

Consideration of Music Activities Currently Performed in Vienna —Taking “WIEN MODERN 36” as an Example—

FY2023 Mécénat Associate

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Introduction

Vienna in Austria, known as the city of music, is a relatively compact city equivalent to about one-fifth the area of Tokyo, and has a large number of concert halls, theaters, art galleries and museums forming a city of culture. Even in Japan, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and its New Year concert performed at the Musikverein on New Year's Day is well known. It is no exaggeration to say that Vienna is an indispensable city for classical music fans. Actually visiting Vienna is the only way to know about the situation regarding how art activities are supported and artistic and cultural events are held in this large touristic city on a real-time basis. This article covers and reports on Wien Modern 36, the festival held from October 31 to December 2, 2023, as part of a contemporary music scene that the author became familiarized with by staying in Vienna, based on a survey in which she served as a Mécénat Associate.

In Vienna, where so many musical performances are conducted every day that it is hard to grasp the entire picture, this survey was conducted with a particular focus on music festivals. Prior to relocating to Vienna in October 2023, the author had been following concerts and music festivals held in Vienna and other parts in Austria for this survey from Japan. However, there was very limited information available about such music festivals, except for information pertaining to the internationally renowned Salzburg Festival, so the author learned from experience that it is difficult even to know of such festivals' existence while staying in Japan.

Even in Japan, a considerable number of music festivals and art festivals are held not only in Tokyo but also in other cities across the country. Some of these festivals have a long history while others have been launched recently, and their situations are rapidly changing. Each of these music festivals has its own unique background, and the genres of music performed, type of musicians and audience of such events vary depending on the venue and circumstances. With this in mind, this survey was conducted with the aim of reporting on the existence of contemporary music festivals that have been enjoyed in the city of Vienna by

providing information that is not available in Japan.

In the present report, after briefly describing the historical outline of musical festivals in German-speaking countries including Austria and in Japan, the contemporary music festival Wien Modern 36, held in Vienna, is discussed as a model for modern music festivals. Following that, there is the summary of an interview conducted by the author with Bernhard Günther, who serves as artistic director of Wien Modern, providing details of the actual situation of the festival. This interview reveals the reason why this event focusing on contemporary music has been held in Vienna, the heart of the classical music world, for more than 30 years, how it is operated and what problems it has faced, by providing valuable information that would otherwise be unknown to the general audience. It is hoped that this report will serve as an opportunity for many people to know that there is a challenging music festival dedicated to contemporary music that has no comparison not only in Japan but also anywhere else in the world.

1. Historical Outline of Music Festivals

1-1 Music festivals in German-speaking countries

The history of music festivals in German-speaking countries dates back to 1810, when a music festival was held in Frankenhausen in Thuringia, located in central Germany. Thereafter, music festivals varying in size from small to large began to be held, and these increased in number toward the 1840s. These music festivals in various regions had their own social significance. In particular, since early music festivals were often held to commemorate the end of a war, some festivals had programs containing strong implications of nationalism.¹ Music festivals have changed with time, and by the end of the 19th century, some festivals came to feature music of specific genres or works by specific composers, and these themes have been carried through to the present. Many of the large-scale music festivals in those times were apparently held with well-known musicians and conductors invited by local dilettantes, and hundreds of amateur musicians joining them. (This type of festival has some points in common with modern music festivals in Japan in terms of their being operated and participated in by citizens.)²

It is difficult to concisely describe the trends of these music festivals; however, it is believed that, broadly speaking, music festivals in German-speaking countries shifted from citizen-participation gatherings for local music-lovers and those from neighboring cities, to music festivals held by artists and for artists inviting well-known musicians and conductors.

Today, in European countries with many music festivals such as Germany and Austria, most of the festivals are sponsored by the government, the state or major companies. In the case of Austria, the Salzburg Festival, which is well-known throughout the world, has long been supported by various companies including Nestlé, Audi and Rolex. Summer is the peak season for music festivals, when projects of all sizes are held, attracting audiences from all over the world, and these events are appreciated for the great contributions they make to

¹ *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart (MGG) Online*, s.v. "Musikfeste und Festspiele" by Richard Schaal, accessed December 6, 2022.

² Naomi Miyamoto (2011), "Authenticity and Transition of Music Festivals in Japan," *Japanese Sociological Review*, Volume 62 Issue 3 pp. 375-391

tourism in suburbs and the countryside, including Salzburg. Large-scale music festivals featuring classical music also include Mozart Week, which began in 1956 and has been held in the same city, Salzburg, and the International Brucknerfest in Linz; most of these festivals focus on composers associated with Austria. Since these music festivals serve as a stage for the world's leading musicians to give performances, it could be said that they are festivals for art.

