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Belgium: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice

Contributors: Alessandro Mazzola

Edited by: Janet Sturman

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Performance practice holds central importance in Belgium's cultural landscape. Live music, in particular, is a widely popular practice, leisure activity, and form of entertainment for Belgians of all ages, social classes, and cultural backgrounds. It concerns a variety of styles and genres, and it is mainly distinguished by the performance venue and social context. Intimate solo shows in small clubs, pubs, and restaurants represent a popular way in which traditional and folk music is performed and received today. At the same time, music in Belgium has important mass manifestations involving large publics. The country has recognized infrastructures for music, dance, and theater production and numerous mid-size and large venues hosting hundreds of international shows every year and the largest music festivals in Europe and the world. Major Belgian cities, furthermore, have some of Europe's most complete yearly calendars for cultural performances, concerts, and festivals. The aim of this entry is to explore the different performance practices of Belgian music today and to discuss their role in the society, the social groups they identify, and the social relations they drive or stimulate.

Small-Size Performances

Small-size performances, including small gigs and intimate solo shows, represent important and widely appreciated typologies of music performance in Belgium. Genres such as *chanson* and *kleinkunst*, for example, are typically identified with such performance practices. Accordingly, small venues have flourished in the country since the mid-1950s. The popularity of these venues also had an important social and cultural impact on Belgian audiences. Indeed, small clubs, concert halls, and even pubs and restaurants have had and still have a great symbolic role in the local identity of cities and neighborhoods. They still are important hubs for social encounters as well as places for jam sessions and music creation. An example is the art deco café *l'Archiduc*, opened in the historical center of Brussels in 1937. It became one of Belgium's most important underground music venues in the 1980s and is still regarded as an icon of the city's multicultural and eclectic artistic landscape. In some cases, small venues also became main cultural institutions and participated in the organization of important local artistic events. This is the case of Ghent-based music club *Trefpunt* founded by local folk icon Walter de Buck (1934–2014) in 1969. The club is known today for being the cultural institution organizing and directing the *Gentse Feesten*, a 10-day music and theater festival attracting more than 1 million visitors in the city every year. In general, the custom of gathering socially at small music venues also had an impact on the way larger venues operate in the entertainment industry and structure their activities. Recognized concert halls such as *Ancienne Belgique* or *Botanique* in Brussels, for example, typically run a small café as a side business on weekdays to improve their audience's loyalty and provide them with a meeting place in town.

Concerning musical styles and performance practices in themselves, the preference for small-size performances fostered the development of specific forms of interaction between the audience and the performers based on close contact and shared cultural and ideological elements. Indeed, these characteristics are typical not only of traditional genres such as *kleinkunst* but also of the artistic approach of many Belgian popular music artists known for their attachment to the public, their social statements, political criticism, and popular sarcasm. Significantly, some of these artists are also strongly associated with a small music venue, where they preferably do their gigs and gather informally with their audience. As mentioned, singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Walter de Buck was directly associated with Ghent and *Trefpunt*. Another example is Arno Hintjens (b. 1949), a singer-songwriter, musician, and actor known for his commitment to Brussels's multicultural and multilanguage identity and, significantly, for being a regular guest at *l'Archiduc*. This trend has to be contextualized within Belgium's specific cultural and language fragmentation, which stimulated the flourishing of local and community cultural expressions and art forms.

Techno and Electronic Music

Belgium also played an important role in the development of techno and electronic music in Western Europe,

and an important club culture flourished there in the 1980s. Specific styles such as *electronic body music* and *new beat* (also known as *Belgian hardcore*) were created by Belgian acts and DJs by mixing European electronic body music and Chicago's house music and adapting the tracks to be played at a slower speed. Belgium produced music acts, such as Plastic Bertrand (b. 1954), Front 242, Confetti's and The Lords of Acid, that were able to achieve international success and spread the local underground culture across Europe. Since the early 1980s, discotheques, nightclubs, and dance halls have thus become a pervasive part of Belgian youth culture.

