

Staging Live Concerts



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How to stage live concerts – A dramaturgy

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Outline

This following analysis serves the purpose to help you create a dramaturgy for a live concert. It is based on experiences of countless live concerts and my research on emotional impact, music psychology and plot dramaturgy.

Taking all of these observations into account will enable you to create a “plot” that will make your concert an unforgettable experience to the audience to which they want to return again and again! These days the real money is in the concerts and not in selling the music.

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This seems to be the first publication on concert dramaturgy as far as my research has shown.

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Alexander Trost.

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Preparations

Stages

Before you can even think about singing before a live audience, you need a stage. When choosing or constructing a stage, you might consider the following.

How many stages do you need? It is good idea to have at least three areas where you can play and act out your music. This gives you an opportunity to interact with more people than just the center stage people. Of course, it depends on where you play. If you play in a room, one stage is perfectly enough. If you play in a concert arena, you might consider at least three stages.

Try not to build your stage too high, the closer you get to the audience, the more intimate it will become. Don't forget, the audience came to see and experience you not to watch you from afar, because that's what they already can do at home. You can use these lower stages to connect with your audience with more personal songs.

If you have an arena, it might be a good idea, to consider a stage in the middle of it. Keep in mind that people come to see you, at least they want feel your presence. By moving closer to those in the back, you give them a special treat that they will not forget. (You might want to check this idea with the Take That "Beautiful World" tour).

Celine Dion chooses a different approach in her "Taking Chances" tour, she moves her stage in the middle and a well thought out choreography and very good video mixing which enables her to interact on four sides with her audience. And they love it, because they are very close to her.

If you want to see a bad example of a stage that keeps the audience away from you, you might want to consider watching D.J. Bobo's "Pirates of Dance" tour. The people – even those watching on TV – are too far away from the stage, it feels like an attraction in a park.

When planning a stage consider various entrances and exits for yourself and your group. This gives you a chance to vary in the way you come back from short pauses. It's not a necessity, but the surprise effect is a lot stronger if you can choose.

Video

I cannot stress this strong enough: Keep in mind that the people came to see you. There are many people paying good money to get into the concert. Imagine their disappointment when they can't even SEE you.

Check out Mark Knopfler's concerts, he has no video feed that shows him on the video wall. Some people saw someone approximately one centimeter tall, playing a guitar. It could have been anybody on that stage. Sure, the music is great, but the experience was limited.

Watch Lionel Richie's tours and you will immediately know how quickly he can connect with the audience, by appearing larger than life, by showing emotions and being close to the people. Richie's concerts belong the best concerts in the business, as they fulfill the emotional needs of those who visit his concerts.

HD cameras make a big difference, Celine Dion used them on her "Taking Chances" tour and it is an amazing difference in quality that people enjoy and value. Invest that extra money, it's worth it.

Avoid using video screens with content that has little to do with your performance. If you sing about world peace I'd rather not want to see a documentary about rats.

Also, please have someone check the appliances; damaged screens which flicker for three hours annoy the hell out of the audience, at least have someone switch it off.

If you can show us some actual video footage from the concert it's a special treat for the audience. Having three cameras is a wise choice and don't forget to film the excited audience every once in a while. People love to be involved in the concert and on the screen – at least they want to have had the opportunity!

Entrance

In the beginning of any concert you have to take into account that the audience has been waiting for your entry for quite a while. They are eager to see you on stage. Give them teasers and they will cheer at every picture from you.

Show pictures from the excited audience and they will be happy to be part of the show.

Present your face on the screen, give us a countdown or introduce us to the show with big instrumental music in the style of your show. Make us look forward to seeing you, make us hungry for the feast.

Background music

If you want to hammer it home, you might want to go with instrumental tracks like Hans Zimmer's. Those choral "Wagnerian" tracks evoke a feeling of greatness and they unite the audience in their growing expectation. From the point of mass psychology it has an uplifting and a uniting effect.

If you want to be subtle, you could start with instrumental arrangements from your own music.

Of course, it depends on what kind of music you are playing. If you're Enya Hans Zimmer might not be the best choice, choose rather Rachel Portman's softer music.

If you want to address your audience, choose other music from the same field you're in. It is certainly not a good idea if you are Joe Cocker to start a pop live concert aimed at people 40+ with heavy metal music from Finland (not that he did).

