

Arts Festivals Summit 2026 Budva

Workshop: Beyond Audience Development

18 May 2026, 12.30 - 14.30 PM, Cetinje

Facilitated by: Max Beckham-Ortner (Secretary General, IMZ International Music + Media Centre) and Hannah Falvey (International Partnerships Manager, Factory International).

How do festivals move from audience development to building lasting relationships with communities rooted in inclusion and trust? This session explored tested approaches, from artistic formats to organisational strategies and emerging tools, that can help festivals connect with communities and sustain engagement across festival editions.

Introduction

Max Beckham-Ortner presented the work of IMZ International Music + Media Centre, an organisation dedicated to increasing access to culture and the arts through audiovisual media. Supported by the city of Vienna, IMZ promotes collaborations between the cultural and media sectors and advocates for the arts and culture to remain visible within public broadcasting systems, both at national and European levels. In Max's view, public broadcasters continue to play a crucial role as cultural infrastructure and as a backbone of democratic societies.

Hannah Falvey explained how Manchester International Festival (MIF) emerged as part of the city's broader regeneration process. Once at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, Manchester faced a period of decline in the 1990s and was looking for new ways to redefine its identity. Thirty years ago, on 15 June 1996, the city changed forever when the IRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) detonated a bomb in the city centre, causing devastating damage. In the years that followed, local authorities explored ways to bring people together and create new narratives around the city. Beyond the gatherings around Manchester United and the 2002 Commonwealth Games, which demonstrated the power of major events to bring people together, attract international visitors and create excitement around what was happening in the city, the council began exploring how the arts could play a similar role. Manchester International Festival was created with two conditions: that it would remain independent from the city and that it would focus on new commissions. From the beginning, the festival aimed not only to present artistic projects but also to contribute to the social and cultural life of Manchester. Citizens and their stories became an important part of this process, with personal experiences and everyday lives finding a place on stage: how couples met and fell in love in the city, the story of a cleaner who deeply loved his job, and many other stories. Rather than focusing exclusively on professional artists, MIF has often centred on ordinary experiences and the stories that shape a city. The development of a permanent home, now known as Factory International, grew from this ambition to create a space where art, communities and the city could meet.

Open discussion

The conversation then opened up to discover each other's wisdom, with festival makers sharing perspectives on how community participation was embedded in their own contexts. Examples included inviting students in the city to become part of the festival experience by going backstage, writing and creating content about what they encountered; establishing co-curation processes that allow residents to participate in programming discussions and organisational decision-making; and creating regular meetings where community members can discuss what they would like to see developed.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the distinction between audience development and community ownership. Participants reflected both about strategies for increasing attendance and for creating opportunities for communities to influence and shape cultural organisations.

Co-curation processes

Co-curation processes can enhance confidence, skills, and a sense of belonging among participants. In the case of MIF, community members are involved not only in artistic programming but also in areas such as production, communications and media relations. Through training and direct involvement with professionals, participants gain practical experience and become more confident in expressing their ideas. One of the most valuable aspects of the process is ensuring that people feel their opinions matter, that they are heard and that they can genuinely influence decisions.

At the same time, the discussion acknowledged that co-curation is neither quick nor easy. Meaningful engagement requires time, trust and a willingness to share responsibility. Participatory processes require flexibility and resources. They can make decision-making more complex and require organisations to adapt their internal structures and expectations. Building consensus often involves careful facilitation, and successful co-curation depends on a willingness to relinquish some control and accept that the outcome may differ from what was originally imagined. As Hannah reflected, the process itself becomes part of the point, and one must champion that. This also prompted a broader reflection on how cultural organisations communicate the value of their work. While artistic excellence remains central to their mission, organisations increasingly find themselves speaking to funders and policymakers who are also looking for evidence of social impact, community well-being and participation. Rather than replacing artistic ambitions, these arguments have become part of the wider story festivals tell about their role in society.

