

Transcript

The importance of planning a musical performance

Dr Sean Williams:

In 2001 I was lucky enough to perform at the Burning Man Festival which is a big arts festival in the Nevada Desert. And I had a really good slot for DJing which was on the Saturday night on one of the big sound systems, going from the night-time into the daytime. So, I had a transition between the hours of darkness, through the dawn to sunrise and beyond.

Now, amongst some of the things I did to prepare for this was I stayed up the previous night and obviously enjoyed the festival but particularly I made a precise note of the time the sun rose over the mountains. Now I knew this would change by a few seconds, not exactly, I didn't know exactly how many but I knew it would change a little bit, but I, I got the time as precisely as I could.

This was because there was a particular tune that I wanted to play for that transitional moment. Now this, this moment, the sunrise is very important. It's a very important for many different cultures, in different arts, for poetry, for, for all manner of different cultures. It happens everyday obviously but it's a moment in time that not very many of us experience. Certainly not very often.

It's the sort of thing that at a festival, if you're in the festival space for a number of days, that you can incorporate into your experiences. And indeed, many festivals will incorporate that particular time within what happens at the festival.

So, armed with the knowledge of when the sun was going to rise, I had a particular tune I was going to play that starts with a fair amount of percussion and at a certain moment this beautiful sort of sound evolves like a, like a kind of a, a wave washing over the, the general sort of sound world. And it's, it's a great track. I've played it on many different occasions, but I really wanted to be able to play it and start it so that the moment the sound is introduced the sun rose.

I did my preparation and I had a little bit of luck as well in that I got the timing absolutely spot on. And this conjunction of the Earth rotating at exactly the right moment for the Sun to come up past the mountains. And this sound in, in this particular piece of music to coincide and that happened, and I think the effect was really palpable on the audience.

I don't know that for sure but as a musician I'm always trying to, to maximise the effect of the kinds of sounds and music that I make on people.

Now, the key principle of this is the fact that music doesn't happen in a vacuum. Music happens at a particular time, in a particular place or space. Festivals give us a wonderful opportunity to have a, have a, have a much more specific or particular range, choice or availability of these spaces and places and times.

So, we can look at this kind of idea across all sorts of musics. One of my colleagues Martin Clarke has written about the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College Cambridge. That's something which is sort of in the national psyche, if you like, I think it goes back to about 1926. But this is something that happens in a particular space. It happens at a particular time. And the context of the music is, is absolutely interwoven with where it happens. If you're lucky enough to be there, then you get the experience of the architecture of the building. You might get the light filtered through the stained-glass windows. You may get some sort of residual incense. I'm not, I'm not sure of the, whether there's incense used. But the point is all of the senses can come into play in a festival situation.

It's the sort of thing that you don't get entirely if you listen to recorded music. So, festivals allow us to actually sort of make this connection realise the importance of what we call the, the performance ecosystem or the sound ecology. And many of us are really studying all of these extra influences and perspectives that give us a really different kind of insight on how music is and was made and how it is and was received.

So, festivals amplify these kinds of options. And they give us a really good sort of key to, to, to sort of unlock some of the secrets that we might not know about, about music from the past and allow us to develop new ideas about making music in the present.

I hope you can draw on some of your own experiences at any number of festivals whether it's Glyndebourne or T in the Park or Glastonbury or any sort of festival of any kind and have a little think about the importance of where you were or when it happened. And see whether that makes you think or feel differently about the things that you may have heard.