1-2 Music festivals in Japan

As for Japan, despite lagging about one century behind such countries, new music festivals began to appear in 1950, and now the number of music festivals in Japan has grown to be equal to that of Europe. Festivals in Japan featuring classical music can be classified into the following three types: concert-oriented festivals inviting famous musicians, seminar- or competition-oriented festivals, and community participation festivals.³ When music festivals first began to take root, they were mainly carried out with the aim of stimulating the entire musical activity of the country, with famous artists from overseas as the main attractions. In other words, the concert-oriented type represented the mainstream of music festivals in the early stages.⁴ In the 1980s, when concert halls began to be built in various places, it became difficult to attract visitors simply by inviting well-known musicians (especially in provincial areas), so the significance of many music festivals was re-evaluated. Responding to this trend, music festivals in provincial areas came to be organized in collaboration with local communities while continuing to invite musicians from overseas. These music festivals have been continued by involving volunteer staff, musicians, and people in local communities who were also part of the audience, as well as by balancing the understanding of people in host cities and benefits from tourism. As for seminar-oriented music festivals, some festivals extensively invited participants in order to cover their operating expenses with lesson fees

³ Ibid.

⁴ Miki Yamamoto (2003), "A Study of the Acceptance of International Music Festivals in Post-War Japan," *Cultural Economics*, Volume 3 Issue 3 pp. 65-75

and audience fees; however, most of the music festivals currently held are financially supported by companies of various sizes. Particularly in recent times, as companies have come to provide financial support in various ways, more and more activities have been provided without depending on the country or municipal governments.

There are so many music festivals with a long history, the list of which, first of all, includes La Folle Journée TOKYO 2024 and the Spring Festival in Tokyo, which are time-proven events recognized as mécénat activities, as well as Kusatsu International Summer Music Academy & Festival and Kirishima International Music Festival, which provide a combination of seminars and concerts held in each area. Most of the performance programs of these well-known music festivals include great works that are famous examples of classical music. Comparing the characteristics of the previously mentioned music festivals in Austria with those of Japanese festivals reveals certain differences. Japanese festivals invite many musicians from overseas; however, they are mainly presented to a domestic audience and participants rather than an international audience, and it might be correct to say that the combination of a festival for art and a community participation-type festival has become the mainstream for music festivals in Japan.

2. Music Festival "Wien Modern 36"

2-1 Consideration of Music Festival "Wien Modern 36"

As is widely known, in Vienna, the heart of the classical music world, concerts are held almost incessantly every day. However, looking specifically at the forms of music festivals, the author has noticed that even though there are many music festivals consisting of numerous small concerts combined in a small scale, events with concerts launched as original projects are limited. Such projects are more likely to be found in the above-mentioned regional cities such as Salzburg and Linz rather than in Vienna. In addition, as previously stated, taking a general view of musical festivals in Japan shows that many festivals featuring classical music are functioning as a collection of concerts held at specific concert halls presenting great works performed by famous musicians. As discussed later, considering the music festival-related circumstances of the two countries, Wien Modern, the music festival introduced through this article, is a unique event in that it features newly created contemporary music and is a music festival using the entire city of Vienna. First of all, the history of Wien Modern will be briefly discussed to show its outline.

Wien Modern, covered here as a concrete example of music festivals held in Vienna, was established in 1988 by the conductor Claudio Abbado, who was serving as music director of Vienna at that time. This is the greatest music festival for Neue Music (new music) in Austria, and also the world's largest event of its kind. Unlike most music festivals, which are held in summer during the holiday season, Wien Modern is held in November, and this year (2023) is the 36th installment.

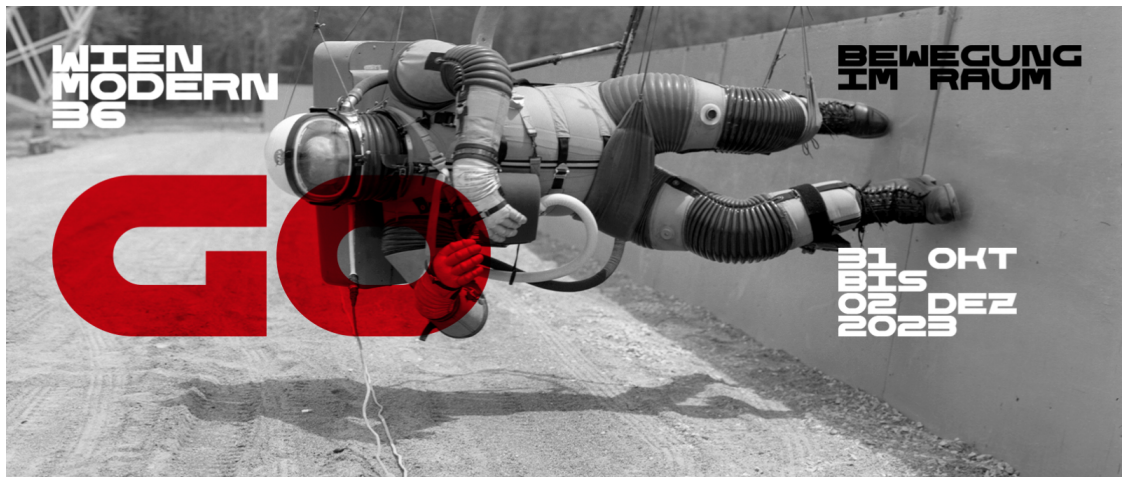
Wien Modern has been held with constant reconsideration of what true new music actually is; however, at the time of its establishment, Wien Modern seemed to be functioning as a stage for presenting performances of great works of the 20th century in Vienna, city of music, representing musical tradition. For example, Claudio Abbado conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra to present works of modern composers such as Pierre Boulez and Alban Berg to the public of Vienna. During the next 10 years, the area for holding Wien