Special guests

Of course the same is true if you have a special guest which sings before you. Sometimes it might be a good idea to ask the music companies if they have a local (usually unknown) singer which could help you connect with your fan base on a local basis. (Make sure, however, to thank that group by pronouncing them correctly.)

Also, make sure, the music companies know who you are and what kind of music you make. I have seen far too many concerts where the band before the main act was simply out of place (and out of tune) and no one has ever heard from them again ... thank God.

Choosing a band before your main act is very crucial in the experience of a "round" concert. You don't want people to leave because of the guests and rush back in once you arrive. It creates too much turmoil in the audience. The band before you is the herald, you are the king or queen.

Also, don't use a band that is bigger than you. It's just weird to be the main act but not being the person people came to see...

Few advertisements / Be on time

One of the biggest mistakes is to sell even more stuff while the audience is waiting, as seen on Pink's last tour.

While she was very, very late - which annoyed the people a lot - the audience saw the same advertisements over and over. Some mobile phone company tried to sell mobile phones with a ten second Pink song.

The first time people heard the song, they cheered - then they realized it was nothing but an advertisement. After the tenth time, people didn't cheer at her music any more, and they couldn't care less about the advertisements.

Don't overdo it, you don't want to ruin your own music. So, be sparse with the advertisements. If you start the adds too early on people might not want to see them anymore.

It is possible to show clips for the protection of the environment. It places you as an artist in a corner that most people find attractive. As did Bon Jovi on their European tour with Al Gore's message. However, don't have this five minute clip run for fifty minutes as people will tend to ignore it after a while, the message would be lost and all that people might remember is not Al Gore and the message, but "the thing that was running for fifty minutes."

And try to be on time. Waiting for over an hour is an insult to the audience – especially during the weekdays. It does not build up excitement but annoyance (although – granted – people forgive a lot. But as you can see one fan didn't – me.)

Creating expectations

Rather than listening to some boring background music, you might want to show a biography on the screens. If you can handle VH1's "Behind the music", the fans would be in a for a treat. Give the people something "extra" that they did not expect from the concert.

Another way of creating expectations is the "zoom-in" on the location, how you landed, where you are; some interviews from the people in the audience and possibly a look backstage which is something people are always very curious about as they will never have access to it.

Opening

Rather than walking on stage, where some people can already see you, you might consider opening with a bang, just like That That in their "Beautiful World" tour or as Madonna did on the "Confessions" tour.

On the other hand, walking through a crowd when nobody expects you - like Celine Dion did at her "Taking Chances" tour - creates a nice atmosphere, where people actually believe you exist and that they could touch you if they wanted to. (Don't try this approach if your audience tends to rip of your clothes. Except if you like that... ☺)

In the parts following we will take a look at the dramaturgy of a concert. Now that your audience is hot for you, let's give them what they want.

Concert Rituals

A concert follows a dramaturgy just like any movie or TV series does. The reasoning behind it is simple: a concert, like any other event follows a ritual. Evolving from praying to the Gods and asking for rain, to the songs sung around the camp fires, concerts now serve as a cultural milestone in society. It is one of the few moments where people can connect with each other and connect to something greater than they are.

Concerts serve many purposes. They create:

- a feeling of community (a sense of "belonging")
- a feeling of strength through community (united by one song / singer)
- a feeling of self-expression in a crowd ("my voice, emotions and presence are acknowledged")
- trying to be close to someone bigger than oneself (touching the gods)
- going into the "flow" feeling (entering a trance-like state)

It would be unwise to ignore these purposes in creating dramaturgy for a concert.

If you want to start off the concert, you have three problems to deal with:

- a) wake up the crowd, if they've been waiting for some time
- b) unite the crowd
- c) draw attention to yourself and
- d) initiate the flow stage

The Dos and Don'ts

It's probably a good idea to watch concerts that fail and by doing so avoiding the mistakes. (If you'd like to add anything to this document feel free to email me with suggestions at atrost@atrost.de.)

If you want to fail on all four accounts, start with a slow unknown song that nobody's ever heard of. They will cheer at you, but they won't wake up because it is a slow song, it won't unite the crowd as they can't sing along and you won't help them enter the flow stage as the people are struggling with the new lyrics and melodies.

