



Photo: MPI for Empirical Aesthetics./Jörg Baumann

A Matter of Taste

When it comes to music, tastes obviously differ. But why do people actually play and listen to music? Why do they still go to concerts when they have long been able to listen to everything on sound storage or digital media? What does a music experience consist of? The right place to look for the answers to these questions is the ArtLab of the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt. Thanks to its special technical equipment, the Institute's multifunctional event room is a concert hall and a laboratory rolled into one. Sounds, facial expressions, gestures, interpretations and various physiological data from the artists and up to 46 listeners can be synchronously recorded and evaluated.

In May 2016, the vocal ensemble Cut Circle visited the Institute. The researchers in the ArtLab had access to the American octet and its conductor Jesse Rodin for three days. While the singers performed a wide range of pieces from their vast repertoire of early music, comprehensive data was tracked, such as EEG, ECG, respiratory rate and the artists' movement patterns.

At the final concert, however, the research focus was shifted to the audience. While the concertgoers listened to the performance, adhesive electrodes on their fingers measured their skin conductivity, and an armband took their pulse. At the same time, they used tablets to self-report information about their reception and assessment of the performance.

Incidentally, the evening program, entitled "My Fair Lady," referred to the strong veneration of the Virgin Mary in the 15th and 16th centuries, a phenomenon that is also reflected in the music of that period.