THE EXPERIENCE OF LISTENING TO MUSIC: METHODOLOGIES, IDENTITIES, HISTORIES

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Understanding audiences: what are concert-goers doing when they listen?

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Abstract

This provocation summarises a keynote given at the Listening Experience Database Project Conference 2018, and draws together some key themes from my previously published work with audiences. In particular, it looks at ways in to classical music, considering both the routes taken by established audience members and the experiences of newcomers. The challenges of empirical research with audience members are addressed, and some qualitative methods including 'write-draw' and audience exchange presented as ways to gain in-depth understanding of live listening experience. The chapter poses questions for ongoing research with audiences, including some fresh perspectives from audiences for the contemporary arts.

Introduction

Entering a classical concert hall for the first time can be an intimidating prospect, especially if as a new attender you feel younger, less prepared, less affluent or in some other way an uncomfortable fit with the rest of the audience. Little wonder, therefore, that classical music organisations are increasingly concerned about their dwindling and ageing audiences, and are trying new presentation formats that fit more closely with the cultural needs of the 'experience seekers' and 'metroculturals' identified in Arts Council England's audience spectrum categories.

[footnote] [1] See also Julia Haferkorn, 'Dancing to another tune: classical music in nightclubs and other non-traditional venues', in Chris Dromey and Julia Haferkorn (eds), The Classical Music Industry (Routledge, 2018), pp. 148–171. [/footnote]

Even for regular attenders, the mystery of what everyone else is doing in their heads as they sit silently through a performance remains. Listening – at least in the classical concert hall – is an invisible, internal act: respondents in a study of young people's first experiences of a chamber music concert commented on how nobody looked like they were enjoying themselves.

[footnote] [2] Lucy K. Dearn and Stephanie E. Pitts, '(Un) popular music and young audiences: exploring the classical chamber music concert from the perspective of young adult listeners,' Journal of Popular Music Education 1, no. 1 (2017), pp. 43–62. [/footnote]

Newcomers more familiar with the exuberant listening behaviour of pop festivals and arena gigs will find no help in an online search for 'audiences': photo stock libraries yield images of fields full of people waving their hands above their heads, some of them holding mobile phones to record the moment, and all of them smiling, moving, singing along.

[footnote] [3] See, for example, www.shutterstock.com and search 'concert audiences'. [/footnote]

Knowledge of how to become a classical music audience member is inaccessible other than through experience, making that first encounter with a live classical music performance all the more important.

Newspaper reports of the migration of pop music listening behaviour to classical music events emerge from time to time, always presenting the behaviour as deviant, while highlighting at an abstract level the desire for less 'stuffiness' in formal concerts. One

such example was the ejection from a performance of Handel's *Messiah* of a crowd-surfer, who later commented that:

> *Classical music, trying to seem cool and less stuffy, reeks of some sort of fossilised art form undergoing a midlife crisis.*
>
> [footnote] [4] Miranda Pyrnne, 'Audience ejects crowd surfer from classical concert', The Telegraph, 20 June 2014. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/10913904/Audience-ejects-crowd-surfer-from-classical-concert.html [/footnote]

The director of the concert, Tom Morris of the Bristol Old Vic, had encouraged the audience to 'clap or whoop when you like, and no shushing other people'. However, he acknowledged that finding the bounds of unregulated audience behaviour had been taken as a challenge by the crowd-surfer, Dr David Glowacki, who was 'investigating what the nature of the rules are using the skills that make him an extraordinary scientist – and for some in the audience, a slightly irritating one.' Glowacki himself summarised the dilemma facing classical music organisations that have to balance informality with the expectations of their established audiences:

> *You're free to behave as you like, and it's comforting to think that you have that freedom, but it's only available to you so long as you behave correctly.*
>
> [footnote] [5] The Telegraph, 2014. [/footnote]

Among the previous attempts to describe the rules of classical music concerts, the most influential has been Christopher Small's *Musicking.*

[footnote] [6] Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998). [/footnote]

Although an ethnomusicologist, skilled in the close observation of musical behaviour, Small's analysis of classical music concert culture is based on generalities rather than close observation, and now looks rather dated:

> *Even if we have come alone and know nobody, we can still feel a part of the event as we buy a cup of coffee or an alcoholic drink and look around us as we sip. Amongst those present we might recognize celebrities [...] perhaps an eminent politician. The latter*

may be taking cocktails with a group of expensively dressed men and women whom we can assume to be executives, and their wives, of the corporation that is sponsoring tonight's concert. [...] All appear casually at home in this place. We remember our manners and do not stare.

