

The Digital Future of Live Performances

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by Bernhard Kerres

Looking at the various trends of digital technology the question arises about its impact on live performances and the performing arts in general. Will digital technology substitute for live performances some day? Will enjoy music and performing arts in a virtual reality instead of in a concert hall or a theatre?

In July 2010 Amazon, the online retailer, announced that it sells more e-books than hardcovers¹. It seemed that in a very short time period e-books became an important and significant market factor in the book industry, something many of us have not believed in. Interesting enough the pricing for e-books at Amazon is actually not that advantageous. Most e-books at Amazon are cheaper than the hardcover versions but still more expensive than the paperbacks. It seems that having the liberty to get a new book you have heard about here and now is a big advantage.

Already in 2003 Ray Kurzweil, an inventor and one of the leading thinkers about the future, spoke about the future of music. He said at a conference “we are moving towards an era of software-based musical instruments, intelligent accompanists, and music as information”². He believes that music will stay as a major communication tool of human emotions but that the process of developing, generating and performing music will significantly change.

One such an example is David Cope who is an author, composer and scientist focusing on music and artificial intelligence. He thought music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has developed software to compose in the style of over a hundred different composers. He himself composes not only with the support but in collaboration with the computer. Utilizing the test methodology by Alan Turing the work generated by Cope’s software was undistinguishable from works written by human beings by other people³.

Already in 2008 a robot conducted the Detroit Symphony Orchestra⁴. From there it was only a small step to the first opera where robots and human beings perform together. “Death and the Powers” was premiered in October 2010 in Monaco. In a collaboration between Tod Machover and the MIT Media Lab a full-evening opera was developed which features among other things a chorus of robots as well as musical chandelier⁵.

Knowing about these developments all the endeavors to bring the life experience to the living room over the Internet seem rather humble. Nevertheless projects such as the Digital Concert Hall by the Berlin Philharmonic making all concerts of the orchestra available in audio and video or the growing numbers of concerts available for video

download from medici.tv show the interest of the industry in the new technology. The business model for that needs to be found. Even more important digital homes where the internet becomes a normal input into the home entertainment systems need to be further developed.

Will all these developments lead to the end of live performances? I personally still doubt that. The experience of a live concert is still rather unique. Getting ready for a concert, going to a beautiful venue and concentrating on the music is an experience, which is not easily replicated by technology. In a world with ever shorter attention spans and multiple disruptions from phone calls to e-mails on any device close to you focusing for often over two hours exclusively on music might even become a kind of luxury. Most important for me is this incredible feeling of enjoying music and performing arts often with several other thousand people in the same room at the same time. There is enough research into various group phenomena during concerts to prove the uniqueness of this experience.

But I do hope that technology makes music and performing arts more accessible for any audience. There are great opportunities in enabling people to see interviews with some of the performers, listen into rehearsals and to watch a pre-concert talk at their personal leisure. There are just as many opportunities to make music accessible to people who cannot easily come to a concert hall. Nevertheless I see it as our role to enable as many people as possible to enjoy life performances.

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¹ From "E-Books Overtake Hardcover Sales at Amazon" by David Gelles in San Francisco, 20th July 2010, Financial Times, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f0a40d18-9380-11df-bb9a-00144feab49a.html>

² From Highlights of the Richard C. Heyser Memorial Lecture to the 115th Annual Convention of the Audio Engineering Society on 11th October 2003. Published on KurzweilAI.net, <http://www.kurzweilai.net/the-future-of-music-in-the-age-of-spiritual-machines>

³ see „Triumph of the Cyborg Composer“, Miller-McCune Magazine, 22nd February 2010, <http://www.miller-mccune.com/culture-society/triumph-of-the-cyborg-composer-8507/>

⁴ see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf5szwz6Qzc>

⁵ see <http://opera.media.mit.edu/projects/deathandthepowers/>