

A Ticket to Heaven: Live Music in a Planetarium

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The vision

In 1992, I traveled to the “Granite Rose,” the legendary coast of Brittany in western France, which is full of myths and fables. Under these circumstances, it didn’t surprise me to suddenly see a huge, white ball appear during an excursion through this countryside. Was it the Celtic fairies who wanted to abduct me to their “other” world? I was magically attracted and steered toward it – and landed in the planetarium of Cosmopolis/Pleumeur-Bodou.

It was my first visit to a planetarium. I was deeply moved when I looked at the starry sky – simultaneously, I heard music within myself and the desire to play the harp. A vision grew, “Harp Music under the Starry Sky.” Back in Germany, I started this project with great fascination but without any idea of how to transform it into reality. The first invitation came from the planetarium in Berlin (Wilhelm-Foerster-Sternwarte), and appeared to me to be like “a ticket to heaven.”

In actual practice

The success of a live concert depends on commitment by the musician(s) as well as the planetarium. Musicians are attracted to the special ambience and the technical possibilities of a planetarium, but they usually have no real knowledge of the technical aspects. My experience shows that it is advisable for musicians to become acquainted with the differences in the expense and technical effort required for a show. A basic knowledge of the projectors enables the musician to co-create the show, and this also prevents false expectations right from the start.

For my harp music, the projection of the starry sky was (and still is today) an important design element, combined with special projectors and selected allskies. With the aid of creative improvisation from both sides, the creation of a harmonious program has always resulted (in spite of the great variety of planetariums!). The audience has always been enthusiastic. This is a fundamental

experience for me and it’s a relief to know that not everything shown on the dome has to be 100% perfect for a live concert. Often, “less” may even be “more;” concerts with the music and “almost nothing but the starry sky” were impressively beautiful. In the final analysis, it is the music which should be in the foreground. In all the years I’ve toured, I’ve always received many positive suggestions in the German planetariums – many thanks to all concerned.

Tips

I’d like to list a couple of items which have proven to be of help in organizing my live concerts during the past ten years in the hope they are useful to others:

Storyboard

I attach a “storyboard” for the performance to provide artistic directions on the sequence of events of the music and sounds and the image projections. The storyboard together with my music on CD is the major preparatory material for the technician. I will reach a decision on the exact sequence with each planetarium on the phone, based on the technical abilities of the respective planetarium. If we can use allskies, I will provide them; the planetarium is to take over programming the presentation of the allskies and the star projector and is to provide a technician for the final checks as well as the concert itself.

Just as looking at the stars is a gateway to a person’s soul, so is music. Stars and music have cast their spell over people since primeval times. Both awaken feelings. The starry canopy of the dome also speaks to our feelings. This is certainly one of the pillars on which the worldwide success of planetariums is built.

When it’s possible to meld music and the stars together harmoniously, it opens up a new world within us. We often live in an everyday world full of hectic rushing and distractions, overstimulated by the flood of images and noise of the modern world. The experience of music beneath the planetarium dome offers a counterpoint. It opens an internal side of our existence. The harp is specially suitable for accomplishing this – even in the legends of ancient peoples, this is the instrument which has enchanted man and animal.

The modern world of the planetarium is currently undergoing conversion to all-dome video projection with its spectacular effects. Among them are those which can intensify the power of music and the stars even further: when they are employed with the eyes of a composer, the composition and visual dramaturgy are blended with each other with sensitivity. It is challenging and fulfilling to follow this path. Together with Christine Hoegl and the Digistar III from Evans & Sutherland, we reach an audience in Kiel which is often more appreciative than the audiences of the spectacular shows.

– Eduard Thomas, Director of Mediadome/
University of Applied Sciences in Kiel, Germany

I provide the technician with a remote-controlled visual signal (light) for his actions.

Audio/Sounds

The acoustics in the dome are usually dampened. To obtain a bright sound, the harp music and any sound effects are amplified by the planetarium's loudspeaker system. Additionally, I work with sound effects such as singing birds, ocean waves, and wind. In the special atmosphere of the dome, some well-chosen effects give an additional spacious sound, which is nice. My husband, Bernhard Schmidt, accompanies the project right from the start; he takes care of harp-related sound with his own equipment: Mackie mixer, Lexicon echo, direct soundpick-up and wiring with suitable connectors.

Rehearsal and Concert

In preparation for the concert, I recommend a compact rehearsal on the day of the concert; our experience has shown that two to three hours are enough for setting up, sound checks, transfer of the allskies in to your trays, and the final program checks. This period for preparations should be made available by the planetarium before the concert starts - without any interruptions caused by the planetarium's normal program.

