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Collectives Curating Myth. Festival Neue Musik Rümelingen and Its Curatorial Legacy

We are neither talking about the snail nor the big slug, in fact we are not talking about molluscs although we could learn a lot from them. We are talking about the snail-like spiral inside the human ear.¹

Landscape art – conceptual music – contemporary music Since 1990, Neue Musik Rümelingen has long been a festival hiding in plain sight within the European contemporary-music scene.² With most editions situated in the countryside surrounding Basel, Festival Rümelingen has become known for its innovative programming of classical-contemporary works as well as new music composed for landscapes, interactive happenings, community gatherings and theatrical situations. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Festival Rümelingen, however, is its curatorial practice. Since its inception, the festival has been programmed each year not by a single director but by a team of musician-composer-musicologists.³ The curation of festival editions involves both linking the natural landscape and music with audience participation and discourse. It seems that the festival takes a dual approach: on the one hand, curation is used to create collective experience during the festival, and on the other, a curation of discourse around the festival is created to generate and promote the collective identity that is formed from those experiences.

The first curatorial approach is embedded in active participation from the audience: the idea of music and musicking is collectively critiqued throughout the festival in events such as discussions with the artists or throughout structures of various group experience. This composite reflection during the festival initiates within the self and the senses. In her eloquent reflection on the festival's conceptual music and its position within the natural landscape, Ursula Brandstätter states that the countryside becomes "shaped by our senses", which are "stimulated by the compositions".⁴ She forms multiple theses about aesthetic landscape experience and concept music, citing the role of a linguistic

- 1 Hans Wüthrich: *The Singing Snail. A Concept* (1979), Karlsruhe 2014, p. 7.
- 2 For clarity, Neue Musik Rümelingen will henceforth be referred to as 'Festival Rümelingen'.
- 3 The trend of curatorial practice in new music festivals, which mimics the collection of artistic works under one exhibit theme in the visual-arts world, is a phenomenon that musicologist Brandon Farnsworth explores and is highlighted later in this paper.
- 4 "Konzept-Musik [regt] an, Landschaft ganzkörperlich mit allen Sinnen wahrzunehmen." Ursula Brandstätter: *Landschaft als Konzept. Konzept-Musik in der Landschaft am Beispiel des Festivals Rümelingen 2011*, in: *Ins Offene? Neue Musik und Natur*, ed. by Jörn Peter Hiekel, Mainz 2014 (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Neue Musik und Musikerziehung, Darmstadt, Vol. 54), pp. 72–85, here p. 82. Translations by the present author if not otherwise indicated.

component, imagination, use of all senses, reflexivity and a synthesis of an “external reality (visual or acoustic)” and an “internal reality” within the self.⁵ The author furthers Barndstätter’s thesis of internal and external fusion within aesthetic landscape experience and concept music to include the cohesion of individual and collective experience within the realities that form during the performances.

Through the cohesion of internal and external experience within curated landscape art happenings at Festival Rümelingen, a community of knowledge around participation is built. Conventional views on listening, perceiving and even pragmatics like how and when to arrive at the events are collectively called into question. Why do we hear what we hear, and where? How does our own role shape our individual and group experience of the music? What reflections can be made before, during and after the events not only within ourselves but also together with the artists presenting? With the inaugural performance piece of the 1990 festival, Hans Wüthrich’s *The Singing Snail*, Festival Rümelingen proclaimed its mission for community exploration of extra-musical thought.

Regarding the curatorial efforts done in the off-season, it should be noted that the festival has generated a large resonance with publications and digital materials in comparison to its larger contemporary-music-festival counterparts. The curatorial team has carefully documented its artistic evolution over 30 years, and its identity can be clearly ascertained in all the published material surrounding the festival, which the team has, in large part, generated and collected itself. Thus, although the festival’s site- and time-specific happenings are not naturally conducive to documentation, the team has nevertheless managed to capture and preserve an image of Festival Rümelingen.

Journal and newspaper reviews, books, academic articles and word-of-mouth present the virgin festival-goer with a fantastical image of a festival. Some examples of extraordinary reviews and headlines include: “Rümelingen, a mecca of modern music”; “this evening was a synaesthetic synthesis of the arts of simply overwhelming effect”; “a musical pilgrimage”.⁶ In addition, the festival is highly promoted through personal recommendations from other artists and musicians, creating a ritualistic atmosphere around it similar to other contemporary-music festivals. Comparatively, Festival Rümelingen is unique in that it is still a well-kept secret: many professionals in the contemporary-music

5 “Wahrnehmung einer äußeren (visuellen oder akustischen Wirklichkeit und gleichzeitig Vorstellung von inneren Wirklichkeiten”. Ibid.

6 “Rümelingen, ein Mekka moderner Musik” (*Basellandschaftliche Zeitung*, 15 September 1992); “dieser Abend war ein synästhetisches Gesamtkunstwerk von schlichtweg überwältigender Wirkung” (Stephan Hoffmann for the *Stuttgart Nachrichten*, 27 August 2007); “Ein musikalischer Pilgerweg” (*Basler Zeitung*, 16 August 2010). All quotes found on the festival website archive of collected reviews, www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/archiv-medienspiegel/; all weblinks in this article last consulted 22 July 2024.

scene are unaware of the festival or have never attended.⁷ Beyond the purely positive reviews,⁸ the oral and material discourse surrounding the festival gives a magical sense of perfection: the experiences here are otherworldly and spiritual. They go beyond virtuosic interpretation of musical scores to building a religious-like code of musical doing in nature that, in the European contemporary-music community, has gained mythical traction.

