

'POLIFONIA' WG 4**Site Visit Amsterdam 18-19 June 2013
Askoschoenberg Ensemble****PARTICIPANTS:**

- Amy Grimes, Guildhall School of Music & Drama, UK
- Raffaele Longo, Conservatory of Music of Cosenza, Italy

INTERVIEWEES:

- Joe Puglia (Violinist)
- Marieke Schut (Oboist)
- Liesbeth Steffens (Violinist)
- Rogier Vansplunder (Finance Manager)
- Wim Vos (General Manager)

1. The Story

AskoSchöenberg was formed in 2008 by the merger of two ensembles, the AskoEnsemble, and the Schöenberg Ensemble. The AskoEnsemble was founded in 1965 as a student chamber ensemble at the University of Amsterdam and was dedicated to developing innovative approaches to the performance of new music. The Schöenberg Ensemble was founded in 1974 by graduates and students of the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, with an initial focus on chamber works from the Second Viennese School. Later the Ensemble expanded its repertoire to include the entire twentieth century.

In the 1980s and 90s it was clear that the two ensembles were moving in similar directions, leading to their merger in 2008/2009. For most musicians, this has led to a 30 – 50 % loss in income; the number of players is still reducing from around 40 to 30 at present, with an ultimate goal of 20 players.

Government funding was cut by 50% at the start of 2012, which has led to significant restructuring of the ensemble, its activities and its administration.

2. Vision and Values**Artistic vision**

AskoSchöenberg is committed to performing the broadest possible range of classical, extra-European and cross-over non-symphonic repertoire from 1910 onwards, with and without electronic media. Depending on costs, 3-4 new works are commissioned each season, and include composers from Europe and beyond.

Vision

Intrinsic artistic value is of primary importance: works performed should express a clear and new distinctive musical identity whilst also engaging audiences. Vos sees new music audiences as sophisticated, urban, and highly educated – a “niche” market.

3. AskoSchöenberg

As funding for AskoSchöenberg has been reduced by half, personnel in the ensemble have been reduced by half as well. Repertoire choices reflect this, and now include works involving fewer

players: works chosen tend to be with single strings, in order that substitutes are not required. Works by Dutch composers are often chosen as these projects are easier to fund. Rehearsal times have been reduced, and more self study is expected at home. The overall impact is that there is less paid work for the musicians.

As a result, many musicians have started their own ensembles and are developing their own projects. The long term impact is likely to be two-fold: on the one hand, new projects developed by individual musicians may be personally nourishing and can expand the collective experience and knowledge of the new music field; on the other, it may also disperse musicians and their implication in the Ensemble's work, with a potentially negative impact on overall quality.

Many of the musicians who helped the ensemble get started some 40 years ago are retiring, leading to a new generation of musicians who bring new energy and new visions for the ensemble. These include performances on You Tube, performances in unusual locations, and collaborations with electronic music or, as mentioned earlier, cross-over music.

Tickets prices vary, but average 20-26 €; educational projects are offered free of charge.

4. Outreach/Education

AskoSchöenberg current funding does not cover the costs of outreach or educational concerts: the ensemble must apply for external funding for every education project undertaken.

'Lab' concerts are a priority. In these, 6 young composers from the three principal Dutch conservatoires (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and The Hague) write 7'pieces, which are then performed three times in public.

In addition, an annual workshop project in high schools offers the possibility for 60 young people to write 3-4' pieces, from which 15 to 20 are chosen for performance in a final concert. All 60 pieces are recorded however, and participants all receive copies. These projects focus on drawing family audiences.

5. Ligeti Academy

The Ligeti Academy started in 2006. Masters' level students (musicians, composers, and conductors) from the University of Amsterdam and Royal Conservatory in the Hague formed an ensemble which was professionally conducted and coached. The students were all aged 21 or over and had to audition. The students had to be able to play very well but also be open, flexible and to be enthusiastic about contemporary music.

The musicians played pieces by the student composers, both having received coaching from members of Askoshöenberg. The conductors had the opportunity of working with AskoSchöenberg. The students also received coaching on stage techniques (bowing, how to present themselves etc) from choreographers. The students had to attend a piece of theatre twice a year.

The Academy was funded (50,000 € per year) by AskoShöenberg, Royal Conservatory and University of Amsterdam.

Due to funding cuts the Ligeti Academy was discontinued in 2012. Vos was of the view that the model was too expensive to sustain, however the Ensemble continues to explore ways to provide opportunities for advanced Conservatoire students or young professionals to have the opportunity

to collaborate with the ensemble. As of this writing, the Ensemble is exploring a possible Europe-wide project, working with like contemporary ensembles in other countries.