A specially prepared lamp provides the minimum amount of light on the harp during the concert; it will not impair viewing what is projected on the dome.

Advertising and Public Relations

The planetarium should announce the concert in its program of events as well as provide information and hang posters within the planetarium. Flyers sometimes are useful. The expense of extensive posters outside the planetarium is often too high to be practical. In some cases, towns have a free contingent for posters at suitable locations.

The successful ticket sales in Germany result to a large extent, from active press work for all monthly/weekly/daily periodicals and newspapers, up to radio and TV interviews. A phone call with a personal invitation often works wonders with editors. The events are then featured as a highlight and appear with a photo on the title page, or announced as "tip of the day" in the event calendar. This usually ensures a full house.

Finances

Financing and the conditions are subject to negotiation and are treated in various ways by artists. The possibilities include a fixed-fee remuneration or a certain percentage of the ticket sales. The ticket prices are to be set correspondingly.

The question is, how can several (sold-out) concerts best be

achieved so that the total revenue can be increased with only little additional effort. When selecting engagement dates, it should be considered what season of the year or what special occasion would allow one to expect a full house. Additionally, it is practical to plan a concert tour together with other planetariums in the region, in order to reduce the travel expenses. Since the travel, hotel and related expenses are not insignificant, meeting the costs must be clarified in all cases. It must also be borne in mind that GEMA / ASCAP / SACEM - or similar organizations' intellectual-property-right fees - may be due.

Philosophy

You may ask, "Why have live music in the planetarium?" So that the heavens can bloom in our hearts!

Playing live in the "heavenly" atmosphere of the dome touches the emotions of the

audience as well as the musician(s). As a harpist, I have the advantage that the heavens supplement harp music perfectly (and vice versa) - but of course there are many different kinds of "heavenly music." As musicians in planetariums, we have the luckiest job: "to let the stars sing" for us, reaching very close to our hearts.

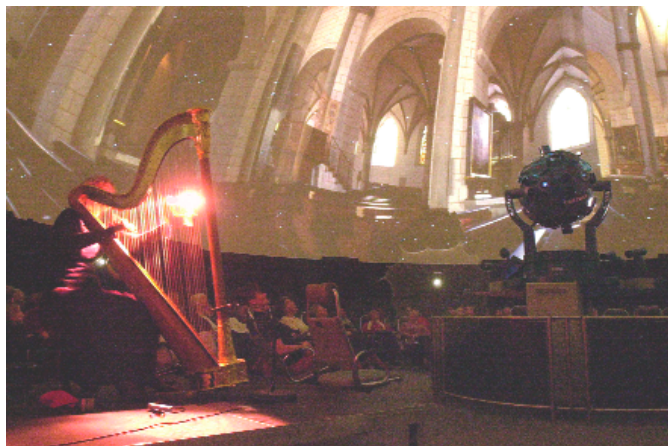
Music in Planetarium Shows

I have noticed that, in planetarium shows, visual stimuli are often accorded more attention than the musical selections - according to the maxim, "We've already invested a lot in the visual show, now we need some sort of music to accompany it." I think the effort and expense of good music is worth it because through the music we experience the visual aspects in another dimension. With the multitude of media, it is increasingly important to create space for one's own experiences - and not to simply "fill the audience up to the brim." This can be accomplished with good music selections, including occasional silence and a certain "emptiness." One should provide the audience with time to experience the visual and auditory stimuli, provide space for one's own fantasy.

Conclusion

A vision of music under the starry sky is something beautiful; the implementation, on the other hand, means work; one doubts, one sometimes even despairs, there's always not enough of something (time and/or money) ... but somehow everything coalesces at the end, and

(Please see *Live Music* on page 12)



Allskies with an astronomical theme or allskies of landscapes, buildings, and nature always have an impressive effect on the audience. Photo taken in the Planetarium Wolfsburg, courtesy harpART.

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makes it all enjoyable.

I have never regretted the effort required because this project has always fulfilled and enthused me anew - I always look forward to the next delightful adventure, as happened recently at the IPS Conference in Valencia, in the fabulous architecture of "L'Hemisfèric"; it was a highlight for me and it was just wonderful to have been present!

I would like to express herewith my friendship/kindness/connection/being in touch/commitment (in Germany we have the suitable word "Verbundenheit," but we could not find a good translation) to the great "family of planetariums" and to encourage others to try live concerts. ☆