The year 2020 marked its 30-year anniversary and presented an ideal situation for a case study that would take a closer look at its past, present and future. A reconstruction of the festival's history will shed light on the characteristics of the curatorial practice at Festival Rümelingen. An examination of its physical and digital publications will formulate a self-image that not only brands the festival but also unites a community of followers outside of its annual edition. The second part of the paper concerns the relationship between the festival's self-image and its external image, with examinations of published materials as well as audience and team member testimonies collected by the author.

The collective making of meaning, memory and identity through active participation in reflective discourse should be further investigated within contemporary-music festivals. While it might be argued that every festival builds its own myth around its tradition, ritual and community, Festival Rümelingen has a particularly strong allegoric presentation. The creation and dissemination of a festival image, and in this case study that of Festival Rümelingen, can be examined side-by-side in a report on audience perception. This paper will argue that the various curatorial acts done by the programming team have identity-building effects, which are based on the tradition of experiencing the festival, or "doing Rümelingen". To uncover the art of myth behind the festival, it is imperative to begin by reconstructing its narrative as told by the curatorial team.

Reconstructing the story of Festival Rümelingen Festival Rümelingen began in 1990 at the centre of the eponymous small village. Located just 30 kilometres outside of Basel, it's no surprise that the town of Rümelingen found contemporary art, but how did contemporary art find Rümelingen? On a tour shortly before the festival's first edition in 1990, Swiss composer Daniel Ott was passing through the village and quickly found a strong interest in the current contemporary-music practices among its denizens. Together with the town

7 This is a statement based on the author's own personal inquiries within her contemporary music working environments since 2019.

8 Upon researching the festival, the author has found to date no mediocre or negative reviews of any edition. It is also worth noting that in the author's own experience of festival attendance as well as being a participant of the contemporary-music community, this magical hype around the festival was extracted through unofficial testimonies of fellow audience members and artists.

pastor Ado Müller and his wife Elsa Müller, Ott and his troupe founded the festival, which had its home base in and around the town church for many years thereafter.

In 1990, the festival's initial programming was used as a platform to provoke political discussion as well as musical dialogue. Inspired by social protests charging against pharmaceutical companies and nuclear power in the Basel area, as well as their subsequent manifestations in the arts and theatre scenes in the late 1980s, the act of bringing contemporary music and its dialogues outside Basel into the countryside became itself a political protest by Ott and his colleagues.⁹ The band of musicians and composer Ott were not only missionaries in spreading their provocative new music, but they were also seeking a place of refuge where they could create a neutral space in which to rediscover sound.¹⁰ Ott states that "Rümlingen sees itself less as a place of representation and more as a kind of laboratory: a place where sounds are researched and worked out to finally [...] enter into dialogue with the environment."¹¹ The laboratory Ott cites has become a melting pot of interdisciplinary experiments with contemporary-music and music theatre, landscape art, audience participation and more. While the organisers claim that integrating location – namely landscape and outdoor space – has always been a key curatorial goal, a look at the programming shows a clear growth in the importance of location as an element of the festival. The author points out two major shifts in the festival's timeline that begin to show the curatorial team's self-awareness of identity-building as well as functional economic adaptability.

In its early years, pre-composed works presented in the form of concerts in the town church and other community locales made up most of the programming. These concert pieces – many of which are now part of the contemporary-music canon – often placed relatively limited emphasis on the integration of landscape. In the following years, the curators experimented with expanding into performance locations outside the church and town hall in Rümlingen, adding happenings in Liestal and Gare du Nord in Basel, but it was in 2003 when a major shift with risky programming gave rise to the visionary curation that Festival Rümlingen is known for today. This edition involved a night hike,

- 9 Taken from an interview with Lydia Jeschke, conducted by the author on 20 November 2020. However, this period of violent protest in German-speaking Switzerland, and its representation within contemporary music, can be dated back to the "Opernhauskrawalle" (Opera house riots) in Zürich, 1980.
- 10 Historically, nature seems to be the perfect place of return for artistic peace and reflection. Brandstätter gives examples of this with reference to the Dada movement, Surrealism and "international situationists", see Brandstätter: *Landschaft als Konzept*, p. 73.
- 11 "Rümlingen versteht sich weniger als Repräsentationsort, sondern vielmehr als eine Art Laboratorium: ein Ort, wo Klänge recherchiert und ausgetüftelt werden, um schliesslich mit der Umgebung [...] in Dialog zu treten." Daniel Ott: *Festival Rümlingen 1990–2005*, in: *Geballte Gegenwart. Experiment Neue Musik Rümlingen*, ed. by Lydia Jeschke, Daniel Ott and Lukas Ott, Basel 2005, pp. 24 f., here p. 24.

and while “concert hikes” were nothing new to the festival, this was the first time that the public was given the opportunity to hike from 9 pm until 7 am the next morning and the first time that the programming team commissioned many composers to work in a collaborative and site-specific way. The festival team had doubted that this edition would attract much of an audience, but to date it was by far the most-attended with around 750 participants.¹² Since then, the festival programming has moved from previously composed music adapted or staged in a non-traditional setting to site-specific new music created for natural environments.

With the passing of Ado Müller in 2014 and the creation of the new-music and architecture biennale in Basel, Zeiträume, in 2015, a second major shift has slowly developed at Festival Rümelingen. Since Festival Rümelingen is no longer the only contemporary-music festival in the Basel area, the curatorial team has adapted the festival to their changing socio- and political environment. The last 15 years have seen increased geographical expansion with fewer editions centred around the village and church and more editions staged in open-air landscapes throughout Switzerland. Strategically, each year that Zeiträume takes place in Basel, Festival Rümelingen finds a different home base in Switzerland.