It also not a good idea to start off slow or soft. You want to start off with a bang, with a faster song, one that everyone immediately recognizes. This is the reason people came here, they want to see you, they want to be a-live, and they want to sing along to a song that has meaning to them. Start off with your current single (if it is a hit), if it is not, start off with one of your hit records.

You enter the live stage with a bang and you should try to acknowledge as many of those four points as possible. The following songs should do just the same, you want to lure the people into the "flow" and you can do that most easily by using songs they know.

Although, after having started with a hit record you can already start to sing some of your fewer-known songs. You might also try to switch to a lower pace but not too quickly. A rule of thumb is: don't get them sleeping until they've been standing at least once.

Feeling of community (a sense of "belonging") /***Feeling of self-expression ("my voice, emotions and presence are acknowledged")***

People came here for a reason that unites them: They came for the music, they came to see and hear you. This is a very strong bond which you do not have in everyday life. Your music has meaning for the audience and in this concert they can express their feelings openly.

When people start to sing Lionel Richie's "Hello" (and take over the show), it unites them in the romantic feeling that they all share with that song.

Thus people feel part of something bigger that they have all shared alike and you and your song are the catalysts for powerful emotions. Let these people share the moment of unity and let them sing along, only by doing this their voices become one and not only is it tremendous experience for you on stage (how popular your song is), but also for them, as it is cathartic.

It creates a very strong bond and having a crowd loving each other and your song, is very powerful for you and your concert.

Trying to be close to someone bigger than oneself (touching the gods)

We love to strive for something bigger than ourselves, something that gives our life meaning. Stars have become the gods of our time. People decorate their rooms, they want to hear all about them, they want to be as close as possible to the dream that they only can dream about.

Whether you like it or not, you have a position above them. Don't use this position to look down on them, it will make them feel inferior. Use this position to uplift them, to "touch their gods" and inspire them.

So should you get personal on stage? Share feelings and attitudes? Yes! Yes, of course!

There are musicians who come to a concert, play their songs, shout once "Stuttgart" into the masses and that's about it (as seen with Sting). And then there the people who talk to them, about their feelings (whether they are real or not.) The latter bound with the audience, the former doesn't.

There are those artists who thank their audience and the audience will always be grateful for it, as they see the man and the woman behind the songs. Loreena McKennitt is a very special singer who interacts very closely with her audience, whereas "Take That" openly acknowledge their feelings and their gratefulness towards the audience.

We all love to be the thanked for the little things we do. Thanking an audience creates a very strong bond. If you recognize their presence and their locality or something that even connects you to them, it makes these bonds even stronger.

Beware, everything you say should be honest – or you should be a hell of an actor – as people will recognize falseness.

Talk about where you are and make sure to say it is a nice place to be. "I'm grateful being here in Germany, in Stuttgart. It's a wonderful city, with wonderful people." I have visited a concert where I had to endure slurs and stereotypes. I didn't come to a concert to be educated or to be stereotyped, thank you very much. That artist – I make sure of that - I'll never see again.

It doesn't work when you say: "I love this city more than any other city" without giving us proof as to why. Make references to landmarks or to personal experiences only than we believe you.

It's also very nice to share feelings: "When I wrote this song I was very sad because I have lost my girlfriend." Now involve your audience: "You all know how it feels to lose somebody. So this song is for you and me."

If the audience is working well with you, you might do it like Lionel Richie: "Stop singing, stop singing. I'm supposed to sing here!" Don't forget to laugh and the people will laugh with you.

Be one of them, acknowledge your audience as equal and give them a dream.

Going into the "flow" feeling (entering a trance-like state)

This part seems weird, I know. Most people don't want to give up their control and creating trance-like states sound more like a sect meeting. But the fact is – we end up a lot more in these flow feelings than we acknowledge. Sometimes you write or read things and you look at the watch and you're surprised where the time went. Welcome, you have just entered the "flow" state.

The flow state is a state where we are wide-awake and at the same time we experience things through all our senses. Time doesn't matter, only the experience of the now. It's like a Zen state.

