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Open doors. Open minds.
Build societies!



“Open The Door”

An initiative of the European Festivals Association

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Interview with Sophie Detremmerie, Business Director Flanders Festival International Brussels

*Festivals are in a privileged position to provide the means for **everyone to experience culture**. Festivals open doors to new artistic forms, new performers, new audiences, unusual venues, unknown cultures, new points of view, new approaches to arts and the world, new social orders, new political discussions. Festivals have always been deeply rooted in society and contributed to its development and transformation. Today, festivals, next to their core artistic mission, are often having a ‘social agenda’. Can festivals do something to fight poverty and social exclusion (European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion)?*

Under the motto ‘Festivals: Open doors. Open Minds. Build Societies!’ in 2010, EFA states that festivals increase social inclusion and encourage participation.

What do you understand under ‘social inclusion/transformation’ through festivals?

The main strategy of the KlaraFestival is that everybody should be able to take part in culture – in our case it is of course in music. Social inclusion, as a real task, means for our festival to be as open as possible: first of all mentally open to all kind of people, but also to make it indeed possible for people to participate. This can be achieved for instance by organising free concerts or special projects that help people to overcome barriers they might have in their mind.

What are the policies and tools you apply in your festival to foster social inclusion?

One of the main policies in this respect is the price policy. In the KlaraFestival concert tickets have about the same price as a cinema ticket, which is really cheap for classical music and which means that it is affordable for many people: It is around 8€ for really big concerts at the BOZAR [renowned concert hall in Brussels] for example. We also offer the KlaraFestival Pass, a pass for only 49€ with which one can attend almost all concerts during 10 days. It is a good example of how to be democratic in terms of prices.

Furthermore, we have a lot of free concerts. We organise free events both everywhere in the city and in concert halls. In terms of price strategy, there are no barriers for people to attend events in the festivals.

What's more, we try to remove mental barriers. Our communication campaign is available for everyone. We always say: a concert is something you have to experience! You do not have to come to one of our concerts because it is this composer or this artist performing; you can also come just as you are going out for an evening or for dinner: you just go to any concert and enjoy.

What is the one project in your festival that shows best your social relevance?

It is the project that is called *Dorp op Stap* (Village On the Road) that takes place in Flanders. I think this project is probably the best one because we have thought about all kinds of barriers that people could face when going to a concert and how to counter those barriers: 1. a price barrier: the whole project is for free; 2. the problem of transport: we solve the difficulty of getting to Brussels – which is a big city with parking and traffic issues – by providing free transport by buses; 3. an age barrier: children from 6-12 years old are included in a children programme which they can attend alone; for children under 6 years old we refund baby-sitting costs; 4. the problem of mobility: during a whole day access is ensured for people in wheelchairs through the provision of extra shuttles; and many more.

We have also made several surveys on the public that is coming to *Dorp op Stap*: we found out that it is the average of all people living in Flanders and not only older, highly educated people having a very good job, as it is mostly the case for classical music. At *Dorp op Stap* all ages, all kinds of people from all educational levels are represented.

Could you tell more about the projects *Big First Night* and *Club K*?

The *Big First Night* is the opening night of the *KlaraFestival*. We organise free concerts in the late afternoon during traffic hours in different train stations and two galleries in Brussels which are very popular tourist places. The idea is that before going home people can enjoy, relax and get in touch with classical music in a place where they do not expect it: a train station might be the last place where you expect to hear professional classical music. We bring culture to people instead of trying to get people coming to our concerts. Like this we reach a very wide range of listeners: even homeless people who are quite often in train stations can enjoy classical music; it might be the 1st or 2nd time in their life. In this project barriers of access disappear because people are just passing by. It is of course also a way of promoting the opening of the festival.

What is new in 2010 is that we are going beyond Belgium borders: to Cologne! The high-speed train (Thalys) is going between Cologne and Brussels. The idea is to have more tourists and foreigners coming to Brussels. If it goes well we will keep on doing this in the coming years; we have plans to go to Paris, London and Amsterdam.