For their 30th anniversary in 2020, the festival edition *HauenSteinSchlag* featured composers and performers of a younger generation and included an exhibit of documentation and performance props from previous editions. The programming team curated an image of the festival’s past while also looking to the future. In 2022, the festival sought radical yet gradual change with the inclusion of a new curatorial team member, composer Andreas Eduardo Frank. The 2022 edition also involved a larger selection of up-and-coming artists and new artistic territory such as pure contemporary electronic performance.¹³

The town of Rümelingen provided the festival with a safe space where the experimental contemporary music of the late twentieth century could breathe. The discovery of what the surrounding landscape could offer was an added bonus. It seems that twenty-first-century music at the festival thrives through its interaction with nature through site-specific work, creating a symbiosis of environment, art and social encounter. This fluid symbiosis, which morphs with each festival location and theme, is curated by a collective in a method that is unique to Festival Rümelingen.

¹² Taken from an interview with Lydia Jeschke, conducted by the author on 20 November 2020.

¹³ The concert titled “Electric Sawdust” was an evening of pure live electronic music performance, a first for the festival that was initiated by Frank. The edition generally integrated more electronic elements than usual. See the full program online under www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/festival-ruemlingen-2022/.

Curating collectively At a conceptual level, programming at Festival Rümelingen is similar to the curatorial approach to creating an exhibition in the world of visual art. Each edition is based on space, concept and dialogue rather than purely showcasing particular composers or genres of music. In his recent publication *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals*, Brandon Farnsworth dissects curatorial approaches to contemporary festival programming.¹⁴ Farnsworth notes the trend among many of the major German classical-contemporary music festivals toward a style of programming that focuses more on mediation of various music disciplines, their social critique and the artistic institutions where they traditionally exist. Important to the current case study are his clear findings on how the contemporary-music community in German-speaking Europe has developed a collective understanding of the term “curation”. Firstly, Farnsworth describes curation as a gateway to alternative approaches in music presentation and their subsequent reception:

“An observed emphasis on experiments with concert staging, creating alternatives to established forms, relationships between various forms of knowledge, and by extension often also political considerations, means that curating is connotated with a renewed emphasis on the relationship between contemporary music and society, and a break in some form with the status quo.”¹⁵

Secondly, Farnsworth suggests that music-festival curators critique the curatorial process in the world of visual arts for insight into best practices, notably mentioning the circumstance

“whereby a star curator turns the organization of the exhibition and its mediation into a quasi-artistic practice and as a form of authorship. [...] This is an acknowledgement of the potential for curatorial practice to turn into a new form of hierarchical control, where only the artistic vision at the top of the pyramid is permitted to realize their, as one put it, ‘megalomaniacal’ vision [...]”¹⁶

Festival Rümelingen is a rarity in the contemporary-music festival scene as its approach from the beginning has been based not on the singular, authoritarian vision of one or two programmers but on that of a team of curators. An additionally unique aspect to this collective approach is that the curatorial team has, for most of the festival’s lifetime, consisted of the same five people: Sylwia Zytynska, Marcus Weiss, Christian Dierstein, Lydia Jeschke and Daniel Ott.¹⁷ As with most music festivals, one might believe that

¹⁴ Brandon Farnsworth: *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals. A New Perspective on Music’s Mediation*, Bielefeld 2020, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839452431>.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Festival Rümelingen has had guests invited to the artistic direction team (for example editions 2007 or 2011), but the programming team remains the five aforementioned persons. The Swiss composer Wolfgang Heiniger was for a period of time (circa 2002–2006) an integral member of the programming team as well but has since been uninvolved with the festival organisation.

Daniel Ott, as a “founding father”, might be the face of the festival and have the final say when it comes to programming decisions, but from the beginning the team of five has been a harmonious collective with a non-hierarchical structure.¹⁸

While the team members also participate in performing and presenting their own compositions (albeit less frequently in the festival’s later years), a large part of their artistic involvement is dreaming up seemingly impossible concepts and realising them. The festival themes always begin with location and space. The team members come together, visit the sites and exchange initial ideas. Each edition is then delegated to two members who are particularly inspired to move forward with the year’s curation and who also oversee the practicality of the artistic visions. The rotation of roles and responsibilities allows the team members to spread the weight of obligations among themselves, keeping a balance of high-quality performance and experimentation throughout the years.¹⁹

Curation at Festival Rümelingen goes beyond an impressive teamwork that puts together concerts with reflective or politically charged themes. The collective curates experiences. The festival is seemingly designed to be attended in its entirety; even the journeys to the festival site(s) and back home are considered in the curatorial process, and as a participant, one indeed has the feeling that this one-of-a-kind experience is a sort of pilgrimage.²⁰ The curation practice at Festival Rümelingen not only includes performances but also many different types of activities that can be understood in this context as “musicking”:

- site-specific works and historical reflections made with, for and during pre-festival residencies and festival performances;
- workshops that engage youth in their typical social contexts (i.e. students from a grade school where the performances take place, young people from the village of Rümelingen or surrounding areas where performances take place, et cetera);
- passive audience participation in performances (guided concert hikes);
- active audience participation in performances (participation required as part of artistic work: thinking, moving, doing, et cetera);
- community meals; places for artists and audience to personally interact;
- round-table discussions, panels and lectures scheduled during the festival.²¹

Information gathered from festival archives, online under www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/archiv-medienspiegel/.

¹⁸ Taken from an interview with Sylwia Zytynska, conducted by the author on 24 November 2020.

¹⁹ Taken from an interview with Lydia Jeschke, conducted by the author on 20 November 2020.

²⁰ Curatorial information gathered here from the interview with Jeschke, 2020; comment on the feeling of festival attendance based on author’s own festival experience in 2020.

²¹ Information gathered from programmes in *Geballte Gegenwart* (2005) and festival archive, online under www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/archiv-medienspiegel/.

