

Monheim Triennial

The Adventure of Music in the 21st Century

The 'Monheim Triennial' is an international music festival aiming to present ground-breaking artistic positions in current improvised, composed and popular music.

The first edition of the Monheim Triennial will take place in 2020 and will be continued every three years on the last weekend of June.

The Monheim Triennale will focus on telling musical stories at the highest artistic level. Artistic Director is Reiner Michalke.

The Idea for the Festival

In the summer of 2017, Daniel Zimmermann, the mayor of the city of Monheim, approached me with the idea to develop a concept for a music festival for his city. Since there are already quite a number of jazz festivals happening in the vicinity of Monheim (with festivals in Leverkusen, Düsseldorf, Viersen, Hilden, Dortmund, Bonn, Münster and Moers), we quickly agreed that the Monheim Festival should be a fundamentally different type of music festival. During my time as Artistic Director at Moers Festival we kept on broadening the term 'jazz' and eventually replaced it by 'Aktuelle Musik'. In the case of the Monheim Festival we also intend to keep a broad definition of the type of music and thus keep it open to a wider range of artists and audiences. In the 21st century, the world's most interesting and original developments and projects emerge whenever improvised, composed and popular music meet. This 'new' music eludes previously known categories and creates new musical worlds and perspectives.

It's in this no man's land of music where the Monheim Festival is looking for its destination. Unlike the neighbouring cities of Leverkusen and Düsseldorf, where they try to attract a regional audience with mostly famous artists, the Monheim Festival rises to the challenge and attempts to fascinate its audience simply by the music's quality and content beyond mainstream music. The unmistakable programming profile caters both to Monheim and Rhineland audiences as well as the music loving community all over the world. The highest quality will resonate from this regional area into the global village of music.

The aim is an international showcase of the currently most ground-breaking artistic positions. In a world that has become increasingly confusing, it will bring together real important and game-changing musicians.

We also quickly agreed on the festival's future timeline. A three-year interval appeared most desirable to us.

Not only to set us apart from other festivals with this unique characteristic. In fact, the triennial format of the Monheim fest is hardly common amongst the international music festival landscape so far. Apart from a few biannual festivals, all other international music festivals take place on an annual basis. Even the so-called 'Ruhrtriennale', a 'Festival of the Arts in the Ruhr area', is held annually. It's the festival management and the theme which changes every three years. Only the 'Musiktriennale Köln', which was held from 1994 to 2010 and where I was significantly involved in its inception and its artistic content until the end of 2007, really took place at a three-year interval.

The three-year interval has numerous advantages for the festival's content planning. It makes it possible to fully complete a festival before starting to plan the programme for the next, rather than having to plan the next festival while the current one is still running, as is the case with annual festivals. Another advantage of the three-year cycle is that it triples our choice of programme planning possibilities compared to an annual festival. This is particularly important at a festival dedicated to current contemporary music which relies on the artistic-musical productivity and creativity of its featured international artists.

Historic Spotlight: Music Festivals

Among the world's oldest music festivals still being held today is the Bayreuth Festival, set up in 1876 and showcasing Richard Wagner's compositions. The world's leading festival in the area of New Composed Music is the 'Donauessingen Chamber Music for the Promotion of Contemporary Audio Art', originating from 1921.

Surprisingly, the world's oldest Jazz Festival also takes place in Germany – and not in the US. It is the 'German Jazz Festival' in Frankfurt/Main which was first launched as a showcase in 1953 to annually present 'something of the best that Germany has to offer in the area of jazz'. A year later, the first jazz festival in the USA was created: the 'Newport Jazz Festival', which was run by its founder George Wein until 2015.

In 1967, the 'Monterey Pop' in California was set up as the first big pop festival, closely followed by the 'Woodstock Music & Art Fair', which took place north of New York City in 1969 and was to remain a one-off event.

Inspired by the open-air-character of the Woodstock Festival, the 'International New Jazz Festival Moers' in the Lower Rhine area of Germany was first launched in 1972 and remained a leading European festival for many, many years to follow. It changed the definition of jazz music and it invented a new type of festival. Over the next six years, the stylistically related festivals in Willisau, Switzerland (1975) and in Saalfelden, Austria (1978) followed suit. All three festivals started out as open-air festivals and have changed to indoor venues by now. The 'Big Ears Festival' which is hosted in the rather small city of Knoxville/Tennessee since 2009, is a new type of music festival for early 21st century music, attracting and inspiring music lovers from all over the world. And it managed to get the New York Times to call it the best in the world.

