

After the Silence evaluation (section taken from Reactions14 evaluation document)

4.5 Royal Northern College of Music – AFTER THE SILENCE: Music in the Shadow of War

4.5.1 Introduction to the event

The Royal Northern College of Music, in partnership with the IWM North, presented *After the Silence* on the evenings of 3, 4 and 5 July 2014. The three-hour programme aimed to embrace the numerous emotions associated with war as musicians and electronics, sound and moving image, dance and spoken word transformed the museum space. *After the Silence* featured over 300 musicians, 80 compositions, and 25 world premières, with music from the last 100 years.

This diverse programme, performed in every corner of the museum, included iconic classical works in the main exhibition stages and morale-boosting jazz and ragtime in the café. *After the Silence* contrasted with a traditional concert experience, offering audiences the opportunity to create their own path through the evening, performances and museum itself.

The evaluators attended for two hours on the evening of 4 July. They conducted a mix of narrative and semi-structured interviews with 11 audience members, exploring their responses to the performances and any impact on their perceptions of IWM North. A further 9 respondents completed a mind-map with their responses to the programme. The packed schedule meant that many people were on the move and only able to give limited time before dashing off to the next pieces; it was also noticeable that many people approached had some connection with the college or the museum. Several respondents who were interviewed were linked to the college, its students or the museum, and several had come for specific performances.

The evening had an air of excitement, movement and vibrancy with very different pieces evoking very different atmospheres in spaces around the museum. Whilst some performances were received in quiet appreciation, others prompted foot-tapping, and particularly lively tunes in the café area were accompanied by spontaneous dancing.

4.5.2 Impact of the event on audiences

Feedback from respondents was overwhelmingly positive, with many appearing stunned by the breadth of the programme, the experience and the very spectacle of the museum being transformed into diverse, simultaneous performance spaces. When asked about their initial responses, there was a mix of those who focused on their musical appreciation of a specific performance and those who described powerful emotional responses, however it was striking how many people also referenced the power of the location. They talked of surprise

at having the museum spaces filled in this way, the experience of this unusual staging, and the cumulative impact of experiencing the pieces in relation to each other.

Really moving performance. Really creative venue – different to a concert hall, not sitting down; can move round and see and feel it in a different way. Lots of different pieces that you can experience in relation to each other.

Absolutely fantastic environment; want to soak it all in.

I'm not a classical music fan but it brings the building alive.

Very different. Very unusual place to hear music. Everything going on at once is what the war must have felt like – sometimes people were happy; did listen to jazz; but there were people dying. Some of it was like crazy music like an air raid then the jazz.....I cried three times. It was very emotional.

Unique, bespoke, overwhelming, interesting.

Totally unexpected that there's so many artists playing simultaneously – working well, not distracting one another.

The space worked really well – it's really informal.



Several people commented on ways that future events could be improved. Two people said that they struggled to find their way round the building and locate performances; two felt that there were too many simultaneous performances and a few people questioned the extent to which the event had been publicised. (During one of the spoken word events, the evaluator observed the performers pausing and then taking breaks to avoid coinciding with particular points in nearby performances.)

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Very very good but some quiet pieces were drowned out. It's very difficult with the acoustics.

Really nice stuff but it's worth doing it again but with less events. A few pieces were a bit rushed.

There's so much material – The map is hard to follow.

Hard to find way round – needs better sign-posting. There's too much going on at the same time and it's too dark to read the programme.

Great idea but not well publicised.

Those drawn to the event for specific performances were not disappointed:

It's a great example of why the English are so good at choral music – wonderful singing. The museum is very challenging and having the music on top adds to this. Double whammy good. It makes you think. It's based on a wonderful old folk tune – it's sharing history.

I came to see the 'Reich' specifically. It was an excellent performance; I knew it would be discordant and strange and it was. It was a very amazing idea to make the sounds of the trains. They changed things – height of the glasses and strings. I like the temporal nature – only for tonight and if people don't come you miss it. Love the building but think of it as very permanent.

I like the music. Some of the pieces are a bit complicated for me but it makes me feel good and I'm glad to see the young musicians. Was great.

Connecting with themes of war and conflict

All but one of the respondents were aware that the event was part of the FWW Centenary and most talked about ways in which different performances had enabled them to reflect on themes of conflict. For some, this was through remembering loved ones who had been part of wars; others felt that music of the time took them there; and several spoke of the combined force of the music, visuals and space prompting visceral connections. For some, it was clear that the music heightened the experience, bringing the messages within the museum to life whether this was evoking the enactment and machinery of war or profound feelings about its human impact. One person described how the mix of diverse performances across the evening acted as a soundscape to war, reflecting the diversity of human experience that continues to be enacted even in times of war.

Atmospheric, moving, enlightening, an effective reminder, touching all senses.

Brings it alive – marvellous. I've a connection with war as I lost a brother – my main reason for being here.

Shocking, scary, great idea, sad, jarring and disjointed.

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I need to reflect on this – I'm concerned about the idea of glorifying war. It was a very deep piece – the impact of war and value of life.

My mom said her dad was a rider in the war and pulled the guns into battle. He never spoke a word about it.

This music was heard by someone 100/150 years ago and there was a sound track to the war – reflecting everything that was going on, different things, fun, life, and death. It puts it into context.

There's a connection in relation to the sound of trains; people taken to internment camps.