The total experience of “doing Rümelingen” for participants, performers and curators begins with the aforementioned set of activities but is then followed by dialogue that naturally occurs through being together. The curators generate a space of mediation between inward listening and reflection through social situations that call upon participants to interact with one another.²² Farnsworth states: “Curatorial practices in music are thus argued to be ones that understand the setting of a specific frame for a musical event as itself an expressive and often critical act.”²³ At Festival Rümelingen, the curators transform the natural landscape into a setting for music critique. The discussions during the festival become an open group investigation into the projects presented, a key objective that is considered during every stage of planning. Initial sparks of dialogue are provoked and often expand into multiple layers of reflection within the contemporary-music academic and community networks.

Curating discourse The author has thus far argued that Festival Rümelingen acts as an oasis for contemporary thought in a natural landscape, but what else makes the festival ripe as a centre for dialogue? Daniel Ott notes:

“Rümelingen, predestined by its peripheral geographical location (i. e., you can’t easily get away again), sees itself as a place of debate, where the most diverse artistic and social designs and approaches are debated.”²⁴

The art of pilgrimage to the festival means that the audience must agree to participate in a fully immersive experience, to go “all in”. This means that, from the initial journey there to the journey back home, the interaction with other participants naturally sparks meeting, conversation, dialogue and reflection, which ultimately results in the construction of a community. In his essay in *Geballte Gegenwart*, Thomas Gartmann draws another conclusion about the festival’s rural location: he reminds us that there is strength in belonging not to the centre but to the edges and that change really happens on the periphery. He also states that “the periphery has the advantage of tranquillity. Here you have the peace to devote yourself completely to things.”²⁵ The tranquillity that the parti-

²² In the author’s own attendance of the 2020 edition, participants were placed into groups and told to stick together, deciding their own timing of the concert-performance hike.

²³ Farnsworth: *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals*, p. 12.

²⁴ “Rümelingen, prädestiniert durch die periphere geografische Lage (das heisst, man kommt nicht so leicht wieder weg), versteht sich als Ort der Auseinandersetzung, wo über die unterschiedlichsten künstlerischen und gesellschaftlichen Entwürfe und Ansätze debattiert wird.” Ott: *Festival Rümelingen 1990–2005*, p. 25.

²⁵ “Die Peripherie hat den Vorteil der Beschaulichkeit. Hier hat man die Ruhe, sich den Dingen ganz zu widmen.” Thomas Gartmann: *Rümelingen und die Welt hinter den Hügeln*, in: *Geballte Gegenwart*, pp. 111–113, here p. 111. Gartmann gives reference to Ludwig Hohl: *Von den hereinbrechenden Rändern*, Frankfurt a. M. 1986.

cipants experience in the natural settings, what Gartmann observes, is precisely that which creates a magical atmosphere ripe for what Ott states above as an excursion for discourse in music.

The remoteness in nature that makes the festival so unique is also a limiting factor for the audience. For those who are not able to make it to the festival location to experience it first-hand, the curators have found a perfect solution: self-published documents relating to festival activities. Print publications such as books and programme-like booklets and digital publications such as a dedicated webpage for online archival material (web-links and photos) and a video documentation series are all efforts in branding the festival, but the curators also collect these materials in order to create conversation during the off-season. As a result of these publications, the debates and discussion that were sparked during the festival have been carried over into long-term, academic discourses that reach a broader public. This layer of curatorial creation is an important aspect in creating the festival's image; thus, the author will explore the five print publications and online media produced by the festival in order to highlight aspects of curated discourse and self-image building patterns.

Print publications – programme books and encyclopaedias Inspired by the format of the encyclopaedia, the curators at Festival Rümelingen create a striking image of the festival, concretising what tradition at Festival Rümelingen means through a collection of texts, photos and audio recordings. This first publication, *Geballte Gegenwart. Experiment Neue Musik Rümelingen*, does not have a typical encyclopaedic structure but is instead a compilation from festival years 1990–2004, providing all the information there is to know about Festival Rümelingen.²⁶ This hard-cover book containing 234 pages and 2 CDs was published in 2005 by editors Daniel Ott, his brother Lukas Ott, and festival dramaturge Lydia Jeschke. The main content of the book consists of essays by various composers, performers and musicologists connected with the festival. The first essays by Jeschke and Ott build a narrative of the festival and are to date the primary sources of information on the festival's foundation.²⁷

Unique to this publication is its dedication to a multi-modal function and presentation. The curators attempt to teach the reader through various modes about what “doing Rümelingen” entails. The book experiments with essay formats, interviews and documentation of artistic processes including email and letter correspondence as well as score sketches. The publication contains a plethora of photos showing experiments with

²⁶ *Geballte Gegenwart*, Basel 2005.

²⁷ See Lydia Jeschke: *Geballte Gegenwart*, in: *Geballte Gegenwart*, pp. 22 f., and Ott: *Festival Rümelingen 1990–2005*, p. 24 f.

people, nature, music-making and theatre; where words may fail to capture certain aspects of the Festival Rümelingen experience, the images supplement the writings. The book also contains a short historical timeline of the village itself and a descriptive timeline of each festival edition through 2004 with exact program details of all performances.²⁸ The final sections of the book include indexes of the articles in the book as well as the works performed at the festival, autobiographies of contributing essay authors, commentary on the included CD recordings, and a personnel register showing the array of notable composers involved with the festival. This artist register is a particularly unique feature to the book as it lists in index format not only persons directly related to the festival or the authors of the book but also “erwähnte Personen” (mentioned persons).²⁹ Notable names such as “David Tudor”, “Andy Warhol” and “Kurt Weill” appear alongside composers and other authors affiliated with the festival even though these artists never attended the festival nor were their works ever performed; they receive this special mention for being key figures in the publication’s essays. This index goes beyond its usual function to serve as a curated listing of important figures of contemporary art in the postmodern era. The curators compiled all these various parts of the first Festival Rümelingen publication to enable an understanding of the many layers of interaction and artistic representation that occur during this time- and site-specific festival. The festival’s second publication, *Drinnen vor Ort*, which covers the 2011 edition, is a collection of concept pieces for mind and body designed to serve as an “audio book”.³⁰ In this edition, all the music was generated in the participants’ imagination, prompted by texts composed for certain locations along a hiking route. Because the music for this edition was not performed live or in a physical sense, this publication makes it possible to re-create the 2011 festival at any time; in this context, the festival team found an impressive way to create a musical experience accessible to anyone outside of the festival. The book acts as an impetus for a discourse about transforming text into an imaginative experience, the interpretation of which will change over time with new generations of participants.