The Monheim Festival wants to build on the traditions of these successful festivals, which reinvented music and redefined our understanding thereof. The Monheim Festival also focuses on transformation and change, as well as its own structure and rhythm, and plans to embed the festival in its city and cooperate with its people.

The Festival and the City

It is crucially important for all music festivals to achieve a high percentage of acceptance in their respective urban societies. This is very different for each city. While a Heavy Metal festival such as 'Wacken Open Air' can assume a 100 % approval rate among its local population, Moers' citizens have traditionally been rather reserved about their Moers Festival.

A festival's acceptance rate by its citizens is as varied as the festivals are themselves, so there is certainly no magic formula. Whenever a new festival is being created, the obvious mistakes made elsewhere should not be repeated. However, it is more important to learn from positive examples and to look at success stories.

In a recent study conducted by the University of Paderborn about the success of music festivals, scientist prof. Dr. Beate Flath mentioned two factors that led to the success of the

annual singer-songwriter festival 'Orange Blossom Special' (founded in 1997), held at the Whitsun weekend at Beverungen, North Rhine-Westphalia:

1. All the important forces, i.e. organisers, the city and all cultural mediators worked together from the very beginning and have 'grown with the festival', local companies were involved right from the start and recognised the opportunities arising from the creation and the regional added value early in the piece.

2. When asked how the local population accepts a highly specialized, innovative music programme, Flath refers to the high credibility of the programme makers, especially when they are constantly evolving and don't stick to the familiar. Credibility is based on the highest level of professionalism, experience, networking and courage.

A good example for successfully establishing a new festival with a by all means challenging programme as well as unknown to large parts of the population is the above mentioned 'Big Ears Festival' in Knoxville/Tennessee. Apart from the festival's founder Ashley Capps, it was the democratic mayor Madeline Rogero who was an important supporter of the festival. During the first couple of years, the audience consisted predominantly of visitors from the city and the immediate region itself. After a few years the festival increasingly attracted the media and audience from further afield, first from within the US and later also worldwide, with sold-out concerts in 2018.

At both festivals, it was the regional population who first placed their trust in their festival and thus laid the foundation for further success. In the case of the 'Big Ears Festival', it does not matter that the music on offer does not correspond with the usual listening habits of the people in Tennessee.

Perhaps it was even an advantage that it was in fact completely contrary. The city's citizens backed their festival because they felt the innate need to do so. Knoxville, the number three city in state of Tennessee following Memphis and Nashville, wanted to show that the city had something to offer and should be taken notice of beyond its borders. The city's setting, the venues used, the festival's marketing and graphic image, the positive media coverage, but above all its consistent programming beyond mainstream created a high level of credibility. Such high credibility that everyone, even those who couldn't relate to the presented music, felt the festival's uniqueness could become the key to its national and international recognition. The people were proud of their city and wanted to symbolically show 'the world' what they could do with their festival.

Artist in Residence

In order to communicate the festival contents, I plan to set up a comprehensive cultural communication programme in Monheim together with the musician Achim Tang, who was the Moers 'Improviser in Residence' for all of 2011 and is one of the most experienced experts in the field of music communication in our Republic. The aim is to promote an understanding of contemporary music, to create a vital link between the festival and urban society as well as to offer artistic stimulus for a sustainable cultural development of the city. This entails conceptual work (development and support of cultural education programmes, concerts and other events), practical project work (plan and implement own artistic and educational projects) as well as the initiation and organisation of projects which connect the festival with the city's cultural educational programmes (integration of focal points and/or featured artists of the festival programming into the city's cultural educational programming). All our activities intend to aim for extensive cooperation with local institutions such as music schools, art schools, Sojus 7 and others.

Why Monheim?

The city of Monheim/Rhine is situated in a remarkable geographical location. Located exactly in between the two major cities Cologne and Düsseldorf, and therefore in the heart of Europe's most populous region after Greater London. At the same time Monheim is quiet and almost secluded, offering the ideal setting for an internationally oriented and embraced (cultural) event.