"Now what does that have to with my concert?", you might ask. Simple: You address all the senses of your audience. They smell their neighbor (or the fireworks), they see you alive, they hear you live, they feel your presence. In a concert more like watching things on TV, you are part of the experience and the more senses people activate, the more they will root in the here and now and the more they will slip into the "flow" feeling.

Once you have entered a flow state, this rush of the senses is incredibly pleasing. Add the adrenaline from being this close to a star and this experience is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

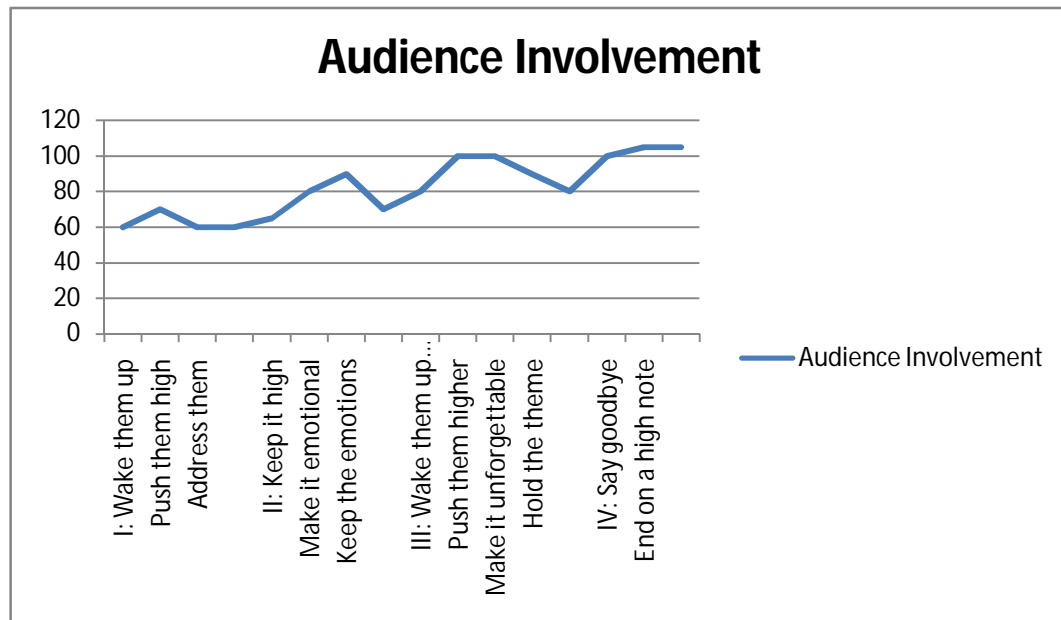
Address the senses and be wise in the choice of your songs. Use a stage that makes them feel like they can be close to you. Don't be somewhere out there. Use a video screen for close-ups and long shots of your face and body, so people can see you. Use effects to make the visual experience interesting.

Known and unknown songs

With the choice of known and unknown songs you decide, if you draw the audience closer or if you push them away. Of course, you want to sell your new songs. Of course, you want to promote your new album. But if you only play unknown songs, people will leave the concert disappointed as they came with certain expectations.

	Slow songs	Fast songs
Known songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - create a flow feeling - people will sing along (and let them sing along) - create a dream-like moment and slow down the crowd - people recall memories and positive feelings (reflective) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - wake up the crowd - create a feeling of unity with the crowd and their singer - people will sing along (and let them sing along) - people recall memories and positive feelings (active)
Unknown songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - work in a setting where the people are cuddling with their neighbors - relax but also distance because of the unknown-factor - calms down the crowd - the danger: it may also throw them out of the loop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - work in a setting where the people are already hot for a new song - create a distance because people can't sing along, it has to have a good rhythm / easy chorus so people can do something (clapping) - might throw people out of the loop, because they can't handle this song and don't know what to do with the song.

A suggested line-up for a successful concert



Overview

You are building towards an emotional high. Every crowd has to be motivated and warmed-up in the beginning.

The first act is to make them warm and involved, here you create the bond.

In the second act, you push them higher with strong songs and a stronger involvement. Here you become "intimate" with the audience.

In the third act of the show you want to peak the emotions, have your strongest material and create the biggest emotional impact. This is the emotional climax of the show.

Finally, say goodbye – and return for some final songs (three) and end on the highest note possible, usually with a very strong, powerful song (as you want to see them leave afterwards ☺).

