

# *Music Minus the Rules:* the challenges of bringing new audiences into the concert hall

*Breaking established concert rules to bring new and diverse audiences into the Teatro Comunale Claudio Abbado of Ferrara: two experimental events to understand what attracts new audience*

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How to attract new and diverse audiences into the concert hall?

Every manager in the performing arts very likely poses this question at least once a day. And there is not a single answer to this age-old dilemma. Classical music suffers from many public misconceptions, as every musician knows: that it is "old", cold, complicated, snobbish and for well-off people that can afford costly tickets.

It is not easy to overcome the superstitions of those who do not feel at home in a theatre. During the past years, the EUYO has been more than aware that innovative performances are sorely needed to get closer to casual audiences and interact with new people.

There has been a veritable cascade of informal EUYO performance formats in the last

few years: the post-concert *Late Night Sessions* experienced in many informal venues; the *Close Up* seats in which people can sit right inside the Orchestra; *Hands-On* in which children can touch, learn and play instruments; the *Spazio Klassik* yurts bringing music into the squares and streets of Bolzano; the *Orchestra in Città!* project that brought music into the schools, hospitals and retirement homes of Ferrara; and finally the *Music Gallery* spearheaded in Grafenegg and Vienna, and that flourished in the summer 2020 with 23 concerts in 19 countries.

All those formats share a common thread: the EUYO performs outside a theatre, in special events. But perhaps the real challenge would be to bring people inside a theatre and offer them an informal concert. And indeed, to attract new audiences to the Teatro Comunale



*A moment of the first Music Minus the Rules concert of September 12, with presenter Ambra Bianchi and conductor Peter Stark.*

Claudio Abbado in Ferrara has been the core concept - and challenge - of the Music Minus the Rules experiment.

Two special events took place on Sunday 12 and 19 September, at the congenial time of 4pm, designed as an ideal approach for families, young people and especially for first-timers. In both events, lasting about 1 hour, a presenter interacted with the conductor, the musicians and the audience.

The first event saw the engaging Ambra Bianchi, from the Associazione Musicisti di Ferrara, introduce the audience to the Orchestra. What is an orchestra? how does it work? what are its sections? All topics that were explained in detail with simple language. Interviews with musicians and Peter Stark showed the human side of those who play an instrument to the audience. Trying different ways of playing in front of the audience allowed everyone to grasp the importance of rehearsals and different interpretations.

The second event had the stylish presenter Fabio Sartorelli accompanying the audience into the magical world of symphonic music with conductor Sascha Goetzl. Between excerpts of Tchaikovsky' Sixth Symphony, Sartorelli went into myriad detail about the private life of the Russian composer, his dilemmas, his catastrophic marriage and the terrible relationship with his wife. He presented the life of the composer as a deeply human if afflicted story; conjuring someone who could be recognised by the audience, and for whom they could feel real sympathy.

It is now time to draw some conclusions. Although the numbers of the audience could not have been those of pre-covid times, as every second seat in the Ferrara theatre is still

tied up to prevent people from sitting close to each other, the theatre was not in full capacity.

Tickets were more than affordable: single seats were costing only 9€, with a special promotion of 3€ for young people under 20 extended to members of the Associazione Musicisti di Ferrara and those who had purchased a ticket for InternoVerde, a popular festival that opens Ferrara's private gardens. A different style of poster made its appearance outside the theatre, with the image of an EUYO musician for once not in concert dress, and adored instead with sunglasses; similar flyers were distributed to the locals who host the Ferrarese students' nightlife. A Facebook advert promoted the events through video animation. Local press articles announced the events.

Through whatever path they finally made their way into the theatre, the people who attended the Music Minus the Rules were ecstatic. Finally, they said to people in the box office, they found a family atmosphere, a true embrace by an orchestra. Many of them were curious to discover more about the symphony of which they had heard only excerpts. The result was a quick sell-out of the following EUYO concert in which the full Tchaikovsky' Symphony could be heard.

So there is a lesson that we can draw from this experiment. To entice new and diverse audiences into the concert hall means dispelling myths, fighting against rigid structures and preconceptions, and also avoiding easy targets. It is a path into uncharted territory for many, being aware that there are no easy "audience segments" to target but rather a glorious sea of individuals who have not yet discovered the beauty and the emotional drive that classical music can bring when we manage it minus the rules.

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