

Lecture Town and Gown 10 May 2010

Art in - an ageing - society: music without boundaries

Dear listeners,

In NRC newspaper of March 25 writer Gerrit Komrij says in his column: *Where something is brought about, the artist is not far*. Despite Komrij's sometimes rather sour observations on art, I think *this* statement supports all research and activities we want to develop in the Research Centre Art & Society of the Hanze University Groningen.

When the plans for the research centre were being developed and described in 2008, one wonderful name after the other was considered. They left me cold. *Art and Society* was the title as far as I was concerned, and fortunately that is what it became. The word 'society' for me expresses something beyond 'the society'. Art and society is about touching people in their deepest being with and by art. Words that are associated with this are: connecting, intensifying, moving, arousing attention, giving pleasure, offering a sense of structure, have a healing effect. 'Wellbeing' in other words, not intended as an old-fashioned term but as an all-encompassing word for all things that make life worth living, or at least can make it liveable.

Artists can play an important part in these processes, not as pseudo-therapists, but *expressly* from their own artistic identity and drive. These are leading for an approach in which artists wholly understand the different social contexts in which they move, and react to this adaptively and responsively.

This requires quite something from artists, and therefore from us as higher art education as well. We are not used to seeing this as our core business. Which is quite strange; after all we have been doing this for as long as we can remember as artists: connecting with an audience and bringing something about. The point here is that we want to connect with a *new* audience, as well as with the more or less traditional audience who have appreciated art for a long time. New audiences, from all nooks and crannies of society: schools, hospitals, prisons, care homes, nursing homes or the corporate world. In essence with those who, through whatever circumstances, do *not* come into contact with art as a matter of course.

For this reason we need research that has to lead to innovative projects, as well as entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship which should be approached in an integrated way in an artist's training, not via courses offered under the heading: 'how do I become a boy or girl from the fast-lane', but underpinned with fundamental questions of identity: who am I as an artist, what do I want to express, what role do I *want* to and *can* I play in society, which are my strengths?

Critical reflection therefore is key, *especially* in relation to artistic processes and the complex world in which we live. And this has to be part of research which has to lead to increasing professional development and possibilities for artists.

I would like to underpin this rather abstract exposition with something more concrete in a minute. Within the Research Centre Art & Society I lead and give shape to the Research Group Lifelong Learning in Music & the Arts. I would like to give you a short impression of what we do within the research group and after this look more closely at one specific project in one of our big research strands Healthy Ageing through Music & the Arts

The Research Group conducts research into the relation between musician and artists and society. A central question in this is what the connection between artists and new audiences means for the different roles they have to play. We do research *into* practice. It is qualitative research which should lead to the forming of theory which can be used first and foremost to underpin curriculum development and the continuing professional development of musicians and artists.

Let me explain something about the concept of 'lifelong learning'. Often this is seen as synonymous to 'éducation permanente', but it is much more than a refresher course. I would like to describe lifelong learning briefly as *a dynamic concept of learning which enables us to deal with change*.

Learning lasts a lifetime, happens unconsciously and consciously, formally within a school system and informally among young people who are playing pop music in a garage. The time musicians spend at a conservatoire and artists at an academy, is an intensive period in a lifelong learning process. But there is also something we call a life-wide process. Life-wide learning exists as well. The transitions in a human life, in the personal arena as well as the professional, are of crucial importance to someone's development; intensive learning moments intersect the horizontal line of lifelong learning. This is the reason why one of the most important characteristics of the concept of lifelong learning is that it is always about a combination of personal *and* professional development. Someone's learning always embodies someone's biography.

Lifelong learning is global and local, and moves from the level of society as a whole via the level of the educational institution to the level of the individual in society.

Lifelong learning is a very important concept for artists. Because, in order to be employable in new social contexts artists have to, besides having complete command of the

artistic profession, be able to fulfil various roles simultaneously in order to do their work well. The roles of 'innovator', 'partner', 'collaborator', 'researcher', 'connector' and 'entrepreneur' for example.

We will look more closely at an example of these combined roles. One of the most important changes in the current professional practice of *musicians* is the emergence of what is called the 'community musician': the musician who works in various social contexts. I don't really like the word, because I think at heart every musician is a community musician. There is not (yet) a Dutch word for it.

