

**Andreas J. Hirsch**

# **Creating the Future**

**A Brief History  
of Ars Electronica  
1979–2019**

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## Imprint

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A Brief History of Ars Electronica  
1979–2019

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“Within the computer artist, the scientist meets the artist.”

Hannes Leopoldseder

Hannes Leopoldseder, Foreword, in: Druckrey, Timothy, Ars Electronica (Eds.): *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future – A Survey of Two Decades*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1999, p. 7.

## Put Your Radio in the Window: A Festival Emerges From a Cloud of Sound

Ars Electronica’s entrance into the world was no less than grand. On the evening of September 18, 1979 a crowd of around 100,000 people—approximately half of the city’s population—had gathered in the park on the banks of the Danube in front of the city’s concert hall, the Brucknerhaus. It was a mild evening after a mostly sunny early autumn day. The opening event had been the talk of the day. Traffic collapsed since nobody had expected such a huge crowd to turn up. At five minutes past eight, the first movement (Allegro Moderato) of Anton Bruckner’s *Symphony No. 8 in C minor* commenced flowing along the river. The event had been announced as a “cloud of sound” that would eventually cover the entire city of Linz. This was to be achieved via a massive sound system at the Danube park (Donaupark) and on the opposite bank of the river, as well as additional speaker systems at four remote, elevated positions in the city and—maybe most importantly—via regional radio.

On the day before the opening, Monday, September 17, 1979, a very unusual “special guest” had arrived at the airport of Linz: The mayor of Linz, Franz Hillinger, had come to the red carpet rolled out at the city’s small airport to officially welcome “SPA 12,” a robot that had flown in from New Jersey, USA. SPA 12 looked very much like the robots familiar from science fiction movies and spoke with a somewhat squeaky, metallic voice. He graciously greeted the population of Linz and held the opening speech at Ars Electronica on September 18. He even mingled with the crowds on the city’s main shopping street (Landstraße), responded to questions from

people phoning in to a live radio broadcast, and was the star of a late night TV discussion show *Club 2*. As this was late 1970s robot technology, SPA 12's movements were, of course, remote controlled and his quick-witted answers came from a human companion not far away. But the message that Ars Electronica sent out was nonetheless clear: Linz welcomed this emissary from the future with open arms.

Those two events marking the inception of the first Ars Electronica Festival—the massive “Cloud of Sound” (Klangwolke) and the arrival of the robot SPA 12—were in fact well-planned parts of a bold and visionary concept. When the composer Hubert Bognermayr—a pioneer of electronic music and founder of the rock band Eela Craig—approached Hannes Leopoldseder, regional director of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF, to cooperate in an event of electronic music, it immediately sparked his interest. But Leopoldseder quickly advocated a grander design: It should not merely be a concert plus a small symposium, but also a large-scale event in public space. And the project should not limit itself to electronic music alone, but expand to other areas of creativity where microelectronics were beginning to be applied in artistic creation.

The symphonic open-air performance on the banks of the Danube was based on a quadrophonic recording of Bruckner's last completed symphony by the Concertgebouw-Orchestra conducted by Bernhard Haitink. Music producer Ulli A. Rützel negotiated the rights for this unusual use of the recording. Bruckner's music was to be accompanied by a laser show focusing on a huge balloon covered with shimmering hearts. The composer and sound-architect Walter Haupt had been brought in from Munich to conceptualize this open-air event due to his previous experience with filling large outdoor spaces with floating sound. However, the organizers' plans were affected by some unexpected factors: The huge crowd somewhat reduced the audibility of the music in some parts of the Donaupark and during the concert the balloon was pulled down to the ground by members



**Preparation of the helium-filled balloon** for the Klangwolke (Sound Cloud).  
Concept by Walter Haupt, 1979

**First “Sound Cloud”** with Anton Bruckner's *Symphony No. 8 in C minor*, 1979



“Calling upon people to do something totally different with their radios—to use them not just as a receiver but as a transceiver to relay what they pick up and to propagate it into the public sphere—epitomizes the actual mission of the Klangwolke (Sound Cloud) and its quality as a project. (...) Thus, the Klangwolke is part of Ars Electronica’s DNA, since, ultimately, the only way to fulfill the mission of this festival—to function as a platform for art, technology and society—is through the intentional interplay of experimental and popular approaches.”