In 2013 with *Ton & Tal*, the festival publication was an integral element in performance as it served as both programme notes and as a map that guided the audience on a large trek throughout major areas in Switzerland.³¹ The landscape in and around Rümelingen is highly valued by the curators, as both publications, *Drinnen vor Ort* and *Ton & Tal*, attempt to draw visualisations to the spatial aspects of their infamous “hike

28 Ibid., pp. 155–193.

29 Ibid., p. 212.

30 *Drinnen vor Ort. 4 Landschaften, 4 Jahreszeiten, 4 Wege*, ed. by Thomas Meyer and Lydia Jeschke, Saarbrücken 2011.

31 *Ton & Tal, Valli & Intervalli. Eine Expedition*, ed. by Lydia Jeschke, Liestal 2013.

concerts” established in the first artistic shift after 2003. The display of Festival Rümelingen’s aesthetic niche of concept and experimental music in nature can be further examined in their second encyclopaedic volume, *Der Ball rollt weiter ... Festival Rümelingen 2005–2020*.³²

In celebration of the festival’s 30-year anniversary in 2020, *Der Ball rollt weiter* is a recollection of the 15 years following *Geballte Gegenwart*’s release. In contrast to the first volume, this second volume is more simply organised in a chronological format in which each festival from 2005–2020 is represented by a short programme description and photos. At the end of the book, there is a timeline of the programmes from each year in detail, providing insight into how the festival evolved after the first shift. The programming team appears to dream bigger over time, with artistic visions of marathon, overnight concert hikes, journeys across Switzerland, and risky (prone to “fail”) digital and industrial installations placed within nature. The publication also shows increasing audience interaction. Performances aimed at children and youth participation increased over time as did the number of journey-based performances that required the audience to create their own sounds and individual experiences.

The festival’s most recent publication, *Ich sitze da, als wäre ich nicht vorhanden. Robert Walser und die Musik*, is the programme book that accompanied the 2021 festival based on the work of Swiss writer Robert Walser.³³ The festival was combined with the Robert Walser Annual Symposium, marking the first time that Festival Rümelingen integrated an academic conference into its curatorial art. This publication contains the libretti from pieces performed at the festival, inspired texts by Walser, drawings, programme notes and lecture texts. Like all previous publications, this Robert Walser musical reader was created not just for the 2021 festival but to serve as an inspirational and informational booklet for future readers as well.

Central to all of Festival Rümelingen’s physical publications is the artistic aspect. The books seem to be musical works that, in attempting to capture a festival edition or set of editions, are in fact timeless ways of musicking that keep the festival alive between its performances and happenings. A narrative of the festival’s tradition can be outlined by reviewing the physical publications. From its inception as a nuclear community in a small-town church to the expansion of the festival across urban areas and landscapes all over Switzerland, the curators at Festival Rümelingen have found multi-modal ways to teach a wider audience about the essence of the festival, which can be reduced to two

32 *Der Ball rollt weiter ... Festival Rümelingen 2005–2020*, ed. by Lydia Jeschke, Rümelingen 2020.

33 *Ich sitze da, als wäre ich nicht vorhanden. Robert Walser und die Musik*, ed. by Lydia Jeschke, Rümelingen 2021.

threads – communal sound experience in nature and reflective discourse. The festival team has also used digital forms of media to brand and disseminate its self-image.

Digital publications – online archive and video documentation Using the typographical branding established over the years through marketing and physical publications, the curators have created a festival Internet homepage that has become a centre of discourse, functioning not only as a source of up-to-date information about coming editions but also serving as an archive.³⁴ On the website, the team has included the online archive reviews, photos, links to previous edition webpages, videos, radio and tv media presentations and even closing reports. This anthology in cyberspace embraces the digital world, but what do the curators publish within this space, and how does the website's design and contents reflect the festival's self-image?

The following content presented on the website is an “impressions” page from the previous year.³⁵ The page features photos of the performances and festival happenings in addition to audio clips from local radio stations and video footage. The website includes the 2023 interview that the curators gave on the TV station TVP World, but most of the video content consists of a series of clips entitled “Impressionen” (impressions) that provide footage of the edition's concerts and happenings. While it is not uncommon for a festival to document its events with videos that might act as trailers for the upcoming days or documentation for funding support, the videos created by Festival Rümelingen are works of art, adding another layer of experience to the time- and site-specific works presented at the festival.

This artistic presentation of the documentation of the site-specific pieces can be seen, for example, in the impression videos from 2016 and 2019.³⁶ A comparison of the style of documentation of the same piece, *con sordino* by Peter Conradin Zumthor, performed in 2016 and again in 2019, can give us a clear impression of how the festival team has grown in the creation of the festival image. Listed as the first official video documentation of the festival in their online archive, the impressions video from 2016 opens with a view of the town church, footage of participants arriving and a welcoming speech from Jeschke.³⁷ This 30-second introduction leads to documentation of selected works, which

34 See www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/archiv-medienspiegel.

35 At the time of publication, this is the impressions page for the 2023 edition: www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/impressionen-2023.

36 See Festival Rümelingen: Festival Rümelingen 2016 [Video], online under <https://player.vimeo.com/video/198077543>, and Festival Rümelingen: Festival Rümelingen 2019, Impressionen, online under <https://player.vimeo.com/video/375952622>. The reader can also access these links through the festival's online archive under www.neue-musik-ruemlingen.ch/archiv-medienspiegel/.