Acts 1 and 2

The first act is the hardest work for an artist. Wake them up, warm them up and make the audience ready for a rollercoaster ride. Don't expect the audience to be ready and "in the mood", they come from work, arrived at the last minute to your show, paid horrendous prices and didn't get a good parking space. They are sweaty, the beer is over-priced, their partner smells bad and now it's your turn to deliver. They are expecting to be entertained, before they become involved.

Wake up the crowd

Start with a fast song (preferably one that is well-known) and let them sing for the first time. Continue the next song in the same speed. Get them singing early on. You don't want to start too slow and make the audience fall asleep (they are tired anyway).

At latest after the third song, acknowledge the presence of the audience and the locality. Have a one-sided "talk" with the audience, shout at least the city's name into the crowd, it always makes them cheer.

Unite the crowd

You can unite the crowds with fast songs they know very well, where they can stomp, sing and clap. Or you can start playing slower songs that makes them want to cuddle and experience emotions. Anything people can do together (well, almost anything) works well in this act. They still need to loosen up.

Try to make them stand up as soon as possible, if they want to sing along acknowledge it and let them sing (support them if it fails).

After four slow songs, give them something to get moving. If you want to speed things up again- or if they do not actively participate (or if you want to introduce a new song), make the people clap, stomp, sing along.

Make "La-o-la"-waves. Let the girls sing against the boys, let the left crowd sing against the right and the middle crowd.

In act two you can use some of your newer songs, but I caution you: do not use too many unknowns. If you can't get them to stand up by themselves, clap your hands so they'll clap with you. This is also a good idea to employ when you have a new song, at least make them clap or give them the major chorus to sing along. Give them the chorus of a new song and introduce it to them so that they can sing along. Never have the entire lyrics on the screen, you don't want them to attentively read the lyrics (which they may not understand) and not listen to the song.

All of these techniques will unite the crowd, will make them feel strong, will help them to enter the "flow", will give them a sense of belonging and they will have the feeling of touching a "God".

At latest after the six songs, people like to calm down. Give them a moment to relax. If you want to slow things down, talk to them for a moment (not for too long!), or start the next – slow – song.

Be careful if you're not speaking the language of the country you're in. The broadest accent can ruin any means of communication, then you'd better not talk at all, as people will be very easily frustrated. Try to speak some words in the language of the country, every audience applauds the effort and it makes you sympathetic.

Bring in the audience, make it a unique experience. Have someone from the crowd come on stage. Let them sing for you and have them make rhythmic sounds (or sing, like Freddie Mercury used to do). People like to move and they love to be involved and part of it.

However, the moment people realize that this concert is just like all the concerts before and after, then the individual experience won't be as strong as it could be.

Change some songs and say: "I will only sing this song here tonight for you, I won't sing this in Munich, but only in Stuttgart."

Draw attention to yourself

Every once in a while, at latest after three songs, you should address the crowd somehow. Talk about the city, the country you're in, talk about day's events (don't get political, it usually backfires – and if you do it, make sure you can take it), have some fun, talk about the things that happened to you and create a bond. A simple "Hey, you're great" works wonders. Don't overdo it though, Michael Bubl  almost created an entire comedy routine which was funny – but that wasn't why the people came in the first place (at least those who didn't know he would do that.)

If you talk too much the audience cools down, the flow ends, it gets boring, people get cold and some remember to cough and to rush to the restrooms. Keep the spirits up! Watch DJ Bobo's terrible speech in "Pirates of Dance" where he tries to tell a story, gets side-lined and no one really knows what they he or she is watching there. Was it a musical, a story-telling episode and what on earth did it have to do with the music?

Initiate the flow

This part is hard to control. Usually it takes place automatically, if the crowd is involved, the song line-up works with the ups and downs in the mix of faster and slower songs, between rocking and cuddling.

As an artist you can address a wide range of emotions and evoke a lot of personal feelings with your music. Once the listener identifies him- or herself with the music, they will enter the flow state all by themselves and they will add an individual note to this concert that is unique to the individual and makes the entire experience one of a kind. This makes the concert intimate and personal. You can't get closer to an artist than that. (Some unfortunate exceptions are the rule ... ☺)

Act 3 and Goodbye

This is the final act and just like in any good movie, this is where the emotions are at its highest, this is where we identify with the main character – in this case – with your music. Here you create new memories, new emotions that connect the audience to your music forever.