From Cologne (one million inhabitants) and Düsseldorf (600,000 inhabitants) to Monheim, it takes one hour by bicycle, 40 minutes by public transport and 20 minutes by car. Equally stunning is Monheim's location along one of Europe's most important waterways: the Rhine river. From Cologne it would take just one hour to reach Monheim by ship, whereas it would travel twice as long upstream from Düsseldorf.

In recent years, the cultural location Monheim has built up a versatile cultural infrastructure for children and teenagers. Based on the realisation that the future and social peace in our cities can only be achieved through the development of children and teenagers, Monheim has set itself the goal of being a 'capital city for children', regardless of their social or national origin.

With the 'MoMo – Music School for All' model, the Monheim Music School has done pioneering work since 2005. It was the first music school in Germany to introduce free instrumental music lessons, comparable to the Norwegian 'Kulturelle Skolesekken' (cultural backpack). These are held once a week at all primary schools in Monheim and started long before the state of North Rhine-Westphalia launched its model 'Jeki – An Instrument for Every Child'. In 2015, the music school was built and opened, an exemplary building in terms of size and equipment.

And there are other remarkable projects in the field of cultural education. Worth mentioning are the activities at the Ulla-Hahn-Haus, which focus on conveying literature to children and teenagers; since 2014, the school project 'Wortmalerei' (Word Painting) which regularly connects visual arts with literature and shows the its pieces; and the planned extension of the socio-cultural centre Sojus 7 with its activities for teenagers and young adults.

These cultural projects and cultural educational activities constitute an essential foundation and create credibility for the establishment of an international music festival. Monheim's self-image in dealing with art and culture ultimately convinced me to follow through with Monheim's proposal for a new music festival.

However, another aspect makes Monheim the perfect city to host such a major cultural event which deliberately choses to set itself apart from cultural and social mainstream. Monheim has taken its own political path, formulated goals and made itself economically independent. Today, Monheim is not only one of the most child-friendly cities in Germany, but also boasts a 'welcoming culture' that welcomes new, foreign and different things and does not exclude them.

The Programme

It would be way too early and not constructive to put a name to parts of the intended programming or even artists for the future festival at this point. However, it is possible to describe some corner stones which clarify the nature of its intended programming.

The quintessence of the programme is to present the most important contributions, created in new and remarkable ways in the area of contemporary music by musicians from all over the world. We plan to present and document international music at the crossroads where the new, the unknown and the unexpected meet. The presented contemporary music

includes New Composed Music, Improvised Music and Jazz as well as Popular Music, which is open to experimentation and exploration.

An example for this would be that the musicians Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who were still comparatively unknown in the 1960s, were all connected by an invisible artistic force field. Only later did we learn that they knew about each other and appreciated one another. These artistic force fields have always existed and still exist today. It is the aim to find them and to make them tangible in a festival context. The programme which ideally functions as a benchmark for the production and creative power of international artists, is framed by set themes and commissioned works. One possible theme would be the complete works of an outstanding musician of the 20th century and to examine the question which impact his or her work has on 21st century music.

Another part of the programming would be to award contract compositions or concepts. To a certain extent, this would enable artists to detach themselves from the dependence on artistic productivity and to actively intervene in the artistic production process.

As far as all these programme projects are concerned, the quality of their selection will be crucial. Although it is possible, with some listening experience, to distinguish good music from bad music, it takes a lot of knowledge, experience and instinct to distinguish good music from very good music.

Since it is hardly possible for a single person to keep up with the entire range of international music creation at eye level, I intend to appoint a supporting team of curators who research and keep an eye on to be agreed areas.

The appointed curators and especially me as Artistic Director of the festival will sincerely aim to reflect political developments of a constantly changing world in our festival programme, in particular the consequences of migration and displacement.

Timing and Location

The first festival edition will take place in 2020. Since the planned refurbishment of the former Shell fuelling station into an event venue, aka the future festival centre „Kulturraffinerie K714“, will not be completed by then, this first edition would be a kind of three to five day ‘trailer’.

The first complete festival edition, with the above-mentioned full programming, will first be held in 2023. It will consist of at least five festival days with approximately 80 programme contributions. Further editions will be held in 2026 and 2029.