Some words about Club K: “K” stands for Klassik (in Dutch), for KlaraFestival, for Klara Radio and for K-nal, the name of the location [a night club] where the project takes place. The goal is to attract younger people – in their twenties or thirties – to classical music which is the most difficult group to reach. This new project was set up as a going-out evening for youngsters in a club that they know from pop and dance parties. They are in a place they are familiar with and go out as they are used to. But instead of pop music there is classical music. There is a DJ but he plays classical music; there is a live performance but it is classical music. This year it is a jazz variation of the Mahler theme (Uri Caine). Afterwards, the DJ comes back: he first plays classical music, then changes smoothly to pop music and ends with a full party.

The price is only 7.50€. This year, one of the DJ is Shameboy. He is a big name internationally. He was interested in the project because he thought that it was relevant to get more people interested in classical music.

The same evening we organise the finale of a remix contest. We chose the 2nd symphony of Mahler, of which we took a two-minute piece; Shameboy has been remixing this Mahler fragment. Then, we put both the original fragment by Mahler and the remix by Shameboy on the website vi.be (<http://vi.be/>), a platform for young DJs and producers. Then, everyone has the chance to make his own remix and post it. Prizes – technical mixing equipment – are given on the night of the Club K. We have already a lot of reactions on the remix: about 800 people have already listened to the original and the remixed parts and about 500 have downloaded the theme; those are potential candidates for attending the contest.

It is the first time we are doing this; if it works, we will continue in the next years and try to do it 3 or 4 times a year.

What are the results of these activities and how can you measure them?

It depends on each project. The most important thing is to have feedbacks from the public on how we are doing and on what they expect. As long as we have that, we can go further with the project.

For Club K, we will have numbers: the number of people who listened to or downloaded the theme and attended the evening of Club K. A small questionnaire on the evening itself is to find out how to improve.

For the Big First Night, it is really difficult to have numbers. We can trace the number of people who visited the website or the number of press articles; but we cannot tell how many people attended an event. Also, some people just listen by walking by, some stay only 2 minutes, others half an hour or for the whole concert.

For Dorp op Stap, we have already done 3 surveys and circulated a questionnaire answered by everybody who attended Dorp op Stap.

Who is supporting this extra activity?

We have very different sources of income and it also depends on the projects. We receive subsidies for the festival as a whole, which means that the Big First Night and the Club K are partly financed by the government. We are always trying to find sponsors from the private sector but I have to admit that specifically for those 2 projects we do not have any sponsors. For the KlaraFestival we of course have structural sponsors.

For Dorp op Stap we received subsidies from the Flemish government but it has decreased in the recent years; we are now combining this with private sponsors (e.g. the bank KBC). For free events such as the Big First Night or Dorp op Stap there is of course no ticket income. For Club K it is 7.50€ per ticket which covers at least a part of the costs.

In terms of percentage for the whole festival it is 1/3 each from sponsoring, subsidies and ticket income.

Are these bodies interested in supporting the festival's social agenda?

Absolutely. I have the impression that it is the number one concern of the private sector. It has changed in the past 5 years when they really wanted to have a return package that was good for their image and their marketing strategy. I feel that social projects get more and more important. They try to link their image to social and cultural projects.

What are the limits and challenges you face as a festival?

I have the impression that the limits are mostly of financial nature. There is still a lot of work to be done. But we cannot complain: the projects we really want to do, we are doing them and we manage to find the funding for them. It is fine but there is always an opportunity to grow and the first issue is money.

Are festivals in Belgium recognised as social actors?

A lot of people don't realise the social path of festivals. But I really think that festivals are playing a very important role as they bring people together. The work of festivals which implement projects targeted at groups that are normally excluded from this kind of events is very important. But are festivals recognised for what they do? Maybe not enough. People who work on these issues see the extra value that festivals generate.

Are there policies or actions in place in Belgium that help or hinder this role?

Governments give subsidies, which is their main task and which helps of course. But I am not sure about concrete policies.