37 Festival Rümelingen: Festival Rümelingen 2016, 0:00–0:33.

are presented in what the author assumes is their chronological placement during the festival. The first work presented, *Klingel Ringel Rum* by Dominik Dolega, shows a group of children performing a work with different types of bells under the direction of a conductor. The piece is set outside on a large sports ground with the audience dispersed all around. A 15-second clip from Zumthor's *con sordino* follows, featuring the sound of church bells as a sort of soundtrack for the audience walking to the next performance. This short interlude-like snippet of Zumthor's piece is overlapped by a clip of the next work, *Belltree* (for David Gunn) by Heike Liss. The two works were both written for the church of Rümelingen. Totalling 2 minutes and 26 seconds, this first section of the 2016 video documentation already points to an emphasis on the Rümelingen landscape and a sense of community that is created there. In the following years, the festival team will go to greater lengths to develop this image and to improve the quality of these video documentaries.

Compared with the 2016 impression video, the 2019 impression video takes more time to showcase a sense of reflection and ambiguity about the festival as well as its natural setting. The video begins with either a sunset or sunrise behind a field with a woman's voice reciting a poetic text in German. The scenery coupled with the language of poetry gives a mystical impression. The following scene fades in with church bells – Zumthor's *con sordino* – and a view of what we assume to be a Rümelingen field and forest landscape that coincides with the end of the speaker's text: "... und die Wiese wird weit" (... and the meadow becomes vast).³⁸ Next, the word "Innland" (a play on words with inland, or interior, and the Inn river) is superimposed over a picture of landscape which we assume is the festival location. The following section is devoted to the sounds of the church bells, superimposed over visuals of a beautiful countryside, people wandering, gathering and exploring, and sounds of wind instruments with a view into the bell tower of the church.³⁹ This opening to the documentary, lasting around two minutes, is an amplification of the festival image that the curators began presenting in 2016: a festival centred around a rural community, engaging with its audience and activating the surrounding nature through contemporary sound. Curiously, this edition was not located in Rümelingen but in the Engadin region bordering the Tirol region of Austria, and in cooperation with Festival Klangspuren Schwaz. The representation of Zumthor's piece in the documentation was not at the central church in Rümelingen, but at a comparatively similar church and town in Lavin. Without taking a closer look at the programming locations, a short view of the documentation would seem to continue to highlight Festival Rümelingen's relevance to the Rümelingen landscape.

³⁸ Festival Rümelingen: Festival Rümelingen 2019, *Impressionen*, 0:00–0:43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 0:43–1:55.

What the video documentation seems to establish as “doing Rümelingen” is further attested to in the journalistic reception of the festival. The online archive contains a collection of press reviews.⁴⁰ Among the newspaper and journal articles collected by the festival team, however, is a striking lack of mediocre or poor reviews, which raises questions as to how representative these reviews are. The author used other research portals in an effort to find reviews not included in the Festival Rümelingen archive and concluded that the festival does not in fact omit any mediocre or less-than-great reviews; it appears that these reviews simply do not exist. This author argues that the fantastical image of Festival Rümelingen is not only an image produced by the curators but also a collective act that includes the journalists, academics, and publishing institutions taking part in forming and telling the tradition of “doing Rümelingen”. The communal aspect of the festival and the self-image cultivated and affirmed by the curators and reception leads to the final element of this case study: the audience-participants and their own interpretation of the festival.

“Doing Rümelingen” – extracting an external image The author has thus far traced the tradition of what Festival Rümelingen curators have bound together as the tradition of “doing Rümelingen”: a multiple-day commitment to experiencing contemporary music through concerts and social events within the context of a natural landscape. Festival Rümelingen originally pledged to its village location, through a promotion of its strong ties to the greater Rümelingen area. Due to the festival’s strong social aspect, the curated self-image of Festival Rümelingen can be likened to a curated self-identity.

Heike Delitz’s assessment of Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory,⁴¹ in particular the self-description in groups, clarifies how a group identity may emerge within Festival Rümelingen:

“Thus, groups constitutively have a ‘constructed outer boundary’; also central is the ‘reintroduction of the differentiation into communication [...], which leads to the formation of a communication structure that is differentiated from the environment’: to the communication of a ‘generalised group identity’, which mainly consists of the ‘condensate of experiences from the system’s past’. ‘Once such a thematic core of the group is established, the social system group gains its own life’ (Fuhse 2001: 5f.). The goal is to keep the group from ‘falling apart’. To do so, it must ‘trace its outer boundary from time to time’, form its own symbolic media, etc. (ibid. 10).”⁴²

⁴⁰ Titled “Presse”, www.neue-musik-ruemelingen.ch/archiv-medienspiegel/.

⁴¹ Niklas Luhmann’s “Social Systems Theory” (SST) has been integral in redefining sociology’s understanding of how humans form communities or govern themselves, particularly emphasising that communication, instead of the people themselves, create the social systems that we function in. Delitz specifically refers in her work to Luhmann’s *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M. 1997).

⁴² “So haben Gruppen konstitutiv eine ‘konstruierte Außengrenze’; zentral ist ebenso das ‘Wiedereinführen der Unterscheidung in die Kommunikation [...], was zur Herausbildung einer von der Umwelt

Luhmann's SST is certainly applicable to all festivals, as any festival might aspire to identify itself and then promote its worth to the public, but Festival Rümelingen seems to go further in moulding an identity, in particular with respect to its location and its people (inhabitants of Rümelingen, non-presenting audience members and the artistic community the festival invites to perform). After establishing its historical roots (bringing contemporary music to a nontraditional performance environment as a political act) and periodically tracing its outer boundaries (discovering the success of the nature-hike concerts and commissions of dedicated landscape art pieces as well as adapting the festival location to avoid competition with other events in the area), the "social system" to which Delitz refers has taken on a life of its own at Festival Rümelingen, outside of the curators' control.

