

Music Walk: new music for public spaces



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Steve Bowbrick, Interactive Editor, BBC Radio 3

It is likely that music is as old as human culture and it offers us a medium of expression that is constantly being reinvented and updated. Using new media and technologies, *Music Walk*, commissioned for the 2012 BBC Proms season, offered participants an innovative experience of contemporary music while moving through different urban environments in London. Since its launch, *Music Walk* has had significant impact upon its participants and on British cultural institutions and, as a result, it is being expanded in new projects throughout London and beyond.



Music Walk took 10 short contemporary compositions, commissioned from 12 composers and inspired by locations around the Albert Hall and made them available online to be heard on mobile devices (smartphones, MP3 players) at the locations that inspired them. Photo courtesy of Suzanne Jansen.

Overview

The origins of music are lost in the era of prehistory. Today, music exists in all known cultures, including isolated tribal populations, suggesting that it was most probably present among ancestral peoples before the global migration of humans. Music is a fundamental part of humanity that is used to express emotions and ideas about the cultural milieu from which it arises. In turn, music is influenced by all aspects of that culture, including social, economic and technological conditioning. Advances in technology and the rise of new media, with its on-demand access to content and user feedback/participation, have transformed how we make music and where and how we listen to it.

Tim Hopkins, Research Fellow (Centre for Research in Opera and Music Theatre) at the University of Sussex has extensive professional experience as a director and designer for opera and as artistic director for devised

performance projects employing new media and technologies. Since 2000, Hopkins has undertaken in-depth research into the use of new media platforms for performance and site-specific projects such as *Elephant and Castle* (Aldeburgh Festival, June 2007), which used sonic and visual media to effect dislocations in an actual location (Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh) and a virtual location (Elephant and Castle, London).

Hopkins joined Sussex in 2007 as an Arts & Humanities Research Council Fellow in the Creative and Performing Arts, undertaking a series of projects that specifically explored the potential for new media technologies in music theatre. *Give Me Your Blessing* (2009) combined live performance and digital media to deconstruct Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, incorporating virtual platforms such as *Second Life* – a 3D virtual world where users interact and create using voice and text chat. *Lost Chord* (2010) investigated new technological interfaces between audiences and performance events, and one act of Harrison Birtwistle's *Masque of Orpheus* (2009), staged by Hopkins for the BBC Proms, explored aspects of mobile performance in site-specific contexts.

Subsequently, recognising his expertise in this area, BBC Proms commissioned Hopkins to develop and produce *Music Walk* between 2010 and 2012. Research for the project examined the creative use of media tools and interfaces such as radiofrequency identification systems, QR Codes and GPS systems to investigate live performance and embodiment, the social effects of digital portability, the notions of public spaces as curated space, and the potential for the digital world to open out on to and augment our experience of the 'real' world.

Music Walk took 10 short contemporary compositions, commissioned from 12 composers and inspired by locations around the Albert Hall and made them available online to be heard on mobile devices (smartphones, MP3 players) at the locations that inspired them. Participants were orchestrated into mobile clusters across timed routes and each group was sent instructions, playlists and tasks designed to heighten their experience at each

location. The project placed the listener at the centre of a new artistic experience, triangulating perception of location, sound and audience action. In addition, around the event, approximately 6,000 additional listeners accessed the music online throughout the Proms 2012 season.

Achieving impact

Music Walk brought contemporary art music to new audiences and enriched the public's experience of their civic spaces. The project had, and continues to have, impact in four main areas: on the public, both those who participated in the event and through the BBC's web page; on BBC Radio 3's thinking around future programming; by engendering the first ever collaboration between the BBC and Transport for London (TfL); and through further collaboration between Hopkins and Sound and Music (SAM), the leading UK promoter of new music.

The most direct impact was achieved through the live *Music Walk* performance, which took place over 1.5 hours on 17 August 2012, exposing 600 participants to 10 new pieces of music in 10 different locations and enabling a novel experience of state-of-the-art music and urban environments. The project reached a much wider audience by purposefully leading visitors to the BBC website over the two-month Proms season. The BBC recorded 5,961 visitors to the web page, 266 listeners streaming the music and 903 full playlist downloads. The project also involved other institutions including the Serpentine Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, each with their own visitors. The impact of the project was noted by Steve Bowbrick, Interactive Editor, BBC Radio 3:

'our feedback and figures suggested an impressive depth and extent of public impact.'

Music Walk, the first collaborative encounter between the BBC and TfL, enabled both institutions to consider the enhancing impact of cultural interventions on public space. TfL has a Surface Planning Policy that incentivises non-vehicle travel and TfL recognised the potential value of *Music Walk*'s enrichment of a traveller's experience on foot. They created bespoke mapping for

the project using their particular mapping-design experience to indicate composers and locations.

Future impact

The BBC is constantly exploring the potential of new digital broadcast platforms, and Steve Bowbrick has confirmed the impact of the project on their future thinking:

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In addition, TfL have indicated their interest in supporting further development, and SAM has commissioned Hopkins to develop a large-scale extension of *Music Walk* throughout London, as well as an exportable model for other cities.

Funding and partnership

Music Walk was developed in partnership and with supporting funding from BBC Proms. TfL provided support and funding through their development of bespoke mapping for the project. Subsequently, SAM has paid for further development of *Music Walk* in collaboration with Joana Seguro and Artists and Engineers.

Working with us

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