers. These are major conflicts that manifest in people's wallets: what am I spending my money on? What can I afford for my children – music experiences, music lessons? That is one aspect. Another is the digital transformation, which also raises efficiency questions. In the Johann Strauss Year, which received €22 million in funding from the city of Vienna (Der Standard, 2024), a new app for students was developed. A side note stated: "No music teachers are needed at all." We must acknowledge that. It is an innovation. I have not evaluated it; I don't know its impact. But these are major changes, and when combined with economic pressure and efficiency, we know where the conflicts lie.

Hans Georg Nicklaus: There is a risk of exclusivity when financial pressure is passed on. The immediate effect is that cultural consumption becomes limited to educational and economic elites. We often observe that cultural workers, not only in the 'independent scene' but also in institutions (mostly as 'freelancers'), can only pursue their work

because they are not financially dependent on it. Is culture increasingly becoming a luxury?

Annemarie Mitterbäck: Culture should never be a luxury. That is why I am convinced that we need projects to make a real impact within urban communities or in rural areas, within their respective contexts. To open up our circle, which does not consist solely of white people socialised in Western classical music (I'll put it a bit bluntly for now) but extends far beyond that. It's also about social legitimacy, but beyond that, this opening up creates an incredibly exciting space of possibility, musically and artistically, which gives rise to diverse, vibrant forms of expression. I really advocate for formats that make this 'unlearning' possible, in universities and subsequently also in institutions, so that we can truly move in a direction where we develop new things together and have a desire to engage in dialogue. Of course, clear structural changes are necessary, and it is also necessary that these places or spaces that are opened up are still clearly structured, but in a different form that reflects society as a whole.

Irena Müller-Brozović: We live in a superdiverse and postdigital society. Norbert Trawöger, what role does this play for the Bruckner Orchestra?

Norbert Trawöger: It should definitely play a role. But I would like to come back to what Beat Fehlmann said: structural changes alter culture. Yet sometimes, when you think of something new and try to act as a gentle anarchist, creating experiences for the system, you encounter resistance within structures. In my experience, this causes great resistance. Economic pressure is rising. I don't know if the *Bruckner Orchestra* will still have 130 members in ten years. When we play Bruckner, we need a certain number of musicians. I would love to play in Upper Austrian living rooms, but that is impossible due to union regulations, size, and resources. Still, splitting up, engaging in discourse, working in smaller groups, and using digital possibilities (many of which we don't yet understand) are crucial. Linz is a very exciting location in this respect, because we have been collaborating with *Ars Electronica* for almost 20 years on formats where we experiment together. But we need to think and act even more radically. We experiment within structural limits. Some things happen as anarchistic experiences, so to speak, because someone makes them happen.

Hans Georg Nicklaus: Back to music mediation as a professionalized discipline. What does music mediation at universities train students for? What roles and tasks will music mediators have in the future?

Lydia Grün: It is hard to answer because I find this future debate difficult. Recently, a significant number of cultural mediation projects run by major cultural institutions in Berlin have been affected by substantial budget cuts. When structural cuts in cultural funding occur, it is the softer factors that are affected, not the next *Don Giovanni* premiere. That is our current reality. In other words, I no longer see this future. We need people who are artistically active and advocate for audience orientation, not a capitalized version of it, as seen in cultural policy concepts, but in the sense of an active civil

society. We need people who help institutions (orchestras, stages, or music schools) create a truly local and unique profile. That's the point: not continuing as before, but asking (and music mediators are trained for this): what does music and art (in the broadest sense) mean in my city, my region? That's what we can do, and it must enter institutions. Most institutions do not critically question themselves in this way. Nor do universities. We are faced with the challenge of asking ourselves whether we can continue to rely on a 360-degree education at the University of Music and Theatre Munich, because the ministry is aiming for profiling and concentration within the science strategy for all universities and colleges in Bavaria. For us, this means we must consider our artistic, pedagogical, and academic profile. Music mediators have the competence to enter situations with questions and build relationships with people around them, including funders. That's a core skill we need, not only for music mediators, but for all cultural professionals. However, it is embedded in the profession of music mediators.

