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Festival Audiences in Finland

Helsinki Festival
Joensuu Festival

English summary

Background

This is a third part in festival audience "trilogy" research series covering various types of major Finnish festivals. The first study concentrated on music festivals where the audiences of Kaustinen Folk Music Festival, Kuhmo Chamber Music Festival and Viitasaari – Time of Music festival were analysed (Cantell 1993). The second report covered the audiences of three different festivals in three different cities, namely the Kuopio Dance Festival, the Tampere International Theatre Festival and the Turku Music Festival. In addition, the audience of the oldest running Finnish rock festival, Ruisrock, was studied (Cantell 1996). While the first two reports dealt with events that represent only one particular art form, i.e., music, theatre or dance, in this third report attention is drawn to festivals that host a selection of art forms simultaneously and are therefore described as general festivals. The festivals studied here are the Helsinki Festival and the Joensuu Festival.

Festivals covered

The origin of Helsinki Festival dates back to 1951, when an event celebrating the music of Sibelius was launched. Over the years the festival has changed in character by featuring a wider selection of art forms and styles in its programming even if the main emphasis has been on classical music. The last major alteration took place in 1995 when various forms of popular and ethnic arts were accommodated in the repertoire. As a symbol of this, a new venue called Huvila, a temporary Helsinki Festival tent, was introduced for the duration of the festival.

Helsinki Festival is the largest festival in Finland in terms of participant numbers. In 1997, some 213000 visitors took part in activities linked with the festival. A large part of these visits, however, count for events that were provided for free. Night of the Arts, a major urban event, alone attracted some 80000 visitors. Ticket sales for the events organised solely by the Helsinki Festival numbered 27400 visits.

Joensuu Festival started in 1981 and established itself quickly on the Finnish festival scene by introducing thematic programming with a large selection of art forms and approaches. For example, Joensuu has specialised on regional Karelian themes – as Joensuu is located in Karelia in eastern part of Finland – and combined these interests with more global themes. In 1997 Joensuu Festival had 33000 visitors and 15500 paying guests. Even if the festival has had a number of successful years, 1997 proved to be a decisive one as one big popular music event flopped in terms of visitors and the festival faced a serious financial crisis. Therefore, it had to cease its operation.

The research material

The research material was collected by means of survey questionnaires and interviews on site. Methods used varied according to the nature and venue of the event. If an event was organised in a conventional concert hall or a theatre that had a lobby then questionnaires were distributed. Drawn from previous experiences it was believed that the visitors could fill out the questionnaires themselves. When an event took place in more unconventional places like Helsinki's Huvila interviews were applied. This was an efficient way of reaching the visitors and of ensuring proper amount of research data.

In all, the data consists of 950 interviews and questionnaires in Helsinki Festival and 1058 in Joensuu Festival. In general, the participants took a very positive view on the research. Some 73 per cent in Helsinki and 80 per cent in Joensuu responded to the questionnaires, and only a handful of people declined to answer to the questions put to them by the interviewees.

Main disclosures

There are a number of similar trends in all Finnish festival audiences that are also evident in Helsinki and Joensuu festivals. Typically visitors are middle-aged, well educated and in high socioeconomic positions. A clear majority of the audience live in cities; usually the organising city and its travel-to-work area accounts for the majority of visits. University cities and the Helsinki region also provide a sizeable stream of visitors wherever festivals are arranged. Women make up to two thirds of the visitors. Men tend to be less independent in making decisions about festival visits: while men visit festivals mainly with their spouses, a much larger portion of women choose to go with their friends or even alone.

While the generalisations given above can be applied universally in various festivals, Helsinki and Joensuu provide a number of features of their own. This is mainly due to the variety of programming featured by these two festivals. In order to differentiate between various events, three terms to describe them are applied here. High culture contains for example classical music and contemporary dance, popular culture rock music and various mixtures of styles and art forms are considered as cross over events.

Especially high culture and popular culture audiences tend to vary from each other. The variation is universal across the board including all main

characteristics that describe the audiences, such as education and socio-economic position. This is particularly pronounced in Helsinki. Not surprisingly, cross over events attract the most varied and broadest selection of people.

Most of the visitors hold high education levels as up to half of the audience tend to have university degrees. Education correlates with socioeconomic positions where senior and junior clerical employees and student form the core groups of active participants. Workers are particularly under represented, whereas high culture audiences have the highest education levels.

Most of the visitors have visited the festival of their chose. However, in Helsinki the Huvila tent clearly attracted new audience groups, especially for popular culture and cross over events. The visitors are keen consumers of cultural services and actively take part in various events throughout the year. Also a great number of them play or have played a musical instrument or have other arts related hobbies that they actively pursue. Thus it can be argued that they have large amounts of cultural capital.

It can be estimated that each visitor to the Helsinki Festival spends about FIM400 and in Joensuu Festival about FIM300. While the economic impacts of the visitors' consumption are problematic to assess in detail, it can be argued that Helsinki Festival audience contributes indirectly – by using services, restaurants, etc. – some FIM 6 million to the local economy. The assessment for the consumption of the Joensuu audience is FIM 1,5 million. The figures given are only estimates and include only the customers who had purchased tickets for various events. An entirely different picture could be constructed if it was possible to study the consumption by all the participants, including those who take part in events provided for free, at these festivals.