Relatives died so it's quite poignant. Music adds something. Even Elgar suffered in the war so it was related to the themes. I read things in the silo and with the music it added something.

Atmospheric, moving, enlightening, an effective reminder, touching all senses.

Discordant. War-like; harsh feelings – made me think of metal, guns, bangs.

It's like a sigh. An ethereal feeling, spiritual. I thought of the soldiers coming from the villages, mines, wherever they came from. Sounds evoke thinking beyond this – can't reason why it happened; 20,000 men killed in a morning; the carnage; there must be something more.

Brilliant. I've never been here and it's very emotional for me. My grandfather was in the FWW in the medical corp; what he must have seen. The projections made me think. War is horrible. No speck of land is worth a life – I'm from Ireland and have seen the pain.

Follow-up feedback

Several weeks after the event feedback was gained from 4 people: 1 by email and 3 by telephone.

The email respondent explained that s/he would not normally have visited IWM North as s/he was a pacifist but was very positive about his/her visit. S/he described the event as very exciting, said s/he loved the variety of music showcased and commented that the final piece *Strange News* particularly made him/her reflect 'even more strongly on the tragedy and futility of war.'

Feedback from the 3 telephone respondents on the performances was overwhelmingly positive with comments including:

Standard of music was outstanding

There was an appreciation of how the evening had been set up and the opportunity to move around a number of different diverse performances:

Never been to anything like that before where you move around different pieces – worked really well

Some pieces were played in small areas so the visual impact was amazing

Great opportunity to get up close to the musicians

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There was appreciation of the friendly and sometimes participative nature of some of the performances:

Really friendly group of singers invited the audience to join them and take part

At the same time there were a number of comments on lack of seating available for many of the performances and that more signage to the different areas would have been helpful. Some respondents observed that some of the smaller performances were 'interfered with' by other bigger ensembles nearby and suggested keeping the smaller and solo performances together.

Suggestions for future potential creative collaborations for the IWM North to consider include:

Art exhibitions related to war themes, or theatre and plays

More done with music and maybe resident artists

Use clothing and fashion – maybe creating clothing from a specific period using different fabrics/materials etc

Workshops for children and young people

After the Silence prompted respondents to reflect on the theme of conflict and a number had either family or personal experience of war. The evening helped create a connection with a personal family experience:

The whole atmosphere reflected what war is like – I thought of my father in the First World War and my brother and I did have 'a moment'

4.5.3 Impact on perceptions of IWM North and motivations to visit

For about half of those interviewed, attending *After the Silence* was also their first visit to the museum. Several people, with connections to the College, commented that they had not previously considered visiting the museum, perceiving it to in some sense be glorifying war. Both these and other respondents expressed surprise at the museum staging such an event; most saying that it had changed their view of the museum for the better and would consider returning.

Superb – big surprise. Very excited.

I've been before but don't expect to see such a thing in a museum.

It's a different mindset. I don't associate music with war and museums. I love it.

It's never been my bag; I'm a pacifist. I'll come again to read the stories. It was brilliant.

I've been here before in the day and there's a different atmosphere. It's the same exhibitions but you see them in a different perspective. You have a different view on things. When you just read and look; you listen to the music and feelings come upon you. It brings it to life.

Several people were pleased to see lots of young people, as musicians and visitors, in the museum:

The music brings the place to life and it's filled with young people.

Glad to see the young musicians – they were great.

Follow-up Feedback

There was broad consensus amongst respondents that the event had improved the perception of the IWM North. Most commented that they would likely return for something similar in future, either at the IWM North or another museum if it had a similar offer:

Something like this adds variety to how you interact with history – offers an alternative way of accessing the message

One respondent commented that she would not normally support any such activities as she felt they tended to 'highlight and 'glorify' nationalism', however went on to say that 'if there was something else being performed about the futility of conflict and celebrating peaceful co-existence then I might return.'

4.5.4 Impact of partnership working on the Royal Northern College of Music

The RNCM felt that the event was really successful from an RNCM perspective building on previous collaborations with museums.

The RNCM commented favourably on performing at the IWM North:

Loved the museum because of the space – interesting with all its intricacies and nooks and crannies. The size allowed a breadth of music from soloists to bigger groups

While the building presented some challenges, the RNCM felt that the size wasn't too overwhelming for the audience to get around and that 'people were led by their ears'. There were some acoustic challenges and crossover of sound. The RNCM is developing the audio visual aspects of its work and felt that this made a big impact at the IWM North.

RNCM gave positive feedback on working with the IWM North and how the process was collaborative and mutual:

Working with Catherine was absolutely fantastic – really open to RNCM ideas and supportive. We worked in a mutual way, keeping in mind what was important for both of us

One of the musicians, who gave brief feedback during the course of the evening, commented that the acoustics were problematic and that the space was not ideal for his performance:

Sound wasn't great. You could hear background wind music going on and the space could be more intimate (the piece is intimate and moving).

4.5.5 Suggestions for other creative pieces

Respondents were keen to see the museum offer more creative programmes and readily made suggestions:

There's scope for more youth work. Create spaces – it's perfect here for educational pieces, or dramatised workshops.

Good for schools – could roll out to different centenaries.

This was massive. Could have small-scale ensembles. Do it again.

More hands-on things for children.

I love all the stuff with contemporary artists.

More music and poetry.

So much material – map is hard to follow. Great idea but not well publicised.