Modern was gradually expanded and works by many composers came to be presented, and by continuously taking on new challenges including world premieres, it has grown into an international music festival that can present a wide variety of programs.⁵

At today's Wien Modern, a variety of works of new music are performed in various places in Vienna literally every day for about 30 days in November. (Sometimes, not one but three or four concerts are held in a single day.) In 2018, a record high of 31,491 people visited the event, and the following year, 2019, as many as 109 works were premiered, which shows that Wien Modern has given a boost to new music and contemporary music scenes. (*Incidentally, the number of visitors in 2023 seems to have exceeded this record.)

2-2 General Picture of "Wien Modern 36" in 2023

With its opening on October 31, this year's Wien Modern 36 presented 57 works, 91 concerts, 20 workshops and other various events including talk shows at 36 venues in 14 districts of the city of Vienna by its finale on December 2, in which a total of 33 female composers and 86 male composers took part.



From the official website of Wien Modern 36

Wien Modern is also characterized every year by a certain theme for the year. This year, Wien Modern was held under the theme of "GO-Bewegung im Raum (Go-Movement in

⁵ From the official website of Wien Modern 36

Space)." At a press conference held prior to its opening, Bernhard Günther, who has been serving as artistic director of the festival since 2016, made some comments regarding the intention of this year's theme and sought understanding, saying that it would provide free enjoyment and play after the COVID-19 pandemic, and show the great driving force of music working in the present day and the continuous development of music while classical music progressively corrodes. This photograph selected as a visual for the music festival taken in 1965 shows an astronaut practicing a moonwalk, which is an homage to the time in the 1960s when people enthusiastically took experimental approaches, while at the same time implying the discovery of feeling music, which is physical "movement," as a bodily experience.

The greatest feature of current-day Wien Modern is that various places in the city of Vienna are selected as venues: concert halls that have been functioning as places associated with the tradition of classical music including the Konzerthaus and the Musikverein, and municipal parks and churches located in the central part of Vienna, as well as main streets and stations, which are key elements for tourism. Thus, the whole city is used to hold events every day. Perhaps because Vienna is known as a city where traditional authority has been maintained, it is meaningful to provide new music to people and for them to share the experience. According to citizens of Vienna, Wien Modern is enjoyed by people from various age groups who accept new music as well as traditional classical music.

In addition, the executive committee of Wien Modern provides meticulous support to help the audience appreciate modern music. A brochure people can get freely at venues includes the schedule and programs of the entire music event. It is a thick booklet covering as many as 100 events, with one page devoted to each event, and contains so much information that it does not look like a typical free brochure. In addition to this, people can receive a program note for a set charge, while those who purchase a festival pass can receive this free of charge. It is far beyond what you might expect a program note to be, containing a huge amount of information and looking rather like a dictionary. The program note not only contains the contents of programs, but also introduces all the artists taking part in the events, including interviews with them and their essays. It reflects its creators' meticulous efforts and attitude

in trying to provide as much as information as possible to those who have interest, while anticipating questions that ordinary people have about contemporary art.

2-3. Appearance of “Wien Modern 36” (excerpt)

As stated in the previous section, quite a large number of performances were held one after another for a period of about one month at Wien Modern 36. This section introduces and reports on some of the particularly impressive and original performances that were held here.

“Maria Gstattner: Fanfare” (October 13, 2023) Venue: Vienna Municipal Park

The Wien Modern music festival opened with this performance, in which artists from various genres led by the composer and performer Maria Gstattner created a setting to experience beauty with music and light on the stage of Vienna Municipal Park. After sundown, as it gets dark,



Fanfare Foto: esel

typically only a few people are seen around here; however, toward the starting time at 6 p.m., regular Wien Modern festivalgoers were beginning to gather. The large area of the park was roughly divided into a number of zones, where a queer-feminist punk band, electronic musicians, students at music colleges, a military band and a brass band were waiting separately. The event started when the members of the military band got together and began to play music. The band marched while playing music, and the audience followed them as if naturally led by their music, before eventually assembling in one place. All of sudden, the number of members of the military band increased, which attracted many more people, filling the public square with a large audience. As its title “Fanfare” indicates, the sound created by the military band and the brass band made a great undulation and soared high in the air, which generated a sense of exaltation as if celebrating the opening of the festival. After that,

artists who were scattered about the park began to play music one after another and led the audience to follow their sound, forming a large crowd. This structure, which Maria Gstättner called "collective ritual experience," helped the people there experience a wonderful and precious sense of solidarity and feel that they were united with others by the sound, and this was achieved because the audience enjoyed the music through a physical experience and the music was performed in the park, a public space, which was open to everyone.