[footnote] [7] Small, 1998, p. 24. [/footnote]

As Karen Burland and I observed in our edited collection, *Coughing and Clapping*, any ethnographic study of a classical concert hall today would likely show more diverse demographics and behaviour:

Audiences themselves are becoming increasingly public commentators on live music, through online fan forums, Twitter feeds and other evolving technology. A response to a concert can now go far beyond conventional, polite applause – coughing and clapping are only the start of the audience's expression of their appreciation (or otherwise).

[footnote] [8] Karen Burland and Stephanie E. Pitts (eds), Coughing and Clapping: Investigating Audience Experience (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 2. [/footnote]

Small's work also highlights the need to gather more systematic, up-to-date ethnographic evidence of what it means to be part of an audience. Investigating the live listening experience without disrupting it is a challenge for empirical researchers, who must balance the desirability of 'real time' responses to listening experiences with the easier access to reflective, post-concert discussions. The views of audience members at the heart of an established listening community must also be balanced with those who are new to live music listening, in order that the full range of audience expectations and engagement can be understood.

This chapter will draw upon three recent studies with different groups of listeners: a) regular arts consumers experiencing a new art form through an 'audience exchange', b) young people bringing the lens of pop music fandom to their first experiences of a classical concert, c) and audiences for the contemporary arts exploring new and unfamiliar cultural experiences across art forms. The brief accounts of each project will examine the methods used, as well as some headline findings, leading to a discussion of future directions for audience research and listening experience.

[footnote] [9] As a keynote talk, this chapter celebrated the diversity of approaches in the Listening Experience Database Project Conference 2018, which brought empirical methods into the LED's remit alongside the archival approaches that had

been its foundational work. Written down, this all feels rather more self-referential and indulgent, for which I can only apologise. [/footnote]

Case studies

a) Audience exchange: exploring the unfamiliar

As part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) Cultural Value project in 2013–2014, I worked with research assistant Katy Robinson to investigate routes into arts engagement in Sheffield.

[footnote] [10] See https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/cultural-value-project-project-summaries/ [/footnote]

We were interested in how existing and potential audience members made their choices between the various venues, events and opportunities in the city, weighing up the potential uses of their available free time, budget and cultural capacity. This was in itself a challenge to the often implicit assumption that the audience for any specific venue exists in a vacuum, making their decisions in relation to that programme and place, without recognition of the multiple other options available on that date – including, perhaps most compellingly, not going out at all.

A survey carried out with the audiences at a number of major Sheffield venues gave us an overview of audience decision making in the city, highlighting the variety of combinations of events that people engaged with (often quite eclectic, for instance, 'opera/Shakespeare plays/heavy rock concerts'), and the different priorities for a 'good night out' expressed by audiences for different art forms.

[footnote] [11] Stephanie E. Pitts, 'On the edge of their seats: Comparing first impressions and regular attendance in arts audiences', Psychology of Music 44, no. 5 (2016), pp. 1175–1192. [/footnote]

Classical music listeners in the survey had high expectations of the events they chose to attend, seeking quality and high emotion from a performance, and having strong opinions on programming. Some listeners wanted more familiar music that would guarantee enjoyment, others sought more challenging and diverse repertoire, while one resolved this with a direct appeal to 'have more of the music I like'.

[footnote] [12] Pitts, 2016, p. 1182 [/footnote]

Respondents noted the lack of diversity and youth among their fellow audience members, but were otherwise less likely than other arts consumers to comment on the social aspects of attendance, focusing more on the programme and its performance.

Pop music listeners, by contrast, talked a lot about atmosphere and 'vibe' and had more in common with stand-up comedy audiences in their desire to see familiar performers doing something unexpected, experienced as being unique to that event.

[footnote] [13] Pitts, 2016, p. 1182. [/footnote]

Highly valued across all live experience was the commitment of the performers, the sense of being close to them, and the distinct experience of live engagement in relation to more frequent consumption of recorded media.

The Cultural Value study also incorporated a component that we called 'audience exchange',

[footnote] [14] Stephanie E. Pitts and Jonathan Gross, '"Audience exchange": cultivating peer-to-peer dialogue at unfamiliar arts events,' Arts and the Market 7, no. 1 (2017), pp. 65–79. [/footnote]

where regular attenders at one art form were taken to something they had never or rarely experienced before. They were invited to bring a friend, to replicate the typical experience of attending live arts and to facilitate participation in a discussion that took place immediately after the performance. This audience exchange was revealing of the preconceptions that new audience members bring to live music events, not just in their expectations of audience behaviour and conventions, but also in the other arts expertise that they attempt to apply to their new experience.