**Gerfried Stocker**

Gerfried Stocker, “The Cloud in the Web,” voestalpine Klangwolke 2012, in: Leopoldseder, Hannes, Christine Schöpf, Gerfried Stocker (Eds.): *The Big Picture – New Concepts for a New World*, Ars Electronica Festival 2012, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 2012, p. 202.

of the audience, who grabbed the shimmering hearts. The German chemist and photographer Manfred P. Kage provided another kind of visualization of Bruckner’s music by transferring the sound waves from a loudspeaker to liquids and a diffusing screen—an analog precursor of future digital media art concepts.

In the days preceding the opening event of this first Ars Electronica Festival, the population of Linz had been encouraged to participate in this “musical Bruckner experiment”: People were asked to turn on their radios at the time of the event and place them in their open windows, thus helping spread the “cloud of sound” across the city. Most of them did not even have to switch radio channels, since that evening Bruckner’s symphonic work was broadcast on the highly popular regional program, which usually featured folk music. The taxi drivers of Linz followed the call to turn on their car radios, tune into the program, and drive with their windows open. So on that memorable evening, the city came to life with numerous sources of the same sound of Bruckner’s music, some of them in the facades of the buildings, some of them cruising through the streets of Linz.

Hannes Leopoldseder was the youngest ORF regional director when he was appointed to the position in Linz in 1974 at the age of 34. He enjoyed a humanistic school education and studied German philology and English language studies. He had trained his strategic mind as a political journalist in the early years of the social democratic government led by Bruno Kreisky, a leading figure in Austrian post-war politics, who carried out reforms to transform Austrian society into a more modern and democratically minded one in the 1970s. The ORF at that time was a powerful public broadcasting corporation with no private competitors, many years before that sector in Austria was deregulated and private radio and television stations sprang up. The director general of the ORF, the conservative Gerd Bacher, encouraged Leopoldseder to let his regional studio play an active role in the cultural scene of Linz and the entire region of Upper Austria. Linz was situated between two

of Austria's cultural hotspots: the capital Vienna to the east—with the Vienna State Opera, the Musikverein concert hall, and most of the country's large art museums—and Salzburg to the west—with the internationally acclaimed Salzburg Festival for music, opera, and theater. Consequently, Linz at that time was struggling to find its place in the cultural landscape of Austria. Building a modern concert hall designed by Finnish architect Heikki Sirén on the banks of the Danube in 1974, naming it “Brucknerhaus” after the region's most prominent composer, Anton Bruckner, and starting an annual musical festival, the Brucknerfest, were early cultural landmarks.

Around the same time, the city of Linz was beginning to try and cast off the image of a “steel city” that had been attached to it since the founding of a steel plant by Nazi Germany in 1938. The Reichswerke Hermann Göring, which became the state-owned VOEST company after the end of World War II, covered an area that was almost the size of a third of the city. Pollution from those heavy industries affected the quality of life in Linz for many years and steel industries in general started running into problems after the end of the post-war upswing. Aspects of the “steel city” would remain relevant also in the cultural life in Linz for a long time, but the search was on for new areas of excellence that could help redefine the city.

Hannes Leopoldseder had a vision that would clearly lead away from traditional culture and old-style heavy industries: He wanted to put the focus on upcoming new technologies—then summed up as “microelectronics”—and their cultural implications as well as their impact on societies. He wanted to let activities relating to the future shape the new image of Linz: “From the beginning, Ars Electronica has been open to signals from the future, open to experiments. This openness is based on the idea that in conjunction with the computer, the basic technology of microelectronics is changing our work, our economy, our thinking, and ultimately our culture, more than almost any other technology before.”<sup>1</sup>



**Robot SPA 12** participating in the late night live TV discussion series *Club 2* at the Austrian Broadcasting Company's (ORF) Regional Studio in Linz during Ars Electronica 1979.