Fanfare Foto: esel

"Wien Modern Opening Concert by Peter Jakober: String Room II" (October 31, 2023) Venue: Konzerthaus



Eröffnung Wien Modern Foto: Markus Sepperer

After the event mentioned above, the opening concert was held at the Konzerthaus located just next to the municipal park. The Konzerthaus has three halls; there are two rooms on the both sides of the Great Hall, a small hall named Berio Hall, and the medium-sized Mozart Hall. The concert was presented with these three rooms connected, which was an unprecedented attempt. String Room II created by Peter Jakober upon commission from Wien Modern in 2022 was performed for the first time in the world. It was first played by 18 string players, which then grew into a large group consisting of 26 violinists, 10 violists, 14 cellists and 10 contrabassists. These players, who were separately deployed in the three halls, were members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra based in the Konzerthaus. The doors of the three halls leading to their auditorium were wide open, which allowed the audience to freely come and go. In Peter Jakober's music piece, the players beat a rhythm by moving the bows up and down on the strings and then stopped. This repetition caused sounds with different wavelengths to spread like ripples and then halt, the sounds echoing in the three halls like waves coming in and then receding. It seemed the players were given directions through headphones with the aid of hardware and software specially developed for this performance and were controlled to play in time with beat. During the performance, which lasted about one hour, the audience freely went back and forth between the three halls, and sometimes stopped walking or sat on the floor, enjoying this experience as they liked.

"Georg Friedrich Haas: 11,000 Strings" (November 1, 2023) Venue: Konzerthaus



11.000 Saiten Foto: Markus Sepperer

To perform this piece composed by Haas in 2020 and premiered in 2023, it is necessary to arrange 50 pianos tuned 1/100 tone apart and a chamber orchestra all around a hall. The very fact that this incredible piece got an opportunity to be played indicates that Wien Modern has a spirit of adventure. The

50 pianos arranged all around the Great Halls of the Konzerthaus were played by students majoring in piano at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. The pianists and instrumental performers of the ensemble performed by following music sheets sent to their touch panel screens and followed the tones appearing on the screens. During the performance, which continued for about one hour, there were sounds ranging from sensitive and mysterious sounds that were barely audible to the audience (who tried to listen to silence) to sounds like a tempest of glissandi using the entire range of the piano. The audience listened to the performance while freely walking through the groups of musical instruments or standing still. Toward the finale, the volume increased, and the strings of the 50 pianos produced a roaring sound with raging soundwaves, causing a distortion of sound that made people feel as if electronic sound equipment was being used. This performance created bizarre sound that made the audience feel as if they were in a gravity-free space. The sound created by the 50 pianos and the ensemble was neither classical music nor jazz, nor noise; it was truly new music that cannot fall into any existing genre. When the performance ended with a lingering echo, there was lengthy applause from the audience, who were clearly delighted to have experienced this extremely uncommon music piece together.



11.000 Saiten Foto: Markus Sepperer

"Olga Neuwirth: Gassatim-Concert | Peter Zumthor 17" (November 21, 2023)
Venue: Plague Column



Musikverein Perspektiven: Gassatim-Konzert Foto: eSeL

The Plague Column is built in the middle of a main street leading to St. Stephen's Cathedral in the center of Vienna. This event, held as a flash mob-like concert around this monument, was joined by a many passers-by and sightseers at twilight, and it grew into something huge. Created by the composer Olga Neuwirth, this project is entitled "Gassatim-Concert Based on the Idea of Olga Neuwirth, Joseph Haydn and Charles Ives." Gassatim means "walking along a street," and as its name suggests, groups of ensembles including students at music colleges appeared one after another and performed while walking along a main street, and played various music pieces from pieces by Joseph Haydn and Eric Satie to modern works by Jimi Hendrix, Charles Ives and Olga Neuwirth. The audience present here included men and women of all ages. Performances took place simultaneously at different locations, which for people listening to them from a distance, sounded like a number of performances mixed up across the city, creating an environment and sound that they could never taste at a concert hall. Toward the end, there was a surprise in which a choir began to sing from the second floor of a building on the main street. Many people present seemed to appreciate this scene. At the finale, Olga Neuwirth, the originator of this project, also appeared on the balcony on the second floor and bowed from there. Everyone present was delighted with the success of this surprise and applauded.



