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Incidental music: Enhancing the emotional experience of the audience

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*Charlotte Corday came to our town
heard the people talking saw the banners wave
Weariness had almost dragged her down
weariness had dragged her down
Marat / Sade, Peter Weiss (1965)*

Abstract

Environmental psychologists, who study transactions between individuals and their physical settings, maintain when an individual's environment is changed, his/her behavior and experience are also changed by the environment (Gifford, 2002). Like other segments of the theatrical setting, a manipulation of the environment can enhance or constrain audience actions. Physical elements, as well as other ambient factors such as lighting, color, quality of materials, set design, music, fragrance, and room temperature are just a sample of the dramatic elements used to orchestrate the environment. However, this paper explores the relationship between the elements utilized to create enhanced experiences for the audience through the introduction of incidental music to dramatic performances that take place in all theatrical settings and venues, ranging from traditional theatres to special events.

Keywords: incidental music, atmospherics, servicescapes, experience creation, emotional connection

Introduction

All theatres, playwrights, directors, actors, and technical support professionals are striving for the emotional connection across all contexts. Beyond simple show, film or grand spectacle, in order to connect audiences to message and to create experiences that

are both shared and intimately personal; communicating with each audience member as an individual in a collective space. Audiences depart having been touched, moved or having had emotions and feelings that were nearly forgotten or efficiently intellectualized rediscovered, re-ignited and once again made very real and immediate.

The purpose of this paper is to gain an understanding of the salient components of experience design in relation to the event environment and those who utilize the space: actors (designers, providers of experiences/services, and staff) as well as the audience (attendees), in order to apply the existing models: Kotler's atmospherics (1973) and Bitner's servicescapes (1992). This paper explores the relationship between the elements utilized in a theatrical performance setting, which create enhanced experiences for the audience. To accomplish this, we review literature from theatre, psychology, environmental psychology, sociology, marketing, architecture, as well as design. Then, we apply these concepts to the element of incidental music, the experience it creates; and the emotional connection felt while blending together in this environment.

Incidental Music

Music composed for, or used in, a dramatic production, film or radio or television program is known as incidental music. In ancient Greek drama, music intervened at significant points, and in medieval miracle and mystery plays it accompanied entrances and exits, imitated real-life effects and enhanced symbolism. The earliest surviving secular play with significant music is Adam de la Halle's "Le jeu de Robin et Marion" (Kennedy, 1994), but it was the Renaissance that saw the first play with incidental music in the modern sense. In the 16th century and the early 17th, music was considered more appropriate for comedies and pastorals than for tragedies. Shakespeare's example led to

an increased use of music in plays in England, and the tradition increased during the Restoration.

The theatre has been responsible for the creation of various introductions and interludes in the form of incidental music. One thinks immediately of Mendelssohn's incidental music for “A Midsummer Night's Dream” (Mendelssohn, 1835), and Beethoven, Faure, Sibelius and Elgar are amongst many composers who have written incidental music.

In the field of event management incidental music is not only used in creative productions; but it is also used as an important tool to orchestrate the pacing of an entire event. Much like a symphony conductor's wand, filled with pianissimos and crescendos, incidental music gives cues to the audience about what is expected of them. It leads attendees through their evening's journey. For example, when guests are enjoying themselves during the cocktail reception and it is time for them to enter the main banquet room, you don't clang the dinner bell. You utilize incidental music to cue them that it is time to exit the reception area—a new experience is awaiting them in the next room!

Experience Creation and Emotional Connection

When approaching a new project, artistic designers explore unperceived assumptions in order to get them out of the way before beginning to work with what is about to be created. The Architecture Forum at Harvard University maintains that you never simply “show” celebration or spectacle. Rather, “it is a force, an undercurrent of nuance; a subtext that informs and enlightens, framed in an experience” (Nelson & Ozier, 2007). Kile Ozier has articulated *Five Tenets of Experience Creation and Emotional*

Connection (Nelson, 2008). These principals, in various combinations, are effectively applied to any context of storytelling, and successful at any magnitude. Ozier's methodologies are: Exploration of Assumption; Comfortable Disorientation; Liberation of Preconception; Successive Revelation; and Subliminal Engagement. It is the principal of Subliminal Engagement, which is most applicable to incidental music in the theatrical/event environment.

