

A Ticket to Heaven: Live Music in a Planetarium

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The vision

In 1992, I traveled to the “Granite Rose,” the legendary coast of Brittany in western France, which is full of myths and fables. Under these circumstances, it didn’t surprise me to suddenly see a huge, white ball appear during an excursion through this countryside. Was it the Celtic fairies who wanted to abduct me to their “other” world? I was magically attracted and steered toward it - and landed in the planetarium of Cosmopolis/Pleumeur-Bodou.

It was my first visit to a planetarium. I was deeply moved when I looked at the starry sky - simultaneously, I heard music within myself and the desire to play the harp. A vision grew, “Harp Music under the Starry Sky.” Back in Germany, I started this project with great fascination but without any idea of how to transform it into reality. The first invitation came from the planetarium in Berlin (Wilhelm-Foerster-Sternwarte), and appeared to me to be like “a ticket to heaven.”

In actual practice

The success of a live concert depends on commitment by the musician(s) as well as the planetarium. Musicians are attracted to the special ambience and the technical possibilities of a planetarium, but they usually have no real knowledge of the technical aspects. My experience shows that it is advisable for musicians to become acquainted with the differences in the expense and technical effort required for a show. A basic knowledge of the projectors enables the musician to co-create the show, and this also prevents false expectations right from the start.

For my harp music, the projection of the starry sky was (and still is today) an important design element, combined with special projectors and selected allskies. With the aid of creative improvisation from both sides, the creation of a harmonious program has always resulted (in spite of the great variety of planetariums!). The audience has always been enthusiastic. This is a fundamental

experience for me and it’s a relief to know that not everything shown on the dome has to be 100% perfect for a live concert. Often, “less” may even be “more;” concerts with the music and “almost nothing but the starry sky” were impressively beautiful. In the final analysis, it is the music which should be in the foreground. In all the years I’ve toured, I’ve always received many positive suggestions in the German planetariums - many thanks to all concerned.

Tips

I’d like to list a couple of items which have proven to be of help in organizing my live concerts during the past ten years in the hope they are useful to others:

Storyboard

I attach a “storyboard” for the performance to provide artistic directions on the sequence of events of the music and sounds and the image projections. The storyboard together with my music on CD is the major preparatory material for the technician. I will reach a decision on the exact sequence with each planetarium on the phone, based on the technical abilities of the respective planetarium. If we can use allskies, I will provide them; the planetarium is to take over programming the presentation of the allskies and the star projector and is to provide a technician for the final checks as well as the concert itself.

Just as looking at the stars is a gateway to a person’s soul, so is music. Stars and music have cast their spell over people since primeval times. Both awaken feelings. The starry canopy of the dome also speaks to our feelings. This is certainly one of the pillars on which the worldwide success of planetariums is built.

When it’s possible to meld music and the stars together harmoniously, it opens up a new world within us. We often live in an everyday world full of hectic rushing and distractions, overstimulated by the flood of images and noise of the modern world. The experience of music beneath the planetarium dome offers a counterpoint. It opens an internal side of our existence. The harp is specially suitable for accomplishing this - even in the legends of ancient peoples, this is the instrument which has enchanted man and animal.

The modern world of the planetarium is currently undergoing conversion to all-dome video projection with its spectacular effects. Among them are those which can intensify the power of music and the stars even further: when they are employed with the eyes of a composer, the composition and visual dramaturgy are blended with each other with sensitivity. It is challenging and fulfilling to follow this path. Together with Christine Hoegl and the Digistar III from Evans & Sutherland, we reach an audience in Kiel which is often more appreciative than the audiences of the spectacular shows.

– Eduard Thomas, Director of Mediadome/
University of Applied Sciences in Kiel, Germany