Musikverein Perspektiven:
Gassatim-Konzert, Olga Neuwirth Foto: eSeL

"Peter Conradin Zumthor: Domglocken con sordino | Peter Zumthor 21"
(November 22, 2023) Venue: St. Stephen's Cathedral



Musikverein Perspektiven: Domglocken con sordino Foto: eSeL

An unprecedented event to perform music by using the bell of St. Stephen's Cathedral, which might be regarded as the symbol of Vienna, was held on three consecutive nights from 9 p.m. The expression "con sordino" used in its title is a musical direction to play with a mute. In this event, the music piece by the composer Peter Conradin Zumthor was performed with the bell of St. Stephen's Cathedral muted, as it were, by putting a covering on the metal portion hitting the bell. Since only the date and time and the content of the event were briefly announced, the author was not sure if many people would show up at the event, but there were almost 100 people at the venue by 9 p.m. on the first day. It seemed as though an auto-play function



Musikverein Perspektiven:
Domglocken con sordino Foto: eSeL

had been meticulously built into the bell, and the composer Peter Conradin Zumthor and participants were eagerly waiting for the opportunity to hear this sound for the very first time. Upon the signal for starting the performance, the sound of the bell, which was something like a holy and primitive rustling sound from nature, began to be heard from St. Stephen's Cathedral. About 100 participants freely scattering around St. Stephen's Cathedral were looking up to the heavens and listening for the sound in silence with smiles on their faces, marking what was probably the most impressive moment in Wien Modern 36. Bass tones sounded as if deeply penetrating the body, and the sound of the bell in a

range familiar to the ear was mixed in harmoniously, creating a warm-sounding atmosphere in the cold, and the people present smiled at each other without saying anything. When sharing this precious moment with them, the author could not help wishing this moment would last forever.

"Erste Bank Composition Prize: Nimikry" (November 28, 2023) Venue:
Konzerthaus

The Erste Bank Composition Prize, provided by Erste Bank, one of the sponsors, was set to be awarded for the 35th time. This year, the award was given to the duo known as Nimikry, consisting of two local Viennese musicians, Alessandro Baticci and Rafał Zalech, who are active at the boundary between music and technology. The greatest feature of "*Rhizomatic Studies*," the prize-winning work that was performed at the festival by Nimikry was, above all, that the musical instruments played in the ensemble produced the sounds that were totally different from their original and natural sounds. Before the performance, digitalized musical instruments were secretly played around the audience seats to have participants hear the sound. For example, when the violin is played in a common manner, it produces a totally different computerized sound. As the instruments were designed to produce totally different sounds, when the members, who looked like players in a chamber music ensemble for classical music, began to play using the performing technique for classical music, electronic and dynamic sounds spread through digital programming that had been connected to the instruments beforehand. This made the audience experience confusion resulting from the gap between what they saw and what they heard. Nimikry's work, transcending all kinds of musical genres, showed the possibility of new types of music and was deserving of the prize. At this concert, before and after the performance of the prize-winning work, Wladimir



Erste Bank Kompositionspreis: Alessandro Baticci und Rafał Zalech Foto: Markus Sepperer

Pantchev's trumpet concerto, which was played for the first time in 20 years after it had been composed, and Chaya Czernowin' contrabass concerto composed upon commission from Wien Modern, were played. These were contemporary musical works whose next performance nobody could have predicted.

"Wien Modern Final Concert In C // 20 Pipers" (December 2, 2023) Venue:
Atelier House of Academy of Fine Arts Vienna

A musical piece selected to decorate the finale of Wien Modern 36 was "In C," which was released by Terry Riley in 1964 and has had a great impact on the world of minimal music. This is a unique musical work that can be performed if there are a number of instrument players, with 35



20 Pipers Foto: Markus Sepperer

players being regarded as desirable, whatever instruments they might play, and its performance time can be freely changed. More specifically, it is an improvisational and experimental musical work in which one performer plays one of the designated 53 phrases as many as times he or she likes, before the next performer plays the next phrase. This time, it was played by 20 pipers. Atelier House of Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, which seemed to be used as a storehouse for stage setting of the former Royal Theatre commonly known as the Semper Depot, was used as the venue for this performance. As the photographs show, it has a distinctive atmosphere that other buildings do not have. The 20 pipers were standing in line on the second floor-like space, and the audience were on the first floor when the music started, but they gradually moved to the second and third floors, wherever they liked, and enjoyed the loud resonance. The Mystical quality created from the sound of bagpipes, light, and this space was perfect for the finale of Wien Modern, which had repeatedly offered extraordinary experiences during the month. After the end of an acoustic experience that lasted about one hour, the people present were listening to the echoing sound filling the

open-ceiling hall until it completely disappeared. The final concert of Wien Modern was brought to a close with the lasting applause of the audience, who were not ready to leave.



