

THE BERLIN FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS IN DARKER TIMES AND HOW IT SOUNDS IN 2022

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Abstract

The Festival of Lights in Berlin was conducted despite the current emergency situation regarding electric power. Nothing could stop the organizers and the visitors from doing this event. It took place in Berlin's city centre from 6-16 October 2022. This review describes the experience with special emphasis given to the sound-video-concept that was realised.

Keywords

Festival, Berlin, Lightshows, Musical choices, Embedding

Introduction

A review essay should always start with excitement. Finally, after such a long time of waiting, I can again enjoy the Festival of Lights in Berlin. The last time was in 2020, when I remembered most vividly the Berliner Kommode, a library building with a long tradition as part of the oldest Berlin University in the shape of an old Kommode which is the German name for the curved dresser that appeared in spectacular colours.

This year, it was all a bit smaller, less big, less bombastic, less light, but nevertheless also quite bright. Some say it was not good enough for Berlin. Not as good as before. I am not sure about this. I think it was as good or even better as it was more focussed. Light objects, just as so many other things, consume a lot of energy, and I do not only talk about the electric power problem that caused awareness among all creators and visitors. It takes a lot of energy to prepare, attract, and excite creators and visitors. I was, for my very own part, stunned by the idea of combining light and sound and of the offering of three-dimensional screenings of different lengths at some places. This was a very good step and attracted many visitors to see the festival and, what seems often more important, to also leave the venue, when the show was done. Then the guides and private visitors had time to reach the next venue, which often was hidden away from the main roads, kind of set back in yards or even plastic swans with changing light colours in a lake.

In 2022, there were altogether 35 venues, mainly in the centre of the city. Some buildings were chosen to screen the three-dimensional videos. Choosing from these buildings, there was most vividly the house called "The Pirates of Berlin" at the bench of the river Spree. The building showed a short sequence with moving pictures of water and wooden ships that resembled the Disney-like pirate barque or the Santa María of Columbus' first journey in 1492, the most non-fitting example for any pirate ships, and some technically generated sound. The exciting location features a well-known restaurant that also advertises itself as a bar, club, and event location. It has a large terrace and can be accessed from all sides. It is the

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number one location for single parties and single Berlin people with some financial resources who are usually quick to spend their time after 10 pm with other single friends here in this place.

Some Ideas on Sound and Music

I want to return a moment to the played music that did not go beyond simple cinema effects of splashing water and the squeaking wood of the ship mast and superstructure. People were obviously only attracted by the light. In order to see all the special items, it was crucial to keep the surrounding in the darkness of the night. Only the entrance showed some guiding lights and the roadside, a location that is usually richly frequented by visitors of the East side gallery, an area with big painted pieces of the Berlin wall. It is one of the longest open-air galleries and free to be seen by anyone. The colourful pictures were not the main attraction at this time.



Figure 1: The 'Pirates of Berlin' along the Berlin Wall. A light show venue in 2022 (Photography by the author).

The Vision of Our Future

The next spot that cannot be overlooked in the entire city is the tallest German building, the Berlin TV Tower at Alexanderplatz. Over the full length of the tower body, the three-dimensional light show introduced the main topic and diverse national contributions to it: 'THE VISION OF OUR FUTURE'. Each artist or group of artists, which represented, in an old-fashioned manner, their home nation, developed the light show items in an exciting way. The sounds coming with it were classical orchestra music of the 19th century, obviously chosen to avoid other types of noise and too many backpackers in that area (Sorace-Keller, 2012). Only the Marienkirche (St Mary Church) had some illuminated windows and a smaller light sculpture made of white glowing wire showing walking people. All other lights came either from the TV tower or the colourfully moving bicycles with roofs, many of which were used by the visitors. Nothing could be better than exactly that topic, although it is still a question of inclusivity. Who is this 'our'? Are there any 'others' out there? Where does the vision come from and where does the vision go? I think that it was an excellent idea to stay fairly unimpressed by the current electric energy crisis (Wen Dong et.al., 2022), which might have been caused by a number of reasons and does not alone exist due

to the gas-stop through Russian pipelines.



Figure 2: A light show at the Berlin TV Tower. Figure 3: Flying objects in Berlin's Lustgarten (Photographs by the author).