Another challenge discussed was how to maintain relationships with participants after a festival concludes. Temporary events can create powerful experiences but risk losing the connection with people once activities come to an end. To address this, MIF has supported initiatives that continue independently after the festival, such as community choirs and local groups that developed through participatory projects. The organisation seeks to provide the conditions and modest resources needed for these initiatives to develop their own long-term sustainability. Other ideas discussed included offering reduced-price access to future cultural activities in the locality and continuing communication beyond the festival moment.

Artistic formats and digital access

The discussion then moved towards how artistic formats themselves can create new possibilities for connection. Examples shared included outdoor screenings of artistic performances, events in unconventional locations, collaborations between classical and popular music genres, and immersive orchestral experiences that allow audiences to move among performers that no longer feel like

distant figures on a stage. The examples suggested that innovation often lies not necessarily in changing the artistic work itself, but in rethinking how people encounter, experience and relate to it.

Digital access and audiovisual documentation formed another important part of the conversation. Max highlighted that recordings of artistic works should not be considered merely communication tools or marketing material, but artistic productions in their own right. Producing high-quality recordings requires considerable investment, but partnerships and co-production models can help make these projects possible. The objective is often cultural dissemination rather than financial return: enabling more people to encounter artistic work and creating new entry points into culture.

Participants generally agreed that digital access does not replace the experience of attending a live event. A theatre performance, concert or festival experience is shaped by the shared presence of artists and audiences in a specific moment and place. However, recordings can complement live experiences by reaching people who face geographical, financial or physical barriers. In many cases, discovering a performance online or outdoors can become a first contact that encourages someone to attend a live event later. As Max reflected, “knowing that a recording of a concert exists does not remove the desire to experience the work again and again in person”, as every live performance remains unique.

The role of the media

The conversation also highlighted the importance of working with different media partners and understanding the communities that festivals want to reach. Local broadcasters, small community radios and hyperlocal media can have a strong impact because they already have relationships of trust with their audiences. One example came from the Göteborg Film Festival, where immigrant communities were invited to produce festival coverage in six different languages. Rather than simply translating existing communication, the initiative brought new voices into the conversation and encouraged people to return to the festival the following year.

When discussing younger audiences, Max emphasised that cultural organisations need to understand how media consumption habits have changed. Traditional communication methods are often ineffective if organisations are not present in the spaces where young people discover information and share experiences. Examples included involving young people directly in communication strategies, inviting them to create content during festivals, experimenting with platforms such as TikTok and collaborating with influencers. Bringing younger perspectives into organisations can reveal different ways of understanding how audiences connect with culture.

Conclusions

It is important to meet audiences where their interests already lie. Rather than asking new audiences to adapt immediately to established artistic conventions, festivals can build bridges through familiar references. The Southbank Centre was mentioned as an example of programming that creates crossovers between classical music and other cultural worlds, from film to metal music, encouraging audiences to discover classical repertoire through points of entry that already resonate with them.

The discussion also touched upon the role of festivals as spaces for experimentation. The word “festival” itself creates a possibility to try new formats, question established habits, expand the way artistic work is experienced and take risks that may not be possible within a traditional season structure. This does not mean transforming the art itself but finding new ways to package it. As one example illustrated, audiences travel to Vienna to experience opera as opera. The challenge is not to change Wagner, but to find new ways of introducing audiences to Wagner. The comparison with The

Lord of the Rings, whose musical language draws heavily on Wagnerian traditions, illustrated how familiar cultural references can become gateways into repertoire that many people perceive as inaccessible.

The session concluded with reflections on the importance of arts education. Early exposure to culture remains essential in developing future audiences and ensuring that artistic traditions continue to be valued. Festivals and cultural institutions are often asked to fill gaps in arts education, create opportunities and build bridges, without additional resources or long-term support. Cultural organisations, however, cannot replace a systematic approach to cultural education. If future generations are to continue engaging with the performing arts, sustained investment in arts education from an early age remains essential.

Pictures



Credits

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