Hans Georg Nicklaus: That is a wonderful description of the competencies we need and train in music mediation programs. Looking at universities, where this field continues to grow compared to other sectors, and at the increasingly difficult cultural policy situation, we see a tension.

Irena Müller-Brozović: I heard an urgency in these descriptions and, at the same time, a plea for music mediation. Do you have concrete ideas for a better future?

Annemarie Mitterbäck: Well, I agree that it is absolutely vital to involve local experts and, of course, to take the respective contexts into account. On the one hand, this is about enabling participation; on the other, it is about the need to challenge the dominant narratives. I would therefore go a step further and bring the different perspectives into dialogue, so that we can actually perceive things from multiple perspectives within the respective contexts and not simply reproduce our own view of things. This involves diversity-sensitive training and also a process of unlearning. How can we open up our perspective so that we can also accept other viewpoints without judgement. One example of this would be *Game of Ambivalence* (Music Scapes, n.d.), a project we realised in 2023 with *Music Scapes* in Vienna's 7th district, which involved a wide variety of participants, from queer dancers to Kurdish singers, representatives of new contemporary composed music, and daf players. The whole thing was transformed, over a lengthy process, into a collective performance exploring the theme of negotiating ambivalence. I think that these spaces of ambivalence, where one learns to endure it, could be an opportunity.

Lydia Grün: May I ask: how far do you go with ambivalences? Let me give you a very concrete example: If there are young people in the group with clear anti-democratic tendencies, and there are quite a few, how do you handle that?

Annemarie Mitterbäck: Leadership is always necessary, especially in such spaces. Otherwise, power shifts to forces that are no longer democratic. So, a guiding module

to maintain democracy and protect marginalized positions, or even areas deemed important for the project is essential. Otherwise, we end up in an anarchistic space where the strongest wins. We have a clear stance and clear positions in these spaces.

Beat Fehlmann: We must recognize that cultural policy, in the true sense, does not exist. The debate about what matters to society and what we fund, and with what intensity, is not content-driven. You can see this in how cuts and processes occur; they are not content-oriented. For us as institutions, or for those involved, it will be increasingly important to make what we call ‘impact’ visible. We should move away from the narrative that we are important and doing something great for society. We should complement this narrative with quantifiable evidence. We cannot avoid this. We must make processes and effects measurable, tangible, and comprehensible. That is one of the major tasks for institutions and our field. I still see enormous fear of doing this. We don’t like transparency very much; we prefer to talk in private and hope things will somehow work out. I find this very dangerous. So I believe we must take this path. I firmly believe in the power and transformative force of music.

Let me give you an example. Two years ago, we ran a year-long project with a neighbouring elementary school in Ludwigshafen, involving all third-grade classes. Many children came with different language biographies; some were still gaining confidence in German, and not everyone could participate in the same way through spoken language. In the beginning, we needed time to establish shared routines: listening to one another, negotiating space, and finding a common pulse. Over the year, what became clear was not that music “fixes” anything, but that it can open a space where children meet each other through action. Rhythm, movement, repetition, and shared attention can make participation possible even when language is not yet a shared resource.

The children brought their strengths into the process, their ideas, their sounds, and their willingness to take responsibility in small moments. We learned with them what helps a group cooperate and what kind of structure supports everyone’s engagement. Teachers told us that they discovered new ways of reaching certain children and that everyday classroom situations more often became workable. They observed more mutual attention, more willingness to collaborate, and clearer shared agreements. Experiences like this are valuable, but we still struggle to make them tangible and communicable without oversimplifying. That is a point we must focus on. We need better language, evidence, and narratives that respect complexity and make consequences visible when cultural and educational resources are cut indiscriminately. Decisions should be transparent and traceable. Only then can we have a real debate. How it will turn out is another question. But at least we will be at a different point than we are now.

Norbert Trawöger: That is an important point that we need to be aware of. We must leave our comfort zone and articulate these things, make them communicable. For us, this means a shift in perspective and position. Leaving the comfort zone, speaking up, acting, demanding, that is immensely important.