20 Pipers Foto: Markus Sepperer

3. Interview with Artistic Director Bernhard Günther

Date of Interview: December 20, 2023

Here is an interview the author conducted with Bernhard Günther, who has been serving as artistic director and curator of Wien Modern. (See the end of this chapter for background information on Bernhard Günther.)

History of Wien Modern

Q. First, could you tell us about how the music festival Wien Modern began?

What I feel now is that it is very meaningful that Wien Modern has lasted for 35 years. Considering that this event has attracted an audience of so many people and come to have a substantial presence in the media, if we started something now, we would not receive such a great response from people. Actually, I have experience of organizing a similar modern music festival twice. One was a music festival called "rainy days" at the Philharmonie Luxembourg, and the other was "ZeitRäume Basel - Biennale für neue Musik und Architektur" held in Basel, Switzerland. The festival in Luxembourg was created in about 2000 with contemporary composers and ensembles. I was appointed to Chief Dramaturg of the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra in 2004, and in 2005 I was assigned as the person in charge of the Philharmonie Luxembourg, which had just been completed, and I was involved in this music festival from that point until 2016. It was a great success to attract an audience of 5,000 people there. As for the festival in Basel, I was invited to join the launching of a new music festival. At the beginning, there was no money, no ensembles, no orchestra. The only thing we had was an idea. About three years later, in 2015, the first festival took place. It was held with a budget of 2 million francs and ran for 10 days. As it turned out, the number of visitors was about 20,000, which can be viewed as a great success. However, most of the audience came to the event because they could listen to music in an open space for free.

Considering these experiences, the situation of Wien Modern when it started was really blessed. There are two or three large music-related institutions cooperating with Wien Modern. I said "two or three" because first of all, Konzerthaus provides great support. Secondly, we have a relatively good relation with the Musikverein. And lastly,

the Vienna State Opera initially provided support because the conductor Claudio Abbado was there. Considering that these three institutions had never worked together, Wien Modern started sensationally. The mayor of Vienna eagerly desired to invite Claudio Abbado to Vienna as a general music director. Before accepting this offer, Mr. Abbado presented two conditions. One was the establishment of an orchestra for young people, which has become today's Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester. The second was to establish a musical festival for contemporary music. At the same time, it was also fortunate that there were some politicians who were happy to support this idea. One was Helmut Zilk, the mayor of the city of Vienna at that time, and another was Ursula Pasterk, who was serving as a Counselor of Culture for the city. Lothar Knessl, who was serving as a press officer of the Vienna State Opera, was another indispensable figure. When I took over Wien Modern in 2016, I met a lot of people, and at least 12 of them said that they offered their cooperation at the time of its foundation. Wien Modern was supported by so many people when it was established.

When Wien Modern started, as a matter of fact, the feeling of guilt was used to bring people to the festival: one of the starting points was the question or rather reproach. The question was why works by great composers in the 20th century were not played at large concert halls in Vienna. Given that combined support from these major musical institutes and prominent persons including Mr. Abbado contributed to the launching of the festival, I think Wien Modern has attracted people's attention from its beginning.

Q. What sort of programs were presented at that time?

At the first event in 1988, very few musical works by still-living Austrian composers were performed, and female composers' works were not included. However, nobody seems to have noticed this at the time. The format of musical festivals those days included so-called common concerts and events to provide commentaries on such concerts, or many various spin-off events.

Specifically, concerts were provided over 23 days at three venues in the first and third districts of the city of Vienna. We had 28 concerts, with participation by six composers from Vienna and eight orchestras, ensembles and choirs. Incidentally, there

were no events transcending different genres such as fine art, dance and media art. Instead, all the programs were in the framework of typical classical music. There were no projects for young artists, nor stages where young musicians could give full play to their talents.

About 10 years later, in 1996, thanks partly to an increase in budget, the scale of Wien Modern expanded, and it took place over 44 days. Comparatively speaking, 68 concerts were held at eight concert halls in five districts and 10 musical works were premiered this year. Such things never happened in 1988. Eighteen male and female composers from Vienna, and seven orchestras and ensembles from Vienna took part in the festival, the program of which included three genre-transcending events including drama and dance, and four mediation and discourse events including a symposiums.

To compare that, in 2019, concerts were held at as many as 25 locations including concert halls in 11 districts in the city of Vienna, with 100 events held across 33 days. The number of works premiered was 79, and 64 composers from Vienna and 57 female composers took part in the festival that year. 14 ensembles, orchestras and choirs from Vienna took part, and the festival included 15 genre-transcending events such as performances, installation events, and programs for talking with young people, as well as 30 mediation and discourse events, from artist talks to symposiums for a general-interest audience.

Looking at such statistical records makes me feel as if I were sitting in an airplane cockpit and seeing the big view. Looking over the history shows a distinctive trend since 1988. This year, 111 events were held at 36 venues scattered across 14 districts. Of these events, 92 were concerts, in which 43 works were premiered, and 20 were symposiums or workshops. Forty-four female composers and 86 male composers took part in the festival.

