

Musicians - From Genius to Participation

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Intro

What is a musician? Well the answer is kind of obvious: A musician is someone who is making music. But there is more than that comes to our mind when we imagine a musician: A musician is someone who expresses him or herself, someone who has a specific taste, someone who needs freedom in order to produce his works, and someone who can create something, that touches us as listeners in a specific way.

The interesting thing about our idea of the musician is, that it is 200 years old. And it is still in order even though a lot has happened since the late 18th century. And currently we are facing another major change in the social and economical conditions of making music -- the digital revolution. And with this revolution the idea of the musician needs to be updated. Musicians need to implement the idea of creating actual participation in their work.

In order to update our idea of the musician, I want to give you a look at three ways our band A FOREST and we as a Leipzig based indie label analogsoul created participation in music recently. But before I do so, I want to take you on a quick ride through the evolution of the idea of the musical genius, in order to understand where it came from and how it worked.

Pre-Modern Musicians

I want to show you what a musician was, before the modern idea of it - that we all share - occurred. The perfect example therefore is Johann Sebastian Bach. Today we know him as

one of the brightest musicians of all times. But in his time Bach was 'just' a very skilled organ player. He was basically a well known live musician, respected for his ability of improvising with his instrument. Why did his contemporaries and Bach himself (!) did not think about him as an unique artist? Because this idea was not yet possible at the time.

When Bach was born in 1685 you became a musician like almost everybody got his job - you inherited it from your parents. The society in the 17th century was strongly hierarchical organized with almost no social mobility to change it.

A musician in the early 18th century was a craftsman in order to serve the societal need for music. And fundamentally there were just two societal needs for music at that time: music either served the aristocracy or the church.

Bach's job as Cantor at St. Thomas in Leipzig was preparing and performing music for every sunday and each event of the church. The greatest composer was God and Bach's job as a musician was to serve him right. So a musician before the late 18th century was not meant to express *himself* musically.

The Musical Genius as Bourgeois Ideal

A new societal function for music and thereby new roles for musicians came up with the bourgeoisie. The citizens took music out of the palaces and churches and brought it into public operas and private salons. The upcoming third estate wanted to pursue cultural pleasures like the aristocracy did, but in their own manner. So they founded orchestras and paid musicians to compose and play for them. Actually the well known Gewandhaus started as an orchestra of citizens that played in private rooms. ("Das grosse Concert", founded 1743.)

This changed the meaning of music as well. The ideal of music turned from the form to the person. You can observe this in every kind of art in the late 18th and early 19th century: Instead of traditional shapes of art the producers became more important. The artists took the center stage as individuals with a unique perspective on the world; with a unique sensibility and ability of expression. Today we tend to understand every early artist this way, but this idea was born exactly in that time.

This idea of the genius meant for example that the musician with the highest value was a composer who interpreted his own works live on the instrument. And that value was not just symbolic but also economically high. The 19th century encountered many waves of hype about virtuosos giving concerts, similar to the pop stars of the 20th century. One of them was the pianist Franz Liszt who was known as a Wunderkind by the age of 12. He was not a genius on the piano but also in professionalizing the personal cult around.

In 1840 for example he organized a tour through Europe by horse carriage, financing all expenses upfront himself. In Vienna and Prague his concerts had been sensational success, but the first Leipzig concerts flopped. So he asked for help among his friends and colleagues. Robert Schumann started writing reviews praising Liszt's concerts. And Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy organized a concert in the Gewandhaus. He even participated in the concert by playing a Bach concerto together with Liszt.

So what do we see here? It does not just take talent on the piano or as a composer that Liszt undoubtedly had. Artists had to foster the image of the virtuous genie. Therefore Liszt prepared his pianos so that they broke when he was playing them; just like the Rolling Stones threw their guitars in the amplifier. Not everybody destroyed their instruments, but every musician had to enact himself as a little bit disconnected from everyday life - Because that was, what they were actually embodying, a different perspective of life than gainful work.

To sum it up: The bourgeoisie brought up the idea of the musician as unique individual. And artists took that role not just by writing and playing great music, but also by staging themselves as virtuosos and sophisticated musical geniies.

The Musician as Employee

110 years ago the most sophisticated part of a bourgeois living room was the automatic piano. And one of the world's biggest producers of automatic pianos was in Leipzig. The Ludwig Hupfeld AG employed 2,000 workers who produced 5 million piano rolls, the storage medium for the pianos, per year. An automatic piano was clearly not a genius like Liszt but it would play all the time you want, and in your living room. The distinctive potential of the bourgeois music moved from concert to the possession of recorded music.

