

## Brigitta Muntendorf: 'I always ask myself: who is the audience?'

In Brigitta Muntendorf's work multimedia and audience participation play a major role. In our country she is still relatively unknown, but in the past Holland Festival she scored high with her transdigital music theatre piece *Melencolia*. Next season she will compose a new work for Asko|Schönberg. 'I constantly ask myself: Who is the audience?'

Muntendorf was born in Hamburg in 1982, as the ninth child in a family of ten. Her father was a doctor, her mother a nurse who had left Austria in her early twenties. The composer cherishes her Austrian roots: 'I loved it when my parents sang German and Austrian folk songs in harmony, while driving in our VW bus. *Brunälla*, which appears in *Melencolia*, was my mother's favourite. We often travelled to Austria, where half of my family lives and I always feel at home. I lived and worked in Vienna for several years, and have a dual citizenship.'

### Old piano

Though her parents loved singing, they didn't attend concerts or opera, 'this was logistically and financially impossible', says Muntendorf. 'However, at some point, my mother acquired an old piano, and I started playing at the age of seven, taking lessons from our neighbour.' Through ads in the local weekly, she later found a young music student, 'who taught me a lot about classical music, romanticism and modern piano literature.'



'I went on like that, posting notices at music academies, searching for teachers. – It was like groping in the dark to get access to this world, my background was completely different. The piano was a dream world for me, with systems, rules, touch, and mystery. I completely immersed myself in it.'

From the age of sixteen she earned a living as an organist and pianist, playing in churches, at funerals and weddings, or accompanying pop/rock bands. Clubbing came later: 'I was often up all night, dancing to techno, drum & bass, industrial beats. Electronic and classical music were always there side by side.' She was a bit of a rebel too: 'I remember a performance at school with my best friend, in which I dissected Brahms' D minor Ballad *Edward* on the piano, while she loudly recited the German translation of Thomas Percy's poem about a patricide – haha, both the poem and my accompaniment visibly caused irritation.'

## No role models

The moment she started playing the piano, she became fascinated by the structure of music and knew she wanted to become a composer. 'But I had no role models in my environment and was afraid of a life I didn't know, so I first started studying medicine.'

This changed when she stumbled on a score of Younghee Paagh-Paan in the Hamburg music library: 'I was fascinated by the radical nature of her sound and the pulsating quality of her music. I didn't know that such music existed, and wanted to learn everything about it. So, I applied to study with her in Bremen.'

It was a lucky shot: 'The first thing I did was study all the scores and soak up everything I could get my hands on. Younghee taught me different rhythmic concepts, we worked with graph paper instead of music paper, and today I still use her techniques of morphing and expanding rhythms into each other. She talked a lot about the "innate energy" of sounds, a similar concept to [Helmut Lachenmann](#)'s thesis on "innate time", which had a very strong influence on me.'

After graduating from Bremen, Muntendorf continued her studies in Cologne. This stems from her interest in narrative: 'Through rhythms, interval constellations, sound quality and spatiality we can create stories about bodies, places, states and forces. The Hochschule für Musik und Tanz in Cologne has always been a powerhouse for instrumental theatre, especially thanks to [Mauricio Kagel](#).'

## Parallelisms & contrasts

'But stories are also told by images and film, by sculptures, landscapes, living beings, by a physique, and dance is an integral part of its curriculum. I'm interested in the tensions that arise from parallelisms or contrasts, the ways they can lead to erasures, additions, or overwhelm. And with pioneers such as Herbert Eimert and [Karlheinz Stockhausen](#), the Electronic Music Studio remains a hub of innovation; I arrived at a place where transdisciplinarity was a matter of course.'

Her first multimedia piece was *Überhall* (2009), in which she projected the conductor onto the wall 'in order to subsequently start an acoustic and visual dilution process à la Alvin Lucier's *I'm sitting in a room*. At the same time, I wanted to address the role of the conductor and the hierarchic structure in music. This core idea that the boundaries of music and media can be generative and create new contexts has remained to this day, only the means have expanded.'

## Technology & Artificial Intelligence

Muntendorf continues: 'The most fundamental form of a media shift may be found in the echo. The moment the spoken word resonates from another source, it becomes a different entity, a different story. That's why I like collaborating with other artists. I often work with dance and choreography, also with video, light, always employing technology.'

'For three years now, my focus has been on 3D-Audio and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Voice Cloning. I see these voices as musical and theatrical instruments, that can develop beauty when the technology itself becomes invisible.'



The composer delved into this three years ago, collaborating with a Ukrainian startup to clone the voices of three singers. This eventually led to the composition of *ORBIT – A War Series*, that premiered to great acclaim at the Biennale di Venezia in 2023.

This 3D audio oratorio explores systematic violence against the female body, without one musician present on stage. Muntendorf: 'Instead, the space is filled with electronics and AI voice clones of violated women around the world; they have shed their physical bodies, becoming immortal and circling the audience with their stories.'

The audience is seated in two sections facing each other during the performance. The cloned voices are projected from 32 loudspeakers placed in two circles around and above them. Muntendorf: 'By cloning, any voice can be transformed into any other voice, altering age, gender, timbre, intonation and more.'

'They can multiply, morph into one another, fluidly move across the entire frequency spectrum of the human voice, and adopt or overwrite individual characteristics. It's no longer the body that represents a voice; it is the voice itself, detached from the body, that holds the autonomy of transformation.'

## Women transformed into sound objects

Thus, Muntendorf cleverly reverses the roles: where victims of war and rape are often dehumanized by the aggressor, she purposely transforms the women into sound objects – 'things' immune to physical harassment. 'The digital reality of the AI voices becomes a threshold state between human and machine; it is hardly distinguishable from our physical presence at the moment of reception.'

