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Festivals

Open doors. Open minds.
Build societies!

"Open The Door"

An initiative of the European Festivals Association

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Interview with Yesim Gürer Oymak, Director International Istanbul Music Festival

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 have contributed to its development and transformation. Embracing its core artistic mission, a festival provides a platform for all sorts of audiences to be touched by artists. Offering this meeting place for all, a festival fulfils also a social responsibility. Nevertheless, it seems today that the 'social agenda' supersedes the artistic one. What is it that a festival today can do to increase access to arts for audiences, and participation? In which sense does a festival contribute to the 'Fight against poverty and social exclusion' EFA is critically asking in 2010?

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

What is the one project in your festival you think shows the most your social relevance?

In the International Istanbul Music Festival, and in all festivals in Istanbul organised by the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV), we have a project called "One Adult, One Student". In Turkey, when you buy a ticket for a concert you say "one ticket for an adult and one for a student". This is where the name of the project comes from. It is a very good example for our festival's social responsibility. We also do other smaller projects but this one covers all the festivals and the contemporary art biennale organised by the IKVS Foundation.

The project is initiated by a collaboration of our foundation and Turkey's leading non-governmental organisation for education. The aim is to introduce art to students who cannot afford going to cultural events, classical, jazz or contemporary concerts. It helps young people experience art in different forms. The purpose is to contribute to the education of an open-minded and creative society for the future generation.

The İKSV is organising four different festivals: a film, festival, a theatre festival, a jazz festival and one contemporary art biennale. All of them are very international and present the best examples of their respective disciplines. The students get the chance to see all these artists, these art forms, new ideas, different cultures and different approaches in our festivals.

Who is supporting these educational and social activities?

The İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts is a non-governmental organisation. Almost 70% of our income comes from private sponsorship. The public funding we receive is not a regular public funding but project based funding. We basically receive around 2% of public funding which is not a lot. We rely very much on private sponsorship and ticket income.

For this project, the money comes from art lovers' donations. For example, when you buy a ticket, you can add another 7 to 50€ to buy tickets for students (7€ is for one student, 50€ for 10 students). Then we inform the Education Foundation about the number of students who can attend music festivals thanks to those donations. Every festival, 500 to 700 students – often with very low income – can attend a performance in any of the Foundation's festivals and the biennale for free. Last year it was even almost 1200 students.

Do you target other specific audiences?

In the music festival we target mainly students because in the festival we have a very limited number of student tickets as we rely heavily on private sponsorship and ticket income. Ticket income is very important for our festival to survive. We want to increase the number of students attending in the best way and reach students with difficult economic conditions.

How do you promote this project?

Advertisements are being made by our media sponsors. We have media sponsors for all festivals and for the IKSV Foundation. We produce printed material such as flyers, festival catalogues, concept programmes etc and appear in newspapers, on television and radio.

In what way do you use the internet as a tool?

First of all, we have a loyalty programme. We inform the members of the loyalty programme of all festivals news, programmes etc such as the "One Adult, One Student". We send an electronic newsletter which is our basic tool. Secondly, on our website we have an icon to click on in order to make donations throughout the year and for all the festivals. This is used mostly when the festivals are running; you can make donations when the tickets are on sale.

What is the feedback from the audience on this particular project?

We receive fantastic feedbacks and had large media coverage with great reviews. We send thank you letters to the people who bought tickets in the frame of this project to let them know the number of students who were able to attend the Istanbul music festival through their generous donations. Of course, the response is very positive. They see that what they do is really beneficial for these young students. It has really been successful. These students were able to listen to classical music for the first time in their lives thanks to this programme.

Do you raise awareness on social issues in your festival?

In the music festival not really but in the festivals we organise abroad we do. With these projects we aim to present Turkey in foreign countries. We did this in Vienna, in Moscow, in a few cities in Germany, in Holland and in France. We for example organised the Turkish year in France during 9 months with 500 events. Our main target was to overcome prejudices that people of these countries have towards Turkey. We want to present another side of Turkey and show them that we have a real culture, which is worth exploring. We are really fighting to remove barriers between European countries and Turkey and stop prejudices against Turkey.

What is the impact of these specific activities on your artistic/cultural/social environment?

As this project is quite new, we haven't been able to measure it yet. I think that we will see the real outcome in 5 years. The response we have so far is wonderful. We have more and more students attending the festivals. But the real impact we see is that the age of the festival audience is going down.

Secondly, we are raising awareness on culture in general. We also see that private companies are more and more sensitive towards the education of students with limited financial means. In general we can see that more and more students in Istanbul are able to attend cultural events through the donations of private companies.

Are there policies and actions in place in Turkey that help or hinder this social role of festivals?

I do not think the public authorities are a barrier for us but they don't help either. They are trying to organise and support their own organisations: state owned institutions such as state orchestras.

The private sector has been actively supporting the cultural sector since 10 years in Turkey. More and more private companies are having their own orchestras, their own festivals, their periodical art

activities. They are especially active in contemporary art. There are a lot of museums owned and being opened by private companies. Basically, the private sector dominates arts in Turkey.

What is the ONE recommendation you would make to public authorities in order to improve the conditions for festivals?

This is a very difficult question. I think both the institutions and the festivals have the responsibility to reach people with arts. For the ones who can't be reached or who are not able to benefit from arts, it is our duty to go to them and find a way to attract them to the arts. Otherwise the gap to those people with limited economical conditions and socially excluded people will get bigger. We have to inspire people, to open up their minds, their horizons and of course to overcome prejudices.

I don't know whether it is possible to create equal opportunities for all. This is quite utopian for me. But I believe that are ways to reach out to excluded people. With this small programme that we have been doing for 3 years now we have been able to attract around 15 000 students. 15 000 students, in 3 years and for all the festivals is quite something. Before, we were not able to do this. It is very much in line with the objectives of the "Open The Door" project.