The people are in the flow, they are singing along, they are experiencing the show. Now they want the climax, the high point why they came here. This is where you play your biggest hits.

Any slow song will be intensified, any rock song will be more moving than anything else. Do not ruin this moment with too many new songs that nobody knows. Gives us your strongest material here.

You, as an artist, are now at your best. Don't speak too much, just give us what you can do best – make music, entertain, involve the crowds and give us what we came for: your music.

Leave with the best song, say "Goodnight" and thank the audience. When you leave the stage, they will be asking for more. Let them wait a little bit (and keep in mind that some people are already leaving!), return with grace, and play at least three more songs. Anything less is too little to warm up again and leaves the audience in the cold. If you play more than three songs it's almost a new act in the concert, keep that in mind. It depends how long you keep the audience waiting, if they have cooled down a bit, it would be unwise to start with a slow song.

Caution, do not use any new unknown song in this act of the show. You want to keep the audience on a high note and you want to leave them with that.

The third last song, can calm them down again, the last one should be strong and powerful. And with that, thank the audience, thank your colleagues and your dancers (they will be happy too), wish us a good night and leave us with a big smile on our faces.

Only return for a second time if you think it is necessary to play more. However, by then a lot of people will be missing already. Do that if you're the biggest star in the world, for all the others, just return once and put the real good material in the acts one and two.

Don't end your act with a slow song, as when the light's come up the cold reality ruins the experience. When you end your act with a rock song, people are awake enough to leave the concert halls and they'll still be singing your tunes.

The only exception is Celine Dion she can end her act with "My heart will go on", because that song is strong enough to end a concert. However, the harsh reality of having to leave with thousands and to end up in busses with sweaty people ruins the memory of that song (at least for me.)

Some more suggestions

Be innovative

While people come to see you and listen to your music. It is one thing to play the songs as how they were recorded. You can do that early on in your career. But once you have sung "All night long" fifteen million times, do what Lionel Richie does: Have fun with the song again, change the tempi, use different instruments. However, beware of varying the lyrics, as people still want to sing along to the song.

Of course, sometimes it is possible to ruin a song like that. Run some tests before the show, just in case you want to sing "My heart will go on" as a heavy-metal song. As always: keep the audience in mind. If you're not a heavy metal artist, you might not want to change the song in that direction, if you don't want to upset and/or disturb the audience's expectations.

It might also not be the best idea to have a cover song that does not fit your theme, your music or your persona. Imagine Alice Cooper singing "My heart will go on" with a snake around his shoulders. It would probably be very funny, but that's that.

Be perfect

You are an artist and people want to see a show that works. Of course, that doesn't hinder the curtain to catch fire or the screen to black out. But the people want to see something for their money. If you just put up a sheet with your name on, it better be at some very small festival and not at an expensive concert.

Chris de Burgh's "Storyteller" concert was visually a big disappointment. It was a man was on stage, singing his songs. For the purists this might be all they need, for the average ticket payer, this is disappointing. I have a better visuals in my living room.

If you compare that stage to the well-thought out and excellently carried out Madonna "Confession" 's tour, you can see the difference. She knows how to entertain, to impress with perfect dance choreography and she knows how to deal with technical setbacks (listen to her speech about the cameras blocking the view). The audience knows that she's been working very hard on that show and that all contribute to it by giving their best.

Give your best, your audience deserves that. Which includes: Don't sink drunk, don't get drunk and try hit the right notes at the right time. If you have to sing playback, try not to let the audience know. They know every note from your CDs, if it is exactly like the recordings, they'll know it is a playback. Vary and have a different interpretation and *know* how to lip-sync right.

Be human

"But I'm only human, you say." That is true and that is why we still love you. Professionalism is the one thing, the human being behind the music is something else.

You can be human by telling us stories about you, by giving us an insight into your life that we didn't know before. Show us how you feel and even if it is just the feelings of the moment. Laugh, smile, be the person we strive for: be happy, joyful and glad that you can do the things most people won't be able to do – to live the dream they've been dreaming about.