These major festival editions will be ‘interrupted’ by so-called one-day ‘Interludes’ during the years in between. The purpose of the ‘Interludes’ is to continuously increase the anticipation of the actual main event, as well as to ingrain the festival date in the long-term memories of both regional and international visitors, as well as media representatives. At the same time this single day of concerts would be a good occasion to draw attention to the Monheim Festival in regional, national and international media once a year.

The last weekend in June is considered to be ideal timing for the festival, one week before the start of the school holidays in North Rhine-Westphalia. The summer temperatures allow for additional outdoor concerts at this time of year. There are no comparable events around that time anywhere the world which might compete with our festival.

Only the festival timing in even years may cause a conflict of interest, as the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship and the 2026 FIFA World Cup will be held from mid-June to mid-July. However, this would only affect the concerts on a single evening. Plus only if the German team qualifies for the respective tournaments and makes into the round of sixteen.

The Venues

Apart from the mentioned festival centre in the presently refurbished former Shell fuelling station on the banks of the river Rhine ('Kulturraffinerie K714'), which is due to be completed before 2023, other planned festival locations include the auditorium of the Otto-Hahn-Gymnasium, the Sojus 7 event centre as well as various 'special' locations such as the Marienkapelle or the open-air theatre. Furthermore, it is planned to incorporate Monheim's entire public space for festival events. Sound installations, stages for various free-of-charge concert formats and musical interventions will be hosted throughout the city.

Branding

Due to the above-mentioned task of developing a festival which

- is integrated into urban life from the very beginning,
- has a programme profile that is unique in the world and
- pursues the goal of achieving greater reach as early as possible,

the branding process is of great importance. The proactive parties within Monheim's urban society should be involved in this process to avoid a gap between local needs and international requirements from the very start.

In this process, the mission statement of the festival will have to be defined, the festival name has to be found or confirmed and the development of the corporate design will have to be prepared. The resulting corporate identity must clearly highlight the unique selling proposition of the project.

When developing a new 'product' which does not have a market yet and won't have a market according to the rules of supply and demand in the foreseeable future, it is particularly important to create curiosity and interest by means of communication and marketing.

Whether an event becomes a brand can neither be planned, nor controlled. There are however a few basic rules which give this possible aim the necessary push. The development of a new international brand in the cultural area is not just about getting as many people as possible to visit this event, it is at least equally important to convey values with the brand and aim to achieve an international impact.

In 1997, 2002 and 2012, Markus Müller, the long-standing media spokesman for the 'documenta' in Kassel, conducted surveys asking (more than 2,500 participants each) the question, „Why are you coming to the 'documenta'?” His conclusion: „I can prove that a clearer profile makes the decision to come much easier for the addressed individuals. Among its addressees, the 'documenta' is regarded to be the most important exhibition for the contemporary art worldwide, which is further strengthened by controversies concerning this statement. To what extent this is true or not does not matter, what is important is that the Documenta is perceived in this way. The more popular the content, the less specific is the audience's interest. Meaning that visitors would not come for the 'Documenta', but rather for content A.”

In addition, I plan to document the development of the festival in a scientific, empirical and (video) documentary way from the very beginning in order to make this process transparent and comprehensible.

Opportunities and Risks

One of the decisive factors for the success of the festival is how quickly the project will get accepted by the people of Monheim. It may not give the impression that the festival lands in town every three years like a UFO, stays for a few days and then disappears again without a trace.

In the best-case scenario, a dialogue will develop between the festival and the cities citizens, whereby the international character of the festival meets the 'welcome culture' of Monheim's people. Such a dialogue requires continuous moderation by the city leaders. This dialogue is supported and accompanied by additional fixtures, such as the 'Artist in Residence', who will help to make the festival contents tangible in the city all year round. The opportunities outweigh the small risk of only hesitant acceptance by Monheim's citizens. The programme will be unique in the world in regard to its standards, scope and musical profile. This is also true for the three-year interval of the Triennale.

The city of Monheim/Rhein offers ideal conditions for the project's success due to its geographical location, its convincing performance as a 'city for children' with activities in the area of children and teenage culture, as well as its political and economic independence.

Reiner Michalke, July 2018