Music Walk: new music for public spaces

‘As a project which reached out to the public in what was for us a significant new format – using online to link place, new music and audience in a focused way – it [Music Walk] had a significant impact not only on participating audiences, but on our continuing debates around how we reach and stimulate audiences in the future.’

Steve Bowbrick, Interactive Editor, BBC Radio 3

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.

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.

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
music, with contemporary compositions, commissioned from 12 composers and locations, and the potential for the digital world to open up to and augment our experience of the ‘real’ world.

**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:

> ‘As a project which reached out to the public in what was for us a significant new format – using online to link place, new music and audience in a focused way – it had a significant impact not only on participating audiences, but on our continuing debates around how we reach and stimulate audiences in the future.’

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.