Large-Attendance Events

The development of a Belgian club culture has led to the rise of performance practices and audience customs that are greatly different from the ones highlighted previously in this entry. This trend is mirrored by the progressive affirmation from the 1970s onward of large-attendance events in the country's musical landscape. Today, electronic dance music in Belgium is indeed consumed and disseminated in some of the world's largest music festivals such as *Tomorrowland*, which set a record in the country with about 400,000 attendees in the 2017 edition. The festival has been organized since 2005 in the village of Boom, province of Antwerp, and gathers international audiences every year. Such large collective performances are not limited only to electronic music. With more than 150,000 spectators every year, the rock/pop festival *Rock Werchter*, organized near Leuven since the 1970s, and the rock/hip-hop *Pukkelpop* that originated in the late 1980s are also listed among the most popular musical events in Europe. Most of these events also create spaces for socialization mediated by music that go beyond the typical forms of social interaction of a performance, a concert, or a festival. They usually provide participants with several recreational areas, facilities, and meeting spaces that are conceived and structured with the aim of facilitating a large collective occupation of the location for several days, creating a community spirit among participants and prompting a sense of freedom and removal from social control.

In general, outdoor music festivals are recurring events in the country's social and cultural calendar and are part of Belgians' lifestyle. Free festivals are relatively numerous in spring and summer in big cities such as Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, and Liège, and some of them also have a specific community dimension. The Flemish, French-speaking, and German-speaking communities of Belgium all have their own music festivals to celebrate community days. The *Vlaanderen Feest* is the festival organized to celebrate the Day of the Flemish Community. It includes a number of concerts taking place from July 1 to 11, in different locations in Flanders and Brussels. It is often seen as an important moment of self-representation for the Flemish community, serving as a public performance of its identity, symbols, and even of separatist and anti-Belgian claims. The French-speaking community, on the other hand, organizes its *Fête de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* on September 27 for several days. It is not as strong as its Flemish counterpart in terms of identity representation, although it has a strong focus on Brussels with a main concert event organized in the city. This element has important cultural and political implications since the bilingual area of Brussels has often been a contested space at the center of the complicated and tense relationships between the two largest language communities in Belgium. The small German-speaking community, finally, celebrates its festival on November 15.

Belgian community festivals, while not strictly monolingual, are also aimed at reinforcing international connections and establishing new ties with other countries sharing the same language, mostly the Netherlands for the Flemish Community, and all the Francophone countries for Wallonia. These connections also have an important impact on music production and dissemination. It is not rare to have Belgian French-speaking artists produced by French labels become popular in another Francophone country, sometimes more than at home, such as in the most famous case of chanson icon Jacques Brel (1929–1978). Even Dutch artists are often produced in Flanders and the other way around, to the extent that Flanders and the Netherlands seem to constitute one shared music industry and communication/advertisement environment, particularly in pop

music. The shared language—cultural international space is also a specificity for the audience. It is the norm for the Belgian public to go to neighboring countries to attend music performances.

Diversity

It follows that Belgium's local music scene mingles regularly with international scenes. This trend has a historical dimension. It is not only related to countries that share language with Belgian federated communities but also and more intensely to the fact that Belgium is both a migration and a postmigration context, with a multinational population including important immigrant minorities. Belgium has a cultural calendar that is structured to meet the interests of a widely and increasingly diverse audience in terms of ethnicity, cultural identity, and nationality. Thousands of international artists perform in the country's main music venues every year. This is also fostered by a favorable location and political centrality in Europe, together with the specific profile of Brussels as one of most cosmopolitan cities in the world. The capital, and also the other main towns to a slightly smaller extent, are crossroads for international artists and productions and host numerous infrastructures to support such multicultural artistic ferment. The internationalization of the music sector is also a principle for the cultural policy system, for cultural institutions, venues, and production centers, as much as for music schools. One of the country's most representative music schools, *de Singel*, is an example of this trend. The school, structured around the conservatory of Antwerp, has among its aims to be a pole of attraction for international students, musicians, artists, and performers, in order to stimulate innovation and enrich the local cultural landscape. A further element of attraction for international artists is the possibility for them to obtain a specific status within the social security system. Following a law regulating access to social security to workers in the artistic domain issued in 2002, Belgium became a destination for musicians, dancers, actors, and other performer artists in search of professional recognition in Europe.