6. Future Plans

Public funding for the arts in Holland is two-tiered: the central government supports the larger ensembles and symphony orchestras, whereas the smaller groups receive funding from the National Arts Council. Discussions are under way to try to get the Ensemble integrated into the central government's funding scheme, based on their unique profile. This is all the more important, according to Vos, given the fact that AskoSchoenberg is the only contemporary music ensemble to have survived recent public funding cuts.

Current public funding for the Ensemble (see business model) is guaranteed until 2016. In 2014, a revised business plan will be written. Vos' vision for the future is that of an organisation for New Music which would encompass performing, research (e.g. PhD) and education/outreach.

The Dutch government is requiring that the Ensemble increase its productions by 50%, despite a 50% reduction in funding. This has led the Ensemble to develop a private donor base, and to envisage new collaborations with opera companies, ballet troupes, and the theatre. Today, private funding and concert fees combined total about 30 to 40% of the overall budget.

7. The Business Model

The Ensemble's total annual budget in 2013 is 1.472.830 €. Public funding accounts for 825,000 € per year (650,000 € from the Culture Ministry and 175,000 € from the City of Amsterdam). The Culture Ministry will provide this amount through 2016. Total public funding represents 65 % of the overall budget.

In addition, private funding is sought on a per project basis for education and outreach projects involving young people. This came to 131.250 € in 2013.

Fees and private sponsorship now represents 30-40% of the total overall budget.

Musicians' salaries represent 982.303 € or 70 % of the total budget; an additional 30.000 € covers the costs of commissioning new works. These commissions are made jointly with partner organisations. Administrative costs are approximately 306.850 €, or 21 % of the overall budget.

Following Government cuts Vos reorganised the staffing structure, and went from 7 full-time posts to less than 4. A hired rehearsal space was no longer viable so the contract was not renewed and the administration office moved into smaller premises at the MusikGebouw.

Through the commission process, the Ensemble creates two major works each year, for which it collaborates extensively with numerous music theatre groups and opera companies. In addition, the group collaborates with vocal ensembles and the Dutch percussion ensemble "Slagwerk Den Haag."

The current structure (all part-time except for producer) is as follows:

Board

General Manager

Financial Manager

Producer

1 Marketing and Publicity Officer

1 Contractor (paying musicians)

Background on Interviewees

Vim Vos, who became the General Manager, has a background as a percussionist but has also worked as programmer of classical music of the Anton Philipszaal, The Hague, as General Manager of the Royal Conservatoire The Hague and as Artistic Manager of the *Residentie Orkest*.

Marieke Schut has been playing the oboe for 25 years, having studied with a specialist in contemporary music. She has her own quartet (with Liesbeth Steffens) and every two years they perform one music theatre production or a ballet. They invite composers to write for them.

Joe Puglia is 29 and a violinist. He grew up in New York, where he obtained a Bachelor's degree Juilliard prior to coming to complete a Master's degree at The Hague's Royal Conservatory. Offered a position with AskoSchöenberg following some subbing work, he has stayed in Holland.

Liesbeth Steffens has been playing with Asko Ensemble since 1985 following a recommendation from a colleague. She is a co-founder of the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, and also leads a chamber group with Marieka. Liesbeth feels she is still learning what it takes to run her own business.

8. Skills and Training for Entrepreneurship

European Conservatoires need to:

- Educate well-rounded, polyvalent artists
- Provide student with opportunities to develop their own projects, to develop new music and to engage new audiences
- Be flexible, versatile, and reactive
- Be strongly connected with the society at large
- Invent new and imaginative ways to present and make music

In order to engage with his different audiences and partners, today's musician, along with high artistic skills, needs

- Business skills and cultural awareness
- Skills in marketing and fundraising (grant applications)
- Capacity to develop, communicate and engage with audiences
- Social and networking skills
- Organisational and management skills
- Presentation skills (self and portfolio)

By way of conclusion:

- Musicians need to develop clear artistic, professional and personal goals, which in turn will allow them to articulate and affirm a strong and grounded artistic identity. Providing formal and informal advice on inventing one's career path, defining short and long-term goals with students and young graduates is of the utmost importance;
- Performers need to be aware of and comfortable in engaging with all art forms – both *inter-discipline* and *trans-discipline*.
- Today's artist must have an entrepreneurial spirit and the wherewithal to realize his own artistic project. This includes the ability to take risks, market oneself, and the hard and soft skills cited above.