The image of the festival curated by the team is, in a sense, an external image: it is an image that what the "insiders" which organise and plan the editions, portray to the world and promote. How is this image then perceived and understood by its audience, or the "outsiders"? In order to assess the reception of the festival's image, the present author conducted a number of interviews in 2020.⁴³ A total of 17 participants with a variety of connections to the festival (none of whom were directly involved in designing or organising it) were selected: volunteers, performers from the 2020 edition, student alumni musicians from Basel and many audience members all with varying ranges of festival experience. An analysis of the interview transcripts of these so-called "outsider" perspectives revealed intriguing connecting themes.

Each interview was conducted with the same questionnaire. When asked how the interviewee saw the relationship between the festival and the townspeople of Rümelingen, two camps of juxtaposing opinions formed: those who believe the festival to be strongly connected to the inhabitants of Rümelingen and those who believe that the festival had outgrown its "small-town" status. It is interesting to note the generational demographic gap that corresponds to these two perspectives. Long-time supporters and Rümelingen inhabitants understood that the festival had changed over its lifetime and was no longer bound to its original location at the village church. Those of a more recent generation (with little to no experience with the festival) seemed to be heavily influenced by the

unterschiedenen Kommunikationsstruktur führt': zur Kommunikation einer 'generalisierten Gruppenidentität', die vor allem im 'Kondensat von Erfahrungen aus der Vergangenheit des Systems' besteht. 'Ist einmal ein solcher thematischer Kern der Gruppe etabliert, so gewinnt das Sozialsystem Gruppe sein Eigenleben' (Fuhse 2001: 5 f.). Das Ziel besteht darin, die Gruppe vor dem 'Auseinanderfallen zu bewahren'. Sie muss dazu 'von Zeit zu Zeit ihre Außengrenze nachzeichnen', bildet eigene symbolische Medien aus usw. (ebd. 10)." Heike Delitz: *Kollektive Identitäten*, Bielefeld 2018, pp. 116 f.

⁴³ Unofficial interviews were conducted in August of 2020 in Läufelfingen, Switzerland. They remain unpublished and are in the present author's archive.

curated image and branding, sticking to the notion that the festival is exclusively associated with the location of Rümelingen.

This question of relationality between the festival's content and its location brought an unprompted tendency into every interview: the terms "elite", "exclusive" and "private" came into spontaneous discussion. Whether used to describe the festival curation in a positive way or to relay complaints of elitist programming, when asked by the author to elaborate on their comments, the interviews turned into provocative and controversial discussions about how the art presented engaged with or excluded the people of Rümelingen.

When asked about what edition or performance remained in the memories of the interviewee, a second and astounding tendency arose, connecting all interviews: music, or sound, was rarely mentioned at all. The term "music" was not often used in the interviewee responses, and even music-related terms were largely absent from the conversation. The experiences, memories and descriptions of what the interviewees thought the festival embodied were strongly related to the atmosphere, social contact and the broader view of "art" that the festival consistently offered.

The aforementioned tendencies in these dialogues with "outsider" perspectives suggest that the festival image among those not directly involved with designing or planning the festival is not strongly connected to the musical aspect of "doing Rümelingen". The interviews also provided perspective on how inclusions and exclusion shape the experience of "doing Rümelingen", and the author argues that these two notions are the source of the seemingly mythical nature of Festival Rümelingen.

Inclusive and exclusive? Using ambiguity to keep discourse – and myth – alive Based on the interview analyses, the concept of exclusion at Festival Rümelingen will be highlighted and dissected from varying perspectives of both "outsiders" and "insiders". For the festival team, the goal is not at all to be exclusive but rather to integrate as many people as possible from the local landscape as well as their contemporary-music community fanbase.⁴⁴ On the other hand, testimonies from younger generations of audience members and performing artists suggest that the economic barriers – costly ticket prices coupled with the traveling expenses to performance locations – create an impression that the festival is exclusionary.⁴⁵ For some long-time supporters from the town, the festival's intellectual and provocative programming invites elitism into the festival experience: who understands the concepts behind the pieces and themes, and who might be challenged? Yet

44 Interviews with Jeschke and Zytynska, 2020.

45 Taken from interviews conducted, Läufelfingen, August 2020. Participants remain anonymous. Archived by the author.

other respondents described the festival programming as relatively simple yet fascinating concepts that require no specialised knowledge or training to be enjoyed. The aforementioned testimonies from participants without insider-knowledge reveal an ambiguous perception of Festival Rümelingen, one that does not exactly coincide with the narratives told by the curatorial team. Two further perspectives from persons who have drifted between “insiders” and “outsiders” will conclude the author’s external assessment of Festival Rümelingen’s self-image.

As a co-founder of the festival with Daniel and Lukas Ott, Niggi Ullrich, a former cultural commissioner for the Basel region, gives a different perspective of exclusivity at Festival Rümelingen:

“I have said nothing about elite but described the festival as exclusive. Of course, it was exclusive in the beginning. We were a few people who organised and performed, and the audience then grew very slowly, a mix of people from the village who knew the Ott brothers or who knew the Ott troupe. [...] The stagings at Festival Rümelingen were anything but exclusive or elitist; on the contrary, the elitist is more a matter for the music academy or the concert hall.”⁴⁶

Ullrich attests that, in fact, the curatorial team considered Festival Rümelingen as a protest of elitism as it brought contemporary music away from its “high-art” niche community in the city and into a rural setting and different mindset. Although the curatorial team fought to break out of the classical contemporary elitist setting within urban Basel, perhaps they only displaced their own form of exclusive musicking to the countryside?