The impact of these conditions on local popular music making, bands, and recordings released is great. Music creation and performance practices in Belgium are strongly influenced and stimulated by international trends. Music innovation, in particular, is centered on the interaction of the musicians and listeners with international styles and genres, beyond the networks based on affinity of language with international artistic contexts described in this entry. Different trends are visible in the different cultural—language communities. Similar to other regions in central and northern Europe, music production and performance are greatly influenced by English popular music in Flanders and Brussels. In Wallonia, the artistic scene is generally characterized by ethnic diversity and by the presence of numerous artists with a migration background. In general, Belgium's music making and performance practices spring from a melting pot of cultures from southern and eastern Europe, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and even South America and Asia. This is not only due to strong migration from Mediterranean countries including Italy, Spain, and Morocco but also to Belgium's main connection with former colonies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as to the relatively positive integration of immigrant artists into the local artistic scene.

Ethnocultural diversity is also a shared value for different music audiences, with a few exceptions concerning most conservative audiences in Flanders, particularly in small centers and rural areas, where there is a preference for Dutch-language singers and local music styles. Belgian listeners are generally opened toward the styles and sounds of other countries' musical cultures as well as toward genres such as world or ethnic music. This trend is largely trans-generational, as it concerns artists and music productions that have appeared since the early 1960s. Some of Belgium's best-selling artists have a migration background or were not even born in the country, such as singers Salvatore Adamo (b. 1943), Frédéric François (b. 1950), and Rocco Granata (b. 1938), all born in Italy. Many are also singers and musicians from African countries who settled in urban Belgian settings in the early 1980s and produced both traditional music acts and contemporary experiments mixing different styles and sounds. World music act *Zap Mama* is an example that illustrates the popularity of these artists and their relevance in the national and international artistic scenes. The act was created by Belgian-Congolese singer Marie Daulne (b. 1964) in 1991 and reached national and international audiences

with a mix of ethnic sounds, hip-hop, and African singing techniques. Once again, Brussels, with its artists and audiences, is the epicenter of ethnocultural diversity in Belgian music. Several Brussels-born and Brussels-based artists epitomize this trend. One example among the most popular artists is the Belgian-Rwandan top-selling singer and producer Stromae (b. 1985) who achieved wide public success since his single debut in 2009, mixing hip-hop, R&B, electronic, and pop music.

Ethnocultural diversity and international trends are also remarkable in the rap music scene in a way that transverses Belgian language-cultural communities, although Wallonia has a stronger tradition in this sense. Underground hip-hop, for example, is a popular context for artists and listeners of Moroccan and Turkish descent, and it is an important vector for socialization above all in urban peripheries in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. In Wallonia, however, hip-hop has had stronger roots in urban cultures since the late 1980s. In the city of Liège, Wallonia's main cultural center, rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti art have become part of the traditional cultural landscape since the mid-1990s. Participation in rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti art has always been high among ethnic minorities, not only in the underground. The city is known for being the hometown of Belgian hip-hop pioneers such as *Starflam* and for integrating hip-hop with football, nightlife, and other leisure activities. To a lesser extent, hip-hop has an impact on urban cultures also in Flanders, although the strong participation of ethnic minorities tends to be relegated to the underground, while the mainstream hip-hop scene is not as multiethnic as in Wallonia.

See also [Belgium: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#)

Alessandro Mazzola
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