For some time now in the UK, but at present in Scandinavia and The Netherlands as well, we have been seeing the emergence of musical practices in various places in society. Community musicians design and lead what we call *participative* music workshops within for example health care, in prisons, for the elderly, etc. The idea behind such workshops is that people can express themselves by making music together and by improvising. This can result in a feeling of something shared, and especially of shared ownership of both the creative process and the creative product.

An integral part of the process in such a music workshop is the mutual exchange of artistic ideas, of learning and improvising together. Being able to improvise therefore, is a very important skill for a musician and equally as important is that a musician can get someone to improvise, as it were, is able to facilitate the process of artistic expression of a third party. The person who leads such a workshop has different roles at the same time, he is for example composer, performer, arranger, and conductor and has to be able to display qualities which are visionary, innovative and enterprising.

A quote by Sean Gregory, a musician from the UK who was involved in research for the Research Group for a number of years is significant. He says:

The roles can differ. You can be a leader, a facilitator, a composer, arranger, a supporting instrumentalist, you can be the person who just makes it happen; you can shift roles (...) The principle (of the creative music workshop) is the notion that you are with a group of people, that you encourage them to come out with their own ideas (...) The key part is that *together you develop something into something else*. That can go for young children with no skills whatsoever or a highly trained dancer or a West African musician, searching and exploring new meeting points, new languages and possibilities.

Over to Healthy Ageing.

The choice for the research strands of the Research Group is determined by the search for and connecting with new audiences *and* broadening of employability for musicians and artists. Within the research strand Healthy Ageing through Music & the Arts we work on research into the relationship between music and *wellbeing and cognitive skills* of elderly people. There are three research projects within HAMA, and about one of these, the project 'Music and Dementia', I would like to tell you some more.

If music be the food of love, play on... This is a quote by Shakespeare from 1601, from the play 'Twelfth Night', but it was also cited in December 2009 by Hannah, a woman in the last stages of dementia. When the music in the workshop that I was observing in a care home in London, was finished, and there was silence, this was broken by the loud voice of Hannah,

who quoted Shakespeare. She was not able to use her hands and legs anymore, but was clearly intensely involved in what was happening. She used to play the violin, her carers told me. Hannah radiated pleasure after the music she had heard, and in the making of it, to which she had probably participated in her mind. Just before the workshop began she had been in tears: 'I just learned that my sister has died' she told my colleague. Reliving a great sadness, again and again as *new* sadness, what could be crueller?

The music workshop I attended in London was a project of the organisation Music for Life. Music for Life was developed and led by music education specialist Linda Rose, and began in 1983. Last year the programme was formally 'adopted' by Wigmore Hall in London, one of the most famous concert halls for chamber music in the world. This adoption is a beautiful statement.

'Music for Life Wigmore Hall' as it is called now, organises interactive music workshops in nursing homes and day care institutions for people living with dementia. During a period of eight weeks three musicians work with a group of eight residents and five carers, and use musical improvisation as a kind of catalyst in order to, in a few words, bring about communication in the widest sense, through music. This happens at various levels. One of the objectives is strengthening the relations between people with dementia amongst themselves, and also those between people with dementia and their carers. Musicians and carers work as a team within a project such as this.

The musicians use a wide range of verbal and non-verbal ways in order to reach the individual residents and the residents and carers as a *group*. Both the pleasure in making music and the reflection of the carers on the impact of this are important. The insights the carers sometimes gain from this, as well as the motivation, can result in positive long-term effects on their work with the residents. This is why, simultaneously with the

project, schooling for the carers takes place. This happens in collaboration with the organizations Jewish Care and *for dementia*, which both work with Wigmore Hall. One project takes eight consecutive weeks. Three musicians, among which is one workshop leader, work in the project together with the trainer of the carers. At the beginning of each weekly session, which lasts an hour, and during which the residents and their carers are in a circle together with the musicians, the musicians play a short piece that they made especially for this group. From there, either or not by improvisation, an hour of shorter and longer music pieces follows, in which the residents are activated to participate, or sometimes even to make their own music piece, together with one of the musicians.