First-timers at opera, for example, had expectations that the audience would be full of 'posh people', but also brought their experiences of watching films, musicals and plays to an attempt to interpret the story. One respondent captured a widely-shared disappointment with the level of dramatic and emotional experience that the opera production offered:

> I mean, the musicals I've seen have always had like an intensity of emotion – I've always felt like I've really engaged with some of the characters, and you kind of get that intensity. Where, with this, I didn't. So I don't know why – I couldn't work out if it's a piece of music which I really enjoyed, and really liked the sound of it, or whether it was a bit of theatre. 'Cos it was almost like a choir, but dressed up, I guess. Which made it interesting to look at, but it was kind of different.

[footnote] [15] Pitts, 2016, p. 1188. [/footnote]

The audience exchange also revealed that the qualities of a performance that are highly valued by regular listeners can have less appeal to newcomers. Where regulars

at the Music in the Round chamber music festival talk enthusiastically of being close enough to the performers to read the music over their shoulders,

[footnote] [16] Stephanie E. Pitts and Christopher P. Spencer, 'Loyalty and longevity in audience listening: investigating experiences of attendance at a chamber music festival,' Music and Letters 89, no. 2 (2008), pp. 227–238. [/footnote]

a new audience member in our audience exchange felt that she did not know where to look: 'I don't know how to play the violin, so they're just moving, but it has no meaning to me'.

[footnote] [17] Pitts, 2016, p. 1186. [/footnote]

Newcomers were aware of an apparent difference between their experience of the concert and that of the listeners around them:

> some people were like, really intense, which was quite nice to see – made me feel a bit guilty that I couldn't maintain that level of intensity.
>
> [footnote] [18] Pitts, 2016, p. 1187. [/footnote]

In each of our audience exchange situations – a chamber music concert, a jazz gig, and an opera performance – respondents made reference to feeling underprepared or not sufficiently knowledgeable, so assuming that more established audience members were bringing not just experience but expertise to their listening. Newcomers to a concert audience have limited evidence on which to make these assumptions, drawing mainly on the silent listening and enthusiastic applause of that established audience. Navigating a new art form with no sense of what is collectively agreed to be normal and valuable in that setting, it is no wonder that this silent reverence can feel alien or unjustified.

The different expectations across art forms shown in the survey, and the distance between familiar arts consumption and a new experience revealed by the audience exchange, both present some pressing challenges to arts marketers: how to make new audience members welcome and how to talk about the arts experience in a way that is meaningful to both new and established attenders? The respondents reported a willingness to prepare more thoroughly for a new arts experience, by reading up on an opera plot or listening to some 'easier' jazz – though the younger respondents were bolder in asserting a 'right to daydream' and to take what they wanted from the event.

[footnote] [19] Pitts, 2016, p. 1186. [/footnote]

Their suggestions supported some of the arts development initiatives that have been undertaken by theatres and concert halls that provide accessible information about their events online, or offer 'buddying' schemes where regular listeners can bring a

newcomer at a discounted ticket rate. Opportunities to talk with other listeners about their experiences were also shown to be valuable through the audience exchange, showing how articulating the internal experiences of listening can help to bring a social dimension to an individual experience.

[footnote] [20] See also Melissa Dobson and John Sloboda, 'Staying behind: explorations in post-performance musician–audience dialogue,' in Burland and Pitts, Coughing and Clapping, pp. 159–74. [/footnote]

b) Crossing musical genres: young pop fans as classical music newcomers

The genre-crossing insights offered by the previous audience exchange were explored in greater depth by Lucy Dearn in her research on young people's experiences of live classical music.

[footnote] [21] Lucy K. Dearn, 'Music, people and place: entering and negotiating listening communities,' PhD dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2017. [/footnote]

Rather than adopting a deficit model, where young people's lack of knowledge about classical music frames the interpretation of their first concert experience, this research considered the expertise that young people bring as pop music fans and how they use this in making sense of a different kind of live music.

[footnote] [22] Lucy K. Dearn and Stephanie E. Pitts, '(Un)popular music and young audiences: Exploring the classical chamber music concert from the perspective of young adult listeners,' Journal of Popular Music Education 1, no. 1 (2017), pp. 43–62. [/footnote]

To capture the first impressions of the young people attending a concert, and provide a stimulus to post-performance discussions, the 'write-draw' method was used. Respondents were given a small piece of white paper and asked to draw their response to the concert on one side, and write about it on the other.

[footnote] [23] See Dearn, 2017, p. 53 for full methodology. [/footnote]

The simplicity of this method is also its strength, in that it avoids priming respondents with directed questions, and makes clear that the researcher is seeking a personal response rather than any preconceived right answers. The method is drawn from research in health studies with children, where abstract responses to pain and illness are as similarly hidden and personal as listening, but previous academic applications had not included music or the arts.

[