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The case of Felix Meritis

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Citation for published version (APA):
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Nineteenth Century Concert Programs in a Digital Research Environment

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From the mid 1990s there has been an upsurge in intellectual interest in the history of European musical life from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. In the resulting research, concert programs have provided essential source material, revealing a revisionist image of eighteenth-century musical practice. Whereas more common sources such as music criticism in newspapers and journals represent prescriptive visions on music, ignoring ‘lesser’ genres whilst championing art music, concert programs represent the actual daily concert practice. Therefore, concert programs have raised new research directions in many areas of inquiry, ranging from the development of repertoires and patterns of taste, to socio-economic aspects of concert life, ideologies about music and codes of behavior in the concert hall (e.g. Psiler 1993; Johnson 1995; Weber 2001 & 2008; Hall-Wit 2007; Boshoff 2006; Abels 2009). The book by Weber (2008) on the transformation of musical taste in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is definitely the most notable of these studies. Not only because it achieved critical acclaim, but also because it is based on thousands of concert programs. And indeed you will find a great many facsimiles of these programs scattered across his book. Unfortunately all this information was never structurally assembled in a database that makes the content of these programs available for future research.

A few projects aimed at digitizing concert programs have tried to accommodate this need (Concert Programmes Project, Marshall Hall Database; Prague Concert Life 1850-1881; Boshoff, Cowgill & McVeigh 2004 et seq.; Ridgewell 2010; Wells 2011; Day 2014). But they are mostly the result of library structures, resulting in catalogs that make concert programs searchable by means of metadata but do not provide a sufficient data structure for the actual content of these documents. In our opinion this limits the research possibilities of these resources for analyzing the structure and the evolution of concert programming significantly. As a consequence we have chosen a different digitization strategy for our own project, one that focuses on the content of the documents, rather than the documents themselves.

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Supported by funding through the CREATE program of the University of Amsterdam we were able to digitise a large part of the nineteenth century concert programs that have been preserved for the concert hall of the society Felix Meritis in Amsterdam. Prior to the establishment of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw in 1888 this venue was by far the most prestigious in Dutch musical life.

We have entered the data from the concert programs in a SQL database in which we defined separate fields for all elements (names of composers, concertos, genres and musicians, etcetera) that can be found in concert programs. These elements are grouped in ranked program items, so that the original order of the program is preserved and consequently can be subject to analysis. We designed a simple web interface that allows for fast data entry of the original programs. For identifying persons and works we matched verbatim entries against external resources like the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP), Wikidata, VIAF and the Dutch Biography Portal. Identification has been done in batch using string comparisons, which reduced the need for item identification to a large degree.

The Felix Meritis database was developed in close collaboration between a specialist in concert programming and classical music (Van Nieuwkerk) and a specialist in historical databases (Nijboer). Both the organization of data and the methods of data entry have been continuously adapted to new insights derived from working with the original sources. Such a more agile and research oriented approach proved to be very helpful in overcoming (or ignoring) many of the obstacles that might be identified from a librarians perspective (e.g. Dix et al. 2014).

The data will be made publicly available through a web interface in the course of 2016. We will use RDFa and popular ontologies such as schema.org and FOAF to turn these data effectively into Linked Open Data. To highlight the research potential of the data we will implement some online visualization tools.

REFERENCES