Leopoldseder was also impressed by figures like Hilmar Hoffman, who served as city councilor for culture in Frankfurt and was the author of the book *Culture for All*. Hoffmann applied the emancipatory spirit of the youth revolts of 1968 and social democrat ideals to cultural policies and advocated a culture of participation and inclusion. Inspired by Hoffmann's ideas, Leopoldseder came up with the idea of an impressive large-scale event in public space, that would not only convince the city government of the importance of his vision of “Ars Electronica,” but at the same time involve the local population with opportunities for audience participation. His regional ORF studio produced both radio and television and he was familiar with Bertolt Brecht's influential text on “Radio as an Apparatus of Communication.” The playwright and poet Brecht, who had adopted Marxist

philosophy in the 1920s, had given this speech in 1932, the year before Hitler came to power in Germany and the terror regime of the National Socialists started and radio was used as a key element of propaganda. In opposition to these looming developments, Brecht—who went into exile immediately after Hitler came to power—had asked for the broadcasting service to change its function from a means of distribution to a means of communication.

For the public broadcasting corporation ORF to be encouraging the population of Linz in 1979 to participate in the “cloud of sound” via their radios can be seen as an act of reverence to Brecht as well as a visionary first step towards transforming mass media into a means of communication. In 2012 Gerfried Stocker reflected on the conceptual implications of the first Klangwolke and its role for Ars Electronica: “Calling upon people to do something totally different with their radios—to use them not just as a receiver but as a transceiver to relay what they pick up and to propagate it into the public sphere—epitomizes the actual mission of the Klangwolke and its quality as a project. (...) Thus, the Klangwolke is part of Ars Electronica’s DNA, since, ultimately, the only way to fulfill the mission of this festival—to function as a platform for art, technology and society—is through the intentional interplay of experimental and popular approaches.”<sup>2</sup>

While the robot SPA 12 immediately won the hearts of the audience, the Klangwolke and the symposium met with mixed reactions. Some became supporters from the very beginning: Computer scientist Gustav Pomberger (\*1949), at that time assistant at the Johannes Kepler University in Linz, had—being interested in all areas of innovation—driven out to the airport to join the group welcoming the robot SPA 12. On the evening of the Klangwolke he was strolling down to the city from Schlossberg (Castle Hill) together with a visitor from Berlin, who did not seem to be too impressed by the event. However, Pomberger enjoyed slowly descending into the cloud of sound and embraced the inventive spirit of Ars Electronica, an organization he would actively be involved in some years later. The event

on the banks of the Danube must have generally appealed to the audience, since the Klangwolke evolved into an institution in the following years and is attended by huge crowds up to this day. Some conservative lovers of classical music fiercely opposed the way that Bruckner’s symphony was used as a Klangwolke and conductor Eugen Jochum even refused to perform in Linz out of protest to such concepts. Also, talks and exhibits of the pioneering “computer art” that was still largely unknown to a general cultural audience, received outspoken ridicule from art institutions and critics. In retrospect, such responses reveal certain similarities to the hostile reactions by many visual artists and art institutions in the 19th century towards the new medium of photography. It took more than a century for photography to be accepted as art and in the case of media art the process was also difficult, but took a significantly shorter period of time.

Hannes Leopoldseder was unfazed by all of this: “Openness has become a fundamental characteristic of the festival: open to new trends, open to the interactions between art and technology, open to that which is yet unfinished, open to contradictions, open to new territories, but especially open to the encounters between artists, scientists, and those who are involved in discussing our future.”<sup>3</sup> He stayed true to his original vision and—supported by the large audience turnout and massive local and international media coverage—was able to convince the political decision makers of the relevance of Ars Electronica for Linz and the region. He also forged an alliance between the regional studio of ORF, which he headed, and the city-owned LIVA, the powerful cultural organization behind the Brucknerhaus—an alliance that would contribute to the great success of the new festival for many years to come, in fact until the mid 1990s.