In the middle of the circle there are a number of instruments that are easy to play and the musicians try to reach the residents by having their antennae on at full alert. What you see and hear the musicians do is what you could call 'the art of reading your audience'. The smallest verbal and non-verbal signals of the residents can be picked up by musicians, in which the carers join in more and more. Once there is musical communication, for example when one of the residents holds a baton and the musicians respond to the most minute movement, often a very special kind of interaction is created. Without exception people start smiling and are visibly having fun. I have observed some amazing processes.

Quite a lot of research has been done which shows that musical communication is healing for people with dementia. In his book 'Musicophilia, Stories about Music and the Brain', Oliver Sachs writes that music may have long-term effects on people with dementia. He speaks of improvements of cognitive functions, mood and behaviour, which may last for hours or days after they have been activated by music (2007: 319).

Evaluations of the Music for Life projects underpin Sachs' observations and moreover show results in the area of an improved interaction between carers and residents. An

interaction which also takes place on a deeper, implicit and non-verbal level. The projects therefore are especially concerned with finding, or rather 're-finding' the person behind the dementia.

Sachs quotes from a letter by a music therapist who says: one of the most beautiful results of my work is that the caring staff are suddenly able to see the people they care for in a whole new light (p. 319). I have heard similar observations from the organization of Music for Life.

About the role of musicians in the lives of people with dementia Sachs says:

The perception of music and the emotions it brings about do not only depend on the memory, and music does not have to be familiar in order to wield her emotional power. I have seen deeply demented people cry or shake while they were listening to music they had never heard before, and I think that they can experience the whole range of feelings that the rest of us experience, and that dementia, at such moments at any rate, is no hindrance for emotional depth. Once you have seen such reactions, you know that there is still a *me* that can be addressed, even if this addressing happens exclusively and alone through music (Sachs 2007: 320).

In the Netherlands there are initiatives for musical practices for people with dementia, we have researched these. Of course there is also music therapy, and this is very important. But a practice such as Music for Life, in which musicians, sometimes in combination with a part-time job in an orchestra or at a music school, work from their own artistic identity in music workshops with elderly people with dementia, does not exist.

Because the number of elderly people is increasing and therefore also the number of people with dementia, it is important to study this practice and implement this in the Netherlands at some time in the future. It may provide new professional opportunities for future professional musicians.

What are we going to do in the research 'Music and Dementia'? Objective is researching the practice specifically from the perspective of the *musician*, and of course this also means that we have to examine the context and the setting of living with dementia and the care for people with dementia. Musicians really have to understand this and know what they need before they can do this work in a responsible way.

Research into the development of practice we could call it, which will take place in collaboration with Wigmore Hall and the organization Jewish Care. We will research a project in a nursing home in London which will run from October to December 2010.

As well as myself, a member of the group of researchers is involved, together with a co-researcher from Wigmore Hall, the trainer of the carers and the three musicians who give the workshop. A professor from the University of Göttingen is involved in the research as well.

After the research results have been described a period follows during which the training, which is a result of the research, takes place. Musicians from the Netherlands who would like to do this work, will be trained by musicians from Music for Life Wigmore Hall. We are thinking of training (of course) master students and recent graduates. The training will be followed by a number of pilot projects in the northern region of the Netherlands and after this implementation will follow.

Back to Art and Society. It is evident, also through this example, that it is important to have both a deep and a wide understanding of the social context, to begin with the needs of people with whom musicians and artists work. It is also clear that it is absolutely irrelevant to consider artistic practices as *either* 'l'Art pour l'Art' or as 'social work'. Art practices which are rooted in society are *per definition* artistically driven and show a close connection between the individual creative passion of the artist and that which the artist brings into being in society.

The key here is the transformative learning of the artist, which is expressed in the changing of her frame of reference when she connects to the social context, be it in a nursing home, at a school or in a juvenile detention centre, and where she always leaves her individual artistic fingerprints on the work of art she creates, together with others.

Thinking back of what Oliver Sachs said about the 'me' that can always still be addressed in people with dementia, I would like to close with a poem as a beautiful metaphor which will speak for itself in connection with this speech. It is the poem 'Reasons' by John Killick of 2008, which was published in the Journal of Dementia Care:

REASONS

"Why do you keep chipping away at that huge piece of rock?"

the little boy asked Michelangelo. "Because I know

there's an angel inside trying to get out."

“Why do I keep gazing at, stroking, whispering to
this body in a bed?” I ask myself. “Because I know
there’s a person inside trying to get out.”

I thank you for your attention.