This demands a strong commitment from the listeners: since they cannot connect with physical musicians or sounds, they are entirely thrown back on their own inner feelings and thoughts. Muntendorf sees this as a form of radical listening: 'I'm drawn to technology. Its non-human aspects can interact with the non-human or even inhumane elements within humans, just as its flaws and imperfections can reflect our own.'

## Digital colonialism

Many people fear AI, but you once said you see AI voices as 'slaves', could you explain what you mean by this? 'I was referring to the development of Siri, Alexa & Co, modern assistants (mostly female) who I see as newly designed slaves of digital colonialism. AI presents many potentials and dangers. It can take over all redundant tasks, allowing humans to experience a qualitative upgrade in their work.'

‘In the field of voice cloning, professions will surely change. Voice actors may work for their own voice cloning model instead of a film company in the future. Deceased singers may not return to life, but to our lives. Living singers may freeze their voice acoustically, or sing duets and choruses with themselves – or not, as an artistic statement. As an artist, I view AI as a tool, an opportunity, and a responsibility to creatively utilize this tool, including raising awareness of its dangers.’



## Audience participation

Along with the many possibilities of technology, the role of the live audience is important as well, as illustrated by your concept of ‘social composing’. When and why did you develop this? ‘I always ask myself: who is the audience? How do audiences differ at different venues, in different countries?’

‘In 2013 I started my series *Public Privacy* for solo instrument and social media platforms in the broadest sense. I entered a new working process, focussing on the connection between live music and musicians on platforms such as YouTube, FaceTime, Skype, and others. My aim was to create a new awareness of the concert situation, showing how digital spaces can easily converge with real ones.’

The six pieces were performed many times worldwide, taking on a different guise each time; all soloists record their own videos, to which they play. In one version of *Public Privacy 1*, ‘Flute Cover’, e.g. we see a flute player in his studio, first on video, then in front of a screen, on which ever more performers join him, in an exciting panoply of physical and electronically manipulated sounds. Muntendorf: ‘My series questions the definition of loneliness.’

In one performance of *Public Privacy 6*, ‘Bright no More’, a singer seems to snatch sounds from the air with her hands, while also manipulating a laptop that distorts her voice and projects prerecorded footage of herself pulling faces on a screen behind her.

Muntendorf: ‘It is also about bringing music concepts such as “covering” from digital platforms into New Music.’ During the covid–pandemic the possibility of performing music apart together through social media appealed to millions, and YouTube almost exploded. Muntendorf: ‘It took on a completely different significance then.’

## Melancholy as creative force

Audience participation is important, too. For *Melencolia* (2022), which was performed in the Holland Festival, you even developed an app with which the audience could create its own prologue and epilogue. While entering the hall, we saw ourselves appear live on screen, the musicians were already on stage.

What is the idea behind this? ‘Two musicians with a bodycam film the audience entering the room and the technical and artistic staff behind their control panels, while six cell phone tracks create a cinematic 3D audio sound. Through the live images everyone shares the same space, but since the audience is surrounded by 3D sound and the musicians are on stage, they experience the division inherent in melancholy on a spatial level.’

Ehm, I don’t think I quite understand what you mean by this...? ‘My piece was inspired by Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I*, that shows a winged being gazing melancholically into the world. Today melancholy is often equated with depression, yet these are fundamentally different things. Melancholy is the loss of self in a process of focussing, pondering, reflecting, and questioning.’

‘In depression, the questioning of self has given way to a pathological state of inaction. It is striking that only a achievement-driven society could make this equation. *Melencolia* celebrates melancholy. Moritz Lobeck, my dramaturge, and I want to challenge, at times overtax the spectator, invite them to get lost, to enter into loneliness, but also into humour, into play, to unleash their creativity.’



Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I* (c) Wikipedia

*Melencolia* has seven episodes, in which different aspects of melancholy are addressed. On stage from start to finish however, is a large, reflecting polyhedron, what is its function? ‘Dürer placed a polyhedron in the visual axis of his engraving, in order to obstruct our view. It represents the things that block us, preventing us from developing our self and our creativity.’

‘We live in a world of rational disenchantment, algorithms, mechanization, the undoing of ageing processes, loss of spirituality and the concealment of death. At the same time, we face exuberant media confrontations and a growing need for redemption, or resonance as Hartmut Rosa puts it, for “being in the world”. Dürer’s polyhedron in *Melencolia I* represents these apparently insoluble contradictions.’

## Spontaneity & control

How do these considerations play a role in the way your works come into being? ‘My ideas are of a musical or media nature, but they always have a societal and social context. The working process often begins with extensive research, sometimes with musical or media try-outs in simple or more complex technical settings. When I’m searching for a different musical language, this may involve learning new software or a new musical program. At other times I sit down with a musician to find sounds on their instrument that suit a specific attitude or situation.’

‘In try-outs I allow myself to be surprised. There’s a lot of spontaneity, I search together with the musicians. However, in the finished score, I leave almost nothing to chance. I am very precise in notation, and in theatrical works I also specify lighting, direction, tape, and the spatialization of all sound files.’



Next season you'll compose a new work for the fourth edition of >CONNECT: *The Audience as Artist*<, a project of five European ensembles that aims to 'break the barriers between artist and public'. It will be premiered by theDutch Asko|Schoenberg. What can we expect? 'I'm planning a kind of TV show in which the audience can ask or answer questions.'

'By using live voting tools, they are surveyed anonymously. Where do they come from, what is their average income, what field do they work in, how do they love... The questions, but also the show, will switch back and forth between real and fantastic worlds and carve their own path between data, music and fiction. – I look forward to this adventure very much!'