As these figures indicate, every year as soon as the festival is over, the members of the team for Wien Modern examine the festival that has just ended and discuss what they can do next time. The most remarkable change, after all, is that works of still-living young composers have come to be performed, which never happened in 1988 when the festival was founded. When I work on the planning of a program, I always find myself expecting that something contradictive will happen. Because what I am aiming to create is not a logically well-balanced program but something risky. Presently, I am working on the development of a program while thinking about how we can create a program that

is open in many ways to be presented during the five weeks given to us.

Wien Modern in the present structure

Q. What do you think is the significance of the current Wien Modern?

I feel a bit uncomfortable bragging about ourselves, but I believe Wien Modern is a truly significant music festival even from a global perspective. I believe so because it has a long history, it was supported by the three institutions at first and has been supported by an increasing number of cooperating agencies, there are a lot of composers and musicians in the city of Vienna, and above all, there are many people here who want to listen to their music.

The audience in Vienna includes so-called professionals who are involved in music, which means this city maintains a very high musical standard. I would like to refer to one study conducted by Mozarteum University Salzburg in 2015. They conducted survey research in three cities, Paris, Warsaw and Vienna, to find out what people visiting musical festivals actually want. Wien Modern was also surveyed in this study, and it was found that our audience included a high ratio of people who were actually working as composers or musicians, or those involved in musical education or music criticism. As a person who is leading the music festival in a city having an audience with such a high musical standard, I think I am responsible for making some contribution by creating something here in what can be called a biotope for music fans.

We are working with composers and musicians from various places in Austria, not just Vienna. Of course, it is important to invite not only musicians from Vienna but also those who can be called international stars; however, I don't think this should be an event where only such top players are invited. I mean, we are responsible not for making a system to invite musicians well-known worldwide to sell tickets, as has often been the case with the world of classical music, but for fostering composers in the next generation by going through a dynamic process that includes providing opportunities for unknown composers and their works to apply, and evaluating and performing them. To be honest, I'm not so much concerned about how many tourists from around the world will visit Wien Modern during the period of five weeks. Of course, there might be some people among them visiting the city just to stay for a few days during the festival or attend specific concerts. However, I believe the main purpose of a festival that takes five weeks is for

local people to enjoy the festival.

Q. Is Wien Modern currently facing any problems or difficulties?

In 2016, when I took over Wien Modern as artistic director, the executive committee for this music festival had only two members including me, and we used a small space in the gallery of the Konzerthaus as our office. The total budget provided was about one million euro. This amount included labor costs, costs for renting venues, communication and marketing, the artistic budget, the infrastructure and other miscellaneous expenses. To take other music festivals in Austria as examples, the budget for the Salzburg Festival is about 60 million euro, and quite a few other festivals have a budget three to four times larger than ours. In an ideal world, when you take over a festival with such a long record, you have the budget, office, staff and teams already organized; however, when I took over Wien Modern, it had to be rebuilt from scratch. We needed to consider how to allocate the budget and how to organize teams. Actually, we haven't finished these tasks yet.

Presently, we have an office with an area of about 100 square meters, where a total of eight staff members with a full-time equivalent of about five, are working. Our present total budget is about 1.5 million euro including sponsoring from companies such as Kapsch and Erste Bank. It takes quite a long time to find new companies or individuals who support our event and raise funds, and we are still working on this. The budget consists of ticket sales (7-8%), support from sponsors (7%), grants from foundations (10-12%) and support from cooperating agencies (5-10%), with the rest mostly consisting of grants from the city of Vienna and the Ministry of Culture.

For two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not able to hold the festivals as planned due to the lockdown, and we were able to resume the festival at last in 2022. However, we had a sort of high-class problem this year: we had too many visitors. The tickets for 60% of the events were sold out beforehand, and overall, the festival achieved an average venue occupancy rate of 88.6%. I would actually prefer a lower occupancy rate if that means that we have to send less people away, so one of our concerns for next year will be rethinking the size of venues and the number of performances.

Wien Modern in 2023

Q. It seems festival passes, which covers most of the events, were quickly sold out this year. Do you find this success shows Wien Modern is gaining increasing attention year by year?

I think this is partly because of the stress people experienced resulting from not being able to go out for trips or to eat out during the pandemic. That might have contributed to an increase in people's interest in concerts. Also, when we realized that we would not be able to have concerts due to COVID-19, we quickly took action to begin a live stream of concerts. When it becomes impossible to have a concert in front of an audience, mass media will face the problem of what they can provide instead. At that time, they heard that Wien Modern had already begun a live streaming of concerts, which contributed to raising our profile. Considering that other theaters such as the Burgtheater were not able to immediately respond to this situation, I think Wien Modern made a very quick response, delivering content without charging admission or selling tickets, during which Wien Modern had more opportunities to be seen by many people. However, it takes a long time for a music festival to win regular customers. It's easy to lose customers, but it takes time and effort to acquire new customers. Since 2016, when I became the director, I have made efforts to play music at as many places as possible in Vienna, provided lectures for young people, and begun activities to make Wien Modern known to many young people, which might be starting to bear fruit now.