Anke Schad-Spindler: The danger now, given the financial pressure, is resorting to individual lobbying, for my area, my institution, my project. That’s justified in terms of raising the profile and legitimizing music mediation as a professional field. But we need

to move beyond this logic of upgrading and downgrading, and focus on shared values and humanistic principles, whether in schools, cultural institutions, or the independent scene. We need to sit at the same table again and ask ourselves: what can we achieve together as a larger lobby? And not knocking on different doors individually, begging for money in secrecy.

Irena Müller-Brozović: Thank you for all your statements. I hope this leads to further discussions.

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Authors' Biographies

Beat Fehlmann is Artistic Director and Managing Director of the Academy of Music in Liechtenstein and of Ensemble Esperanza (since 2025). From September 2018 to 2025, he served as Director of the German State Philharmonic Orchestra of Rhineland-Palatinate. Born in Switzerland, he previously led the South West German Philharmonic in Constance, following positions at the Graubünden Chamber Philharmonic and the Philharmonic Orchestra of the Nations. Since 2020, he has taught orchestra management at the Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts. In 2022, he received the German Orchestra Culture Prize for his innovative work.

Prof. **Lydia Grün** is President of the University of Music and Theatre Munich and president of The German Music Council. She is a professor of music mediation and previously taught at the Detmold University of Music. As managing director of *Netzwerk Junge Ohren* e.V. (2013-2019), she advocated for the role of music in a diverse society. Earlier, she worked as a music consultant and deputy head of department at the Lower Saxony Ministry of Science and Culture and as managing director of *Musikland Niedersachsen*. She studied musicology and journalism at the University of Leipzig, Humboldt University of Berlin, and Free University of Berlin.

Annemarie Mitterbäck is the founder and director of *Music Scapes*. She has worked for over a decade in various cultural institutions in Vienna (*Klangforum, Jeunesse*), Salzburg (Easter Festival), Berlin (*Berlin Philharmonic Zukunft@Bphil*), and New York City (*Carnegie Hall, Community Work*). She has designed diversity-sensitive mediation concepts and participatory music projects for *Wiener Festwochen, Radio Symphony Orchestra Vienna*, the *Vienna Konzerthaus, regionaleX*, and *Musiktheatertage Wien*. Her education and training include music education and dramaturgy (University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna), French, musicology, cultural anthropology/Creole studies (University of Vienna), and critical diversity practice in art and culture (Institute for Science and Art Vienna).

Irena Müller-Brozović studied piano, school music, and music mediation in Basel, Detmold, and Vienna and is a professor of music mediation at the Bruckner University in Linz/Austria and at the Bern Academy of the Arts/Switzerland. Her work combines artistic and scientific perspectives and is based on years of practice with leading orchestras and festivals. She currently chairs the doctoral committee at the Bruckner University and is co-editor of the *International Journal of Music Mediation*. Since 2025, she has been a member of the jury of the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation, where she supports the selection and promotion of music mediation projects.

Hans Georg Nicklaus studied violin, philosophy, and musicology, earned his habilitation in cultural studies at Humboldt University in Berlin, and teaches music and cultural history as well as music mediation at Bruckner University in Linz/Austria. Since 2018, he has headed the Institute for Theory and History there. At the same time, he has been working regularly since the 1990s as a radio editor and producer of music programs for Radio Ö1 (ORF), for which he has received several awards.

Dr. **Anke Schad-Spindler** has been co-director of the research institute *EDUCULT* alongside Aron Weigl since early 2024. Her current research focuses on impact analyses and evaluations of cultural and educational programs, international cultural work in conflict contexts, cultural policy and democracy, and cultural governance. She chairs the Advisory Panel on Cultural Diversity of the Austrian Commission for UNESCO.

Norbert Trawöger is the artistic director of the Brucknerhaus/LIVA. Previously, he served as the artistic director of the Bruckner Orchestra Linz and led Upper Austria's first cultural EXPO, Anton Bruckner 2024. Trawöger studied flute in Vienna, Gothenburg, and Graz, and earned an Executive Master in Arts Administration from the University of Zurich. He has published essays on art and culture. Known for his creative and eccentric approach, he frequently speaks out on society, art, and culture.

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