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Museum Innovation: European state-of-the art, techniques, and approaches

Before academically learning about the works of composers, visual artists, and authors, for most of us, our first contact with a technological, multimedia, and synaesthetic representation of music had been Fantasia (by Disney 1940). Multiple senses are engaged simultaneously, each medium united, representing and reinforcing the beat and the message.

Later on, studies and professional activities enhanced our knowledge and perspectives, and we learned to rely and interact with technology in a more active way, hoping it does not prevail as Hal in the paramount ancestor of the new science fiction movies *2001: a space Odyssey*, by S. Kubrick (1968).

These two examples embody how technology in museums, especially in museums of musical instruments and museums of music, is used presently.

In facts, why is it commissioned in permanent exhibitions? We can trace three main reasons:

To (re) – create an ambient in which music is/was created, played, enjoyed replying to a hedonistic /aesthetic purpose (Fantasia).

To explain and teach how music was created and played and how it is listened following a cognitive aim (2001: a space Odyssey).

To amuse and entertain to raise an emotional approach (Fantasia again or for the Italian public: Allegro non troppo by B. Bozzetto, 1976).

At this point an open question: is interactivity pre-eminently a technological prerogative, or can hands-on, “mechanical,” and “face-to-face” methods be equally successful on the cognitive, sensorial, and emotional levels? More and more, to achieve a relevant use of technology, museums have started to adopt holograms, “talking heads,” sophisticated applications broadcast through high-level screens and touch screens in order to overcome the everyday technology to which audiences are accustomed. These reasons correspond to the individual museums’ missions and to the public’s expectations whereas ever and ever, technological devices enter the common people life – potential visitors and museums-goers – arousing the level of expectation towards the exhibit displays, transforming a room of a museum into a “domestic space”.

Of course, this is easier in temporary exhibitions, usually high-budgeted, where a relatively brief duration corresponds to the public’s heightened-but-narrower attendance window. In fact, space, maintenance, and consumption (either “physical” and of contents) are the main aspects which must be taken into account when a technological multimedia application is being considered for a museum.

SPACE is also the main difference between many European museums and the Italian ones (along with money, most of the times). A museum needs space; objects must be looked at a considerable distance, or — on the contrary — must be observed very closely without hindrances; explanations must be read and exhibitions enjoyed and in any case people need moving at their ease in a “visitor-friendly” environment, following specific or individual “flow”(1). For museums of music (let me use this terminology for brevity’s sake), wishing to use technological applications, space means also silence and time.

Music has to be listened to, but a museum isn’t a music hall or an orchestra-room; therefore objects and music itself have to be explained, narrated in sound or in texts, contextualized within the museum’s philosophy. Technology, most of the time requiring a certain level of interaction, asks for bigger spaces than usually Italian museums (located in historical buildings) can supply.

Attention must be taken to space and silence, since an overlapping set of stimuli won’t jeopardize the experience of visiting the exhibition, providing too many inputs. Museums of music might be considered, by this point of view, multimedia museums themselves , since they combine various ways of

communicating their own specific concepts throughout various media, not to forget light and lighting of the museum that can be used to convey musical experience as well.

Additionally, music needs specific space to be listened to in a proper way, either in an emotional, educational, or contextualizing approach: projecting a museum in which music has “a role” means to integrate many professionals among which sound engineers and neuroscientists.

MAINTENANCE, while during a temporary exhibition, the technological application supplier is usually available to operate on-site (to correct any malfunctions), the more a technological application is sophisticated the more maintenance can be a problem (Seattle Library)(2).

The origin of malfunctioning resides both in the delicacy of the devices themselves and in “domestication.” Often, talking to some Italian curators and directors, they deplore the public superficiality or the too much familiarity to relate with technology — above all among the youngsters — provoking damages.

Another open question: can a museum of musical instruments and of music be an actor in the diffusion of ethical and civic education, as music itself is considered able to?

CONSUMPTION, while technicians can speak about the “physical” decay and consumption of the devices, I wish to focus on the museological need of providing a broad choice of contents, multi-levelled designed, from which any visitor can choose, and also from the web (the importance to have an always updated website).

Museums of music and of musical instruments, as well as all kind of museums inter-related with the fascination of music, on the one hand, must make a choice on what they want to be and what they want to offer, but, conversely, must concentrate on whom they want to interact with: schools, families, researchers, music professionals, mass tourists… and upon these choices, they can programme the length and the depth of concepts to offer to their public. In this sense, technological database for the preservation of oral tradition, art, history, craftsmanship — but also for the sound reproduction of the instruments themselves and as repository of different kind and styles of music and of some specific musical texts — are of extreme importance for the creation of contents and for implementation of intangible heritage (shall we call it virtual heritage?). Not to forget studies on the public’s reaction and on public in general — which are always too few in this field in order to better understand what is retained from the visit of a museum of musical instruments or of music, considering that most of the public is a so-called “not trained listener”(3).

I want to pose another open question:

What kind of music has to be listened to in a museum of musical instruments (high – low music?), and with what purpose (to witness the evolution of craftsmanship/technique, of music itself, of history of music, the diffusion of music in the society, the confront with other cultures’ music, to pair off the scholastic curricula that is so dismissed in Italy, in this sense)?

Summarising

I want to try and sketch a tentative model of integration of multimedia technology in the museums’ displays.

As for we just saw, we can summarise three main themes are the topics of museums of music:

– instruments,

– people who wrote or created music,

– places in which music was/is played and created.

Technology can be integrated in the displays with haedonistic, emotional, or cognitive purposes (or mission; most of the times the three issues mix up together and need to be balanced).

Considering the specific missions of the museums, technology should be acquired in order to improve and not to overwhelm the contents. That’s why it is important – not to say vital – that before deciding to use multimedia technology, museums must be sure of what they want to be (define their mission), what is their most congenial approach (define their vision), and how and to whom they want to communicate (be aware

of their public and architecturally design their contents).

Notes

(1) Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1990), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York, Harper and Row; Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1996), *Creativity : Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, New York, Harper Perennial; Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1998), *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life*, Basic Books.

(2) Antonella Agnoli, “Koolhaas costa, Seattle chiude”, Il Sole 24 Ore Domenica, 06/09/’09.

(3) As to freely quote Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, 1958.