In Christoph Merki’s overview of different specialties in the music scenes of Switzerland in 2009, Thomas Meyer writes a journalistic critique of the Festival Rümelingen story, still one of the only reflective pieces written about the festival to date. Meyer describes the uniqueness of the festival with a view on exclusivity through the lens of the festival’s public relations campaigns. Meyer writes:

“Rümelingen is perhaps an eternal insider tip. Maybe that’s what makes it so charming. People know each other, they meet each other, especially when they are performing themselves. As always with such occasions. Some visitors felt that it was too insider-y. How much does the festival seek publicity, how far does it want to remain an insider tip? Compared to other festivals, the PR machinery is not running at full speed. No concessions are made to attract a huge audience.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Interview with Niggi Ullrich, conducted by Leo Dick and the present author, Zoom, 30 November 2020.

⁴⁷ “Rümelingen ist vielleicht ein ewiger Geheimtipp. Vielleicht macht gerade das den Charme aus. Man kennt sich, man trifft sich, vor allem wenn man selber aufgeführt wird oder aufführt. Wie immer bei solchen Gelegenheiten. Manche Besucher/innen empfanden das auch schon als zu insiderhaft. Wie stark sucht das Festival die Öffentlichkeit, wie weit möchte es ein Insidertipp bleiben? Die PR-Maschinerie läuft im Vergleich zu anderen Festivals nicht auf Hochtouren. Man macht keine Zugeständ-

According to the curatorial team, the festival aims to reach as many people as possible, but for indoor performances at more traditional locations such as the church in Rümelingen, ticket sales are limited by capacity.⁴⁸ With varying spaces, themes and performers involved each year, the team is quite aware that while they will always keep their nucleus of festival followers, the editions bring in different artistic and social communities depending on their curatorial focus. What might seem “insider-like” is the festival’s aim at particular sectors of the arts as well as a thriving connection to their core fanbase, which comprises the inhabitants of Rümelingen and its surrounding area as well as the Germanic contemporary-music community. A continual shift in concept and location programming combined with a discourse-sparking festival environment allows the image of the festival to remain simultaneously branded and ambiguous. Never fully describable or predictable, Festival Rümelingen keeps its narrative on tradition – and therefore its own mythical tale – animate and growing.

Conclusion: festivals thrive on their mythical tales and collective reenactments Festival Rümelingen began as a festival focused on creating resonance on an intimate level, away from the urban mindset and setting. In its first life, the festival became a museum for contemporary music from the late twentieth century. In its second life, music in the twenty-first century is taken to work with nature and its audience is reminded of our artistic existence and reflection within it.

The programming team at Festival Rümelingen is exceptionally skilled in curation, and the need to preserve the music of its earlier years has evolved into championing music of the younger generation. As part of the effort to “brand” the festival, the curatorial team has woven written, recorded and visual accounts of all the different artistic happenings into publications and a website that captures an image of what they believe Festival Rümelingen represents. For over 30 years, the editing/publishing team has kept a consistent house style for their publications, both physical and digital, which has contributed to the festival’s branding. The published materials at Festival Rümelingen resemble programme booklets made by art museums for exhibits and illustrate that the curatorial team finds the integration of other art forms – in this case, visual and literary – to be a vital element in their understanding of musicking. In addition, the festival team has aimed to generate discourse within the academic community. Curation at Festival Rümelingen is

nisse, um ein riesiges Publikum anzulocken.” Thomas Meyer: *Neue Musik. Heimkehr zur Neuen Musik*, in: *Musikszene Schweiz. Begegnungen mit Menschen und Orten*, ed. by Christoph Merki, Zürich 2009, pp. 292–315, here p. 309.

48 Interview with Lydia Jeschke, November 2020.

much more than concert programming: it includes the unification of time, site, landscape, art forms, social gatherings and discourse.

The image of the festival created by the curatorial team goes beyond normative branding schemes because the material generated and promoted to its audience greatly impacts the audience members' experience. Additionally, during the festival the programmers often like to call upon their audience members' inner listening and imaginations, asking them to reflect on sound, surroundings, nature, politics themselves, sparking a discourse within each individual as well as with their fellow audience members, the artists and the festival team. The active and participatory elements mean a rite of passage or initiation occurs and binds the audience into a collective identity for that given moment in time. Added interviews conducted by the author give this case study an insight into the interpretation of the festival image, highlighting a festival that is exclusive yet inclusive, elite yet quite literally down to earth. Terms like "eternal", "elite", "exclusive", "insider-like" as well as notions of "experimental landscape art", "laboratory for sound" and "art at the periphery" ultimately build a collective image and understanding of the festival's representation. Shades of ambiguity, resulting from the binary ideas in the audience testimonies, allow the festival to maintain a secret status while keeping up to date in artistic quality and experimentation.

Festival Rümelingen can be seen as one large-scale, site-specific work that is curated anew each year yet narrates a singular myth: the tradition of "doing Rümelingen". The myth is kept alive by both insiders and outsiders, younger and older generations as well as those who initiated the tradition more than 30 years ago. Festival Rümelingen is certainly no fictional tale but a story that wants to be re-staged, re-embodied and performed for many years to come and can be utilised as a model for other festivals that want to adapt their traditional roots. To be analysed and further critiqued, research projects concerned with discourse-analytical approaches to festival community storytelling would provide more holistic views to current states of other contemporary-music festivals.

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MUSICKING COLLECTIVE

Codierungen kollektiver Identität in der
zeitgenössischen Musikpraxis der Schweiz
und ihrer Nachbarländer • Herausgegeben von
Leo Dick, Noémie Favennec und Katelyn Rose King
unter redaktioneller Mitarbeit von Daniel Allenbach



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Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz
und Thomas Gartmann

Band 17