Subliminal Engagement

When presentation techniques suggest a predictable experience and the techniques applied to the experience require a stretch of credulity by the audience, each audience member is creating a personal experience. The fact that each audience member discovers the experience at nearly the same time, almost in unison, initiates a pheromonally-charged simultaneous set of personal experiences. A virtual, subliminal gasp of recognition takes place among and shared by the audience members and energy erupts in the room that is intangible while being profoundly powerful.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) build on Irving Goffman's dramaturgical principles in their book, *The Experience Economy*, where they discuss staging business performances, equating work with theatre. They also encourage service personnel (*actors*) to "gain a better understanding of the impact their behaviors [*performances*] have on customers and to exert what Goffman calls 'expressive control' over actions in order to create sincere impressions" (p. 108). This is also extremely important in designing the theatrical environment, as you are creating the mood—carefully manipulating the physical surroundings—not just what is occurring on the stage--throughout the evening to ensure the best experience for your audience.

Soundscape

Literary, cultural, sociological, and historical studies have been conducted on the relationship between the senses. A first phase of sound scholarship has characterized research on the sense of listening “as the *other* of seeing: intimate rather than detached, embodied rather than abstract, passive rather than dominant, and above all temporal rather than spatial” (Yablon, 2007, p. 629.) Cultural phenomenologist, Steven Connor (1997), claims that sound is time: a temporal phenomenon. Sound is defined in Webster’s first edition of 1828 as a “word of general signification,” encompassing “sounds of any kind” from “human speech to the wings of an insect” (Helmholtz, 1885).

The notion of soundscape was proposed by R. Murray Schafer (1971) in his research project entitled: World Soundscape Project where a sound inventory was prepared of everyday activities which were addressed from an acoustic, ecological symbolic, aesthetic and musical standpoint (Poissant, 2001).

With soundscaping, music becomes the non-verbal cues used in event environments to assist in changing and creating the pace, flow, and mood of attendee interaction with the event environment. In a ballroom setting, at the cocktail reception, a pianist or a string quartet would allow conversation while communicating an upscale perception. Transition to the dining area is accomplished by having the band on stage perform inviting, higher energy music to let guests know it is time to move into another area. Speakers, presenters, emcees, award recipients, are played on and off the stage by the band. When the meal is served, dinner music facilitates conversation while maintaining a basic energy level. When dessert is served, it is a cue for the band to begin the dance music segment of the evening; and change the feel to a party mode. To

accomplish this, the band will ramp up the volume and attitude of the music to support dancing.

Methods

Ten Professional Event Producers from the Las Vegas Chapter of the International Special Events Society will participate in a focus group with one dichotomous independent variable, the use of incidental music used as entrance between a closed reception and dining experience. Differences between the effectiveness of using ambient (incidental music) vs. verbal cues will be measured.

The ten event professionals who choose to participate in the study will be trained by the researchers prior to the events and will be given an event protocol in which to follow. Parameters will include the following:

1. Number of attendees must include a minimum of 200 persons and not exceed 300 persons
2. Both events used by each producer must be approximately the same size and demographic audience
3. Size of the cocktail reception space must be approximately the dimensions for both events
4. Space must be closed off from the main event environment
5. Incidental music must be similar (ex: one may not be completely instrumental and the other include vocalists)
6. Incidental music must include 3 musicians
7. One of the events will use an event band in the main event room to cue the audience that it is time to move into the next room

8. The other event will use verbal cues to instruct the audience that it is time to move into the next room

Conclusion

It appears that it is possible only to scratch the surface of the relationship between the elements utilized to create enhanced experiences for the theatre and event audience through the introduction of incidental music to events and dramatic performance.

Incidental music is used every day, in nearly every play, and in all places of business to enhance and encourage, much in the same way theatre performance seeks to engage and enhance experiences for the theater attendee. Whether it is the chaos of fringe and found spaces or *A Midsummer Nights Dream* devoid of mid summer – nights or – dreams, which are designed to be performed in and around black boxes, retail establishments, hospitality environments, including entertainment and events, incidental music prepares and frames the visual presentation. Man does not live by sight alone.

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