Music had become a consumer product. The most fundamental effect of this change was the segmentation of roles for musicians: Beside playing orchestras you could become a studio musician, a live interpreter, musician for the radio, a producer for other musicians, or part of an entertainment band. Music became a very well running international business dominated by few big companies, since it takes a lot of money to compete on a mass market for industrially produced music.

So most musicians de facto became employees of big labels. Technically they were freelance professionals but actually they were products of the industry. A great example for this is Telefunken. This German company was actually a producer of radios. In the 50s they founded a music label and offered a formal training to become a music star. Trainees were chosen after their talent and then trained in singing and dancing. The most famous star apprentice from Telefunken was Freddy Quinn who landed ten number 1 hits between 1956 and 1966.

So despite the economical facts the idea of the individual musical genius was still alive and part of every mayor music production. The music labels invested a lot of money to invent and market the musical genius. It has become part of the self-concept of musicians and the audience – as you still can see at high symbolic worth of authenticity in music and musicians.

Digital Times

But this business model is not as solide as it looks. Its grounding becomes fluent. Today every smartphone can store more music than a music rack and everybody can access more music than we could ever listen to. It is not anymore about **possessing music** but about **access to music**. Music is not a physical product anymore but a service. Music has become like water.

Thereby the well-established cycle of the music industry becomes inadequate in digital times. Writing an album every two years, financing the studio and the promotion, playing concerts and selling all CDs is a strategy of the 20th century, where music was solid. But liquid music needs new strategies.

The interesting thing for musicians is that the digital revolution gives them tools in order to regain some power in their economical. Digital technology made it significantly cheaper to produce and distribute music all by yourself. You don't need big money by a big company in order to start a career. You can upload your music to soundcloud for free or to the apple store for 30 % revenue.

The musician can far more easily be the interpreter of his own compositions in the 21st century than in the 20th century. In that sense we are heading kind of back in time. An independent musician in 2015 can be his own management, promotion and sales department. Just like old Liszt did.

Three ways of creating Participation

But in order to make use of these opportunities we need to update our concept of the musician. In digital times a musician cannot be someone who is above the things, a solitude genius. My point is that a musician needs to adapt to the the digital conditions of music and that requires **participation in at least three ways: sharing, versioning and representation.**

At first you have to accept that the main concept of digital music is, that **music exists to be shared.** An mp3 is not solid and it should not be treated like a physical property. A musician will gain reach and content, when he is making his music available. On many platforms, for low thresholds. And even for free.

I want to show you a practical example of working with this idea: Our band A FOREST gave away the whole sample content of their album and complete single tracks for free and accessible for everybody. Fans and other musicians generated great music from this content, the result where 20 remixes and a specific bound

This is not just about "fan art", it's about the way the musicians themselves think about their work. Musicians in digital times should **think about their work in terms of versions.** It's totally ok to produce a great album all two to three years but why do you don't show your

work in between? Do not publish a closed master piece in long periods of time, make its development transparent.

A FOREST granted access to early versions of content. They uploaded sketches for songs, an early piano version of what later became a powerful track with drums. Or they wrote a blogpost with the lyrics for song, and spoke about the idea behind it in a youtube video. A FOREST made themselves and their music thereby accessible. The audience became part of the project. It is about participating in the stream, about commenting and altering.

Music is still a cultural good, but not that of a solitude genius. Listeners should be **represented as the meaningful part of a project they are**. Not necessarily content-wise like in the examples before but also economically. Every musician and every band needs audience in order to make a living from his work. But especially in the 20th century this audience became a passive consumer. Representation helps to sensitize for the conditions of making music.

A FOREST used a specific form of representation by creating an own currency. By representing the value of a product for the band, they increased awareness and income. A youtube click for example is one seed (like one cent), a CD is ten leafs and 10 concert guests are a tree. This currency is represented on stickers on the products and part of the band's PR. So it is not a change of the economical model of paying an artists per se but it helps to shift the focus from consuming to enabling music.

My point is that these on the first glance "symbolic" steps (sharing, versioning and representation) actually pay for musicians. By adapting to the A FOREST created a low-threshold: you could download the album for a price you named and many concerts were also pay what you want. The result is stunning: the band earned on average 4 euro for an album download instead of 2,27 € via iTunes. The amount of directly sold albums on the website or at live shows raised to 85 % increasing the artists profit of 13 to 65 % per euro of sold music.

So our suggestion for the update of the idea of the musical genius is the integration of participation. We want to strengthen the idea of the independent and autonomous musician as closely interconnected with the listeners through digital media. Digital media is not endangering the intimate experience of listening to music, it creates a dozen new channels

or places where music is being listened to. In making the experience of music and musicians part of the idea of the musician we have an adequate receipt for being a musician in the 21st century.