Q. One of the biggest surprises at Wien Modern was that the audience seemed to be so familiar with contemporary music. Was that the fruit of many years of your efforts?

Well, it might be because we have practiced for 35 years. If the audience who regularly visit the festival quietly listen to contemporary music with respect, people coming for the first time will join them, thinking they also should do so. This cycle might have been repeated.

Q. Like this year's theme "GO-Bewegung im Raum," Wien Modern has upheld a deep theme every year. Has the music festival been held under such themes since its founding?

The festival has been conducted under certain themes from the beginning, but they used to be focused on specific individuals, including composers. Since taking office as director, I've been working with themes that are accessible also for who were not interested in contemporary music before and help them to understand the music presented. This task of setting themes sort of falls under my responsibility as a curator. A theme or title reminds people of something specific. Now I, as a curator, attempt to set a theme that will reflect social conditions, which I find is an interesting job. Instead of conveying the same image with Wien Modern again and again, adding a supplementary theme will bring something new. Rather than placing disproportionate weight on specific individuals or tastes, we place a premium on incorporating everything open-mindedly even if that leads to mistakes or contradictions. As the programs show, not only I but also various ensembles and composers play the role of curators, providing information about their programs. I feel the diversity generated by this is very important.

Q. This time, the architect Peter Zumthor was invited as a guest. Is it common to collaborate with someone from a different field?

It was the second time that we have done this, and this time, Mr. Zumthor produced his program in collaboration with the Musikverein. This is a project called "Musikverein Perspectives" originated by Stephan Pauly, the artistic director of the Musikverein, implemented as an attempt to do something with artists and creators who are interested in music but who are not musicians. Mr. Zumthor, who was invited to this festival as a guest, stayed in Vienna for one week, co-curated 13 concerts, took part in eight events and talked with the artists of the festival. Since 2012, when I started to work in Basel we had a couple of encounters which were getting more intensive over the years and leading to our collaboration this time.

Q. One of the appeals of Wien Modern is that some events are held at locations other than

concert halls. How do you organize those events?

It is not our intention to look for such locations to have spectacles and showy events. When it seems that performing outside of a concert hall will give artists more freedom to do whatever they want to and express the intention of a work, we will choose to use a public space or somewhere other than a concert hall. For example, the program presented by Maria Gstattner on the first day contained a concept of demonstrating against misogyny. At first, it was planned to be performed on an island in the Danube river. However, since this island is located a little far from the center of Vienna, we thought that in winter, people would not take the trouble of going there. As we didn't want the idea of holding a demonstration against misogyny to be placed largely outside of public perception, we took a lot of effort to have this event in the city center.

Also, in 2019, the composer Michael Hersch proposed a chamber music piece that he wanted to be premiered. This is a three-part piece of music and it takes a total of 15 hours to play this work. If it is performed at a concert hall, it will disturb the audience if some listeners have to leave their seats for the bathrooms, which is of course necessary during such a long time span. We first thought of having this piece performed at a museum, but a museum is a place to see paintings, where music will become secondary and people might tend to talk. Therefore, we decided to have it played at the Prunksaal (State Hall) in the Austrian National Library. The concert started at 5 a.m., and 50 people were waiting at the door even before sunrise. The music was performed in the center of the library with mattresses and cushions placed at the back for people wanted to listen attentively and quietly, while at the front there was space for people to freely walk around. The Prunksaal has shelves full of ancient books, which created a historic and quiet atmosphere that perfectly matched the music. Actually, I heard the audience of the event talked about their experience there for months after that.

Bernhard Günther

Bernhard Günther has been an artistic director of the Wien Modern festival since 2016. From 2012 to 2022, he also directed the festival "ZeitRäume Basel – Biennale für neue Musik und Architektur," and from 2004 to 2016, as Chief Dramaturg of the Philharmonie Luxembourg, he was responsible for the "festival rainy days" among other things. After studying at the Lübeck Academy of Music (violoncello) and the University of Vienna (musicology, theater studies, linguistics and more), he joined mica – music information center austria – as editor of the Lexicon of Contemporary Music from Austria, where he worked until 2004 as curator and deputy director.

As a passionate visitor and organizer of concerts of various genres and formats, as author, editor, dramaturg and curator for various publishers, media outlets and event organizers, as panel member (i.a. Kranichsteiner Musikpreis, Deutscher Musikrat, Impuls neue Musik) as well as occasional musician, he has been intensely involved in new music and its surroundings for over 25 years. Bernhard Günther was born in 1970 in Thun, Switzerland.



20 December 2023 in the Wien Modern office.

Left: Mr Bernhard Günther.

Right: the author.

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