And if something goes wrong have the courage to laugh at it. The same is true with singing, if you didn't hit the right note, you might want to offer the audience to sing the next verses for you. They'll laugh with you. Nothing annoys more than a perfectionist who has stopped being human.

But also, nothing is more irritating than a concert with a singer, who is just playing his songs, as seen with R.E.M.'s last tour. We have that on the CDs, we want to see and feel you. Show us a little bit about your loveable personality.

Go the extra mile

In the “Confessions” tour Madonna even goes the extra mile – she creates a visual very appealing “Cirque de Soleil” attraction with her incredibly skilled dancers that perform amongst the audience.

People have expectations. And while it is almost impossible to meet the expectations, it is a good idea to still give your best and maybe you can exceed in areas that people did not think about.

Yes, they expect to see you.

Yes, they expect your hits.

Yes, they expect a solid singing voice.

Yes, they expect good entertainment. - That is what they pay for.

The first three have to be met or you’re in the wrong business. The last one has to be met too, but this is, where you can go the extra mile. Have dancers support you, use choreography, have stages where people don’t expect them, use special effects if you want them.

Be careful though, the music and you are the key to the concert. If the special effects take over the concert, something is terribly wrong. It is the sugar coating, you’re the cake. I personally believe that Take That master the art of special effects, emotions and songs very well. So does Madonna and with less special effects (and they not necessary for him) Lionel Richie.

Thank your musicians and dancers!

Although it might feel like it, you didn’t do the job alone. Yes, you were writing the songs, you are singing them, you are at the center and if things go wrong, they will all blame you.

But everyone knows that a concert cannot be done without the help of musicians (and possibly dancers). You don’t have to thank the tour management, they earn enough money, but the musicians and the dancers, they do deserve a thank you.

And if you work the entire evening with them, introduce them to us in the second act and let them show the world what they can do. This gives you a break to step back if you need to. Don’t ever cut an applause short for your supporting colleagues! They might take that as an insult and take it out on you the next time you’re waiting for a cue.

You need a break?

If you need a break as an artist, do not let the audience’s feeling be interrupted by letting them rush to the restrooms. Have some act play for you for some minutes until you have recovered. Any break in the experience of this concert, has to be recovered by warming the people up again. It will be a lot easier if you can keep the emotions high.

Just imagine how it feels to watch a movie and in the middle of the movie, you go to the restroom, you clean the toilet, get something to eat and drink and get back to the movie. It’ll take a while until you catch on with the movie again.

If you’re a band, someone might sing a song without the rest of the band. If you’re the main act, the band might want to play a song without you instrumentally. However, do not ask the special guest back on stage, it confuses people, as they came to see you. (Except if he or she is well known and people love them, but then they want to see them sing *with* you.)

If you go on a break don’t fool the audience. George Michael did so (I’m not sure if it was intentional), on his “25” tour, he had a counter installed, as to when he would be back. The problem was – the counter was running slow. It was not (if I remember correctly) 15 minutes as shown, but 25 minutes and that is annoying for those who ran out, got a drink, came back and had to wait.

Don't take it out on the audience

We all have bad days. Sometimes things go wrong, things don't work out the way you want it to. But for crying out loud, don't take it out on the audience! Don't show them that you're upset! This is not group psychotherapy, this is your job.

I remember one very disturbing concert with James Blunt who shushed the audience, as they wanted to clap and he got upset because he feared missing the beat.

Apparently people were thinking they could clap (from the previous song). That was a clear mistake in concert dramaturgy, people didn't cool down yet for this slow song.

However shushing was the worst possible reaction. People came here to be entertained not to be treated like pupils. As for me that was the last concert with James Blunt – even though I did not clap. It was simply out of line.

If you can't handle audiences and mistakes made by yourself, your band or problems with the technical aspects – get another job, or don't go touring.

Weird things

Some people have weird ideas for concerts. One of weirdest experiences was the beer drinking contest at Nickelback's concert last year. I couldn't have cared less for that break in this concert. It was anti-climatic, not fun at all and it had nothing to do with the rest of the concert. Why should I pay money to see people get drunk when all I wanted was to hear the music.