The 2022's festival took over 10 days and consumed 75% less electric power than in the previous year. The reason for this is not only the reduction of venues, but it is also the better understanding of energy and the use of the most advanced LED technology. Additionally, a lot of visual impact was stimulated by sound, which was unfortunately not yet well attended in regard to a more efficient use of electric power. I think that sound improvements have still some options in this type of a festival, same as in cinema sound and city sound in general. Also, all energy used came from renewable energy sources. Nevertheless, I also think that this could not be reliably verified.

Interestingly, people came to listen to the sound mixture. Not only the cinema sound emanating through complicated and bulky speakers. The next light show stop I did was at the Lustgarten, a large area in front of the Berlin Dom and the Altes Museum (Berlin Cathedral and Old Museum). It consists of green grass, a small fountain and a big baptismal font, some trees at the outer square and the area that is located on the museum island and can only be reached by crossing the wonderful bridges leading over the Spree. Three large kites in the shape of strange birds resembling rather swimming entities were released into the air on invisible ropes. They changed their colours through incorporated light. The music came out of speakers and featured dramatic orchestral cinema music, possibly created for this event. At the same time, live performances entertained groups of visitors sitting on the front stairs of the Old Museum. People were clapping hands. The music came also out of speakers, but they were smaller and not so expensive, fine-tuned, and sensitive. Yet the experience of having seen the musicians was much differently welcome from the show of the big birds. Additionally, there was the general sound of many people talking around themselves. The audible experience was seemingly as important as the visual. The darkness contributed to the light show's success and also to the live singers' attraction. The Lustgarten is also times apart from the festival and it is the place where live performances are held. There is barely a day without live music. The presence of the live musicians and the singer made the location sounds rather normal. In order to find this normal, the sound of talking people should not be missed. Only with this embedding, the sound appears 'placed'.



Figure 4: Berlin's Brandenburg Gate as a projection surface for a light show (Photography by the author).

After the Lustgarten, I visited the Brandenburger Tor (Brandenburg Gate). The main structure of this gate was the projection site for one of the longest video sequences that featured different artists' creations. They were again sorted according to their nationality. This sorting was a bit frightening as one never knows what happens to a big crowd of people in case of a breakthrough of national sentiments. The 3-D effects were breathtakingly beautiful. The power of pictures was clearly demonstrated and the smooth transitions made them appear even more real. The sound, as in other places, was a mixture of different dramatic cinema sounds and songs. It was not spot on but simply attracted people to join the crowd and to spend some time watching the spectacle? Insofar, the music was successful. Additional light came up as small transparent round air balloons with light dots and they were sold in bunches, although at this time, not many children were present who would have shown any interest in them.

The next great station in my visitation was the August Bebel Platz (August Bebel square), a place that is surrounded by classical buildings and the ultimate light shows were to be seen here. Two buildings showed their static slides that were only rarely changed, but the Hotel di Roma, one of the most expensive hotels there, enjoyed full attention. The entire hotel front in a neoclassicistic building was used to project interesting short stories in colours and shapes. These stories cannot be told. The well-hidden speakers featured space-shuttle music as one can experience in science fiction films. The chosen music should fit the topic of the future, yet it was also making the difference between reality and the 'movie-world'. Here was the place to feel that good music with visual stories is the next to be clearly developed and to take over a more active role in the narration of content.



Figure 5: The Kommode on August Bebel square. Still a very colourful building in the Berlin Festival of Lights (Photography by the author).

Final Thoughts

From there I visited some smaller but nevertheless very exciting places around the Potsdamer Platz area, where there were illuminated trees, large tree-size paper flowers, illuminated hats hanging over the streets, and the colour changing swans on the piano lake. Each small event came with some music creations that miss a bit of the point as they were too shallow and too little to make a notable impact on the visitors.

I heard about great light show venues at other times at other venues around the Berlin centre, but I could not visit all these places in one night and the visitations on weekends appeared to be more complicated. The shows finish at 11 pm and then the entire city will go to sleep or party in the darkness. That is Berlin, nobody is alone at any time. Nobody has to fear the vision of any future (Haberstumpf, 2022). All the surveys done about whether this festival should be held or not in times of darkness points towards the essentiality of the arts, light shows and accompanied music included. By this I mean, let's all get creative to survive.

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