

## The reasons for attending performances of operas and musicals and the reception of these genres at the Vanemuine theatre

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The article focuses on the reception of the opera *Tosca* and the musical *Cabaret* and on the reasons for attending performances of these genres in the Vanemuine theatre in Tartu, Estonia. The article addresses the following questions (1) do the different genres of opera and musical performed at the Vanemuine communicate different values?; (2) do the reasons for attending operas and musicals differ, and if so, then how?; and (3) how does the reception of a musical and an opera differ, using the examples of *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini and *Cabaret* by John Kander?

In general, during the last eight years the musical has become the theatre genre most attended in Estonia – since 2006, between three and seven musicals or operettas have figured among the ten most attended theatre performances each year. Opera, on the other hand, is the only genre that has claimed official national status (in the form of the Estonian National Opera, which is the only theatre to have the status of national theatre in Estonia). So far, no extensive research has been carried out to study the audiences of music theatre in Estonia; this article tries to make a contribution in this field.

The theoretical part of the article is based on the theory of values and functions of art by Dutch theatre researcher Hans van Maanen, who distinguishes between the intrinsic values (directly connected to the artwork) and extrinsic values (not directly related to the artwork) of art (Van Maanen 2009: 150). The intrinsic value of art, i.e. something only relatable to art itself, may be experienced through decorative, comfortable or artistic communication. In decorative communication, the recipient merely enjoys the artwork and does not have to give it a meaning; comfortable communication activates the recipient's perception systems by confirming his/her current value system. It is artistic communication that makes the recipient use his/her imagination, and through this process changes – or hopefully changes – his/her perception system and how he/she understands the surrounding world. The Dutch theatre policy researcher and theatre sociologist Quirijn van den Hoogen criticizes Van Maanen for underestimating the importance of comfortable experience and proposes a distinction between artistic aesthetic experience and non-artistic aesthetic experience. In non-artistic aesthetic experience the value of art lies in an escape from reality and the enjoyment of non-existent worlds (Van den Hoogen 2010: 231–234).

The reasons for visiting the performing arts are based on the research by Simona Botti (2000: 17–19) and Miranda Boorsma (2006: 81–82) who suggest five main reasons: functional (cultural) benefit – i.e. the wish to gain new cultural information; symbolic benefit – i.e. the wish to show one's social position; social benefit – i.e. the wish to share the experience; emotional benefit – i.e. the wish to have a pleasant relaxing experience and to escape from everyday reality; and artistic benefit – i.e. the possibility to complete the artwork by giving it a meaning.

The empirical section of the article is based on the quantitative research carried out in October 2012 using the methodology developed by the international research group STEP (Project on European Theatre Systems) with the aim of carrying out comparative research to study the functioning of theatre in smaller European countries. The respondents were chosen randomly from the people visiting the performances. They were asked to give their e-mail address to answer the questionnaire online. Altogether, 227 respondents from *Cabaret* and 158 from *Tosca* were included in the survey.

The article shows that the Vanemuine theatre aims to attract wide audiences with musicals, while the opera is targeted at local audiences, mainly from the city of Tartu and southern Estonia. No innovation or aesthetic criteria are emphasized in the theatre's development policies relating to musicals or operas. Both *Tosca* and *Cabaret* are representative of the style of mainstream Estonian music theatre; and while *Tosca* is considered by the critics to be an artistic success, *Cabaret* is judged more as a failure in artistic terms.

The research shows that the main reasons for coming to the theatre are for the functional and social benefits. In the case of opera, the composer is the most important reason for attending, followed by the opera itself (more as a piece of music than for the performance *per se*) and the acclaimed professional

singers. The reasons for coming to the musical are also good performers (actors, singers, dancers), but the social aspect (coming with friends) is as important as aesthetic reasons. For the audience of *Tosca*, the social aspect, which is also one of the main reasons for going to the theatre, is of less importance than for the audience of *Cabaret*.

The comparison of the public's reception shows that both performances are valued above average by their audiences on a 6-point scale (5.13 for *Tosca* and 4.64 for *Cabaret*). However the average rating for the evening in general is even higher, especially in the case of *Cabaret* (5.18 for *Tosca* and 4.89 for *Cabaret*). 70% of the audiences of *Tosca* said that the performance was what they expected it would be, whereas only 40% of the audiences of *Cabaret* said the same thing about the musical.

Audience reception of both performances is dominated by non-artistic aesthetic values: *Tosca* is mostly seen as a spectacle that is well performed and professionally produced; *Cabaret* is seen as a spectacle that is fun and performed by good actors. This refers to the entertainment value of the performances; words such as "innovative", "inspiring", and "challenging", which are characteristics of artistic communication, are not considered when describing the performances. These opinions correlate with the general opinion of the respondents about the performances of Vanemuine in general. They are most often described as "spectacular" and "professional" rather than "challenging" or "innovative".

Based on the quantitative research done at the Vanemuine theatre, the article concludes that the style of music theatre in general is quite traditional, but that it is valued and accepted by the audiences.