The same thing was true for the T-Shirt cannons they used, that was interesting for – let's say ten people – the rest of them, didn't have a chance, the other's didn't care or even see the T-Shirts flying. Address the entire audience – even those in the back – and not just a select few. They all paid good money.

Some of these things might work in a "kinder" party, or at spring break. But this is a concert – and some things might not be known in other parts of the world and just cause people to shake their heads. Be wise in the choice of "entertainment" that you employ. Do not let it disrupt the flow.

Expand the stage

Be innovative when it comes to the stage. Don't stick to the picture stage. Yes, innovative stage design could be expensive, especially if you want to rearrange it during the performance. But some things aren't that expensive: Have two stages, one lower and one higher, you can go down on the lower platform for intimate sessions and on the higher platform for rock sessions.

You can have a catwalk to another platform or have a platform that you can access from below.

There are other ways to expand the stage without actually doing it: Use ticker tape and involve the audience in the party, have balloons thrown around and a big disco ball in the middle of the room. Create an entire room where the audience and you are partying, not just the stage.

A lot of great suggestions you can see in the documentary Take That did in the "Beautiful World" Tour DVD.

Create emotional arches

When you compile the list of your songs, keep in mind to create emotional arches in sets. You don't want the audience to switch their mood from one song to the next. I.e. don't start with rock song, continue with a ballad and continue with a disco version of another song. Create units, it does take some time for the people to get used to mood – to open up.

Two or three songs create a set. Four songs stretches it, five songs is the absolute maximum one can bear and usually it's already too much. Who can hold his or her energy for over twenty minutes? Have you jumped up and down / or clapped for twenty minutes without getting tired?

Same thing with the slow songs. After the fourth song, there's not much more to kiss and your arm has already fallen asleep. Shake things up again and get the people moving.

When creating a set have the last song or the first one be the strongest one. If you want to slow things down for a slow set, have an unknown song at the end of the set or talk to the audience and then start the new set with a known song.

Themes

Another way to create sets is to make them thematic. Let's say you have created songs about water and fire. You might want to have three songs about water and then three songs about fire. In that case it might even work to switch the mood, but have at least two songs with the same speed.

Having themes for these sets makes it easier to bridge it. When constructing a concert, you might even go as far as creating a plot. You might start with songs about the break-up of a relationship, continue to love's lost desperation, move on to a new start, continue with feelings about love and end up with the fireworks that you're alive again and pregnant.

Voice dramaturgy

When singing – and you know that better than I do – the later it is, the better you hit the notes. Because your vocal chords are warm and you hit the higher notes more easily. It does make sense to have the more complex songs in the second or third act. Leave yourself room to sing faster or slower. Your voice will love you for it.

What do you want the audience to remember?

That is the key to any good concert. What do you want them to remember? An intimate night with you? A party that never ended? A person? A superstar? A theme? You decide but make it big.

Tell us stories

If you make music that tells stories – or instrumental music. People will love you, if tell stories about the songs. It makes the experience of the music a lot more personal and intimate. Share your thoughts about the creation process, about the reception process or of times when the music touched you the most.

However, be careful what kind of atmosphere you're creating. As with Loreena McKennitt, it served its purpose by creating a very intimate "I know you-get to know me"-atmosphere.

Local radio stations

The concert doesn't end when it ends. People are leaving the arenas, but in their minds they are still thinking about it. They are talking about it, cuddle up next to each other, dead-tired, but happy. They go to their cars and drive home.

If you get a chance, have your PR talk to some radio shows. Most of them will be more than happy to report from the concert, approximately half an hour after the concert ended. Have them play some (live) songs and people call in.

This is the last time that the people can share the experience together. And while you're being hurried back to the hotel room to visit the real important people, your fan base will smile about this eventful night and they won't regret having spent the money.

To conclude

Whatever you do, the concert dramaturgy is your choice.

But always remember: The audience is equally important to you and the music.

The audience is an essential part of your show.

Ideas, Suggestions, Contact?

You still have ideas, suggestions or you want to contact me and send me some money? Bring it on! Feel free to email me at atrost@atrost.de with any ideas, suggestions and observations. I appreciate your input and I will update this document with it.

Contact me for individual consultation, lectures and workshops and
visit my website for further contact information (Impressum) at www.atrost.de.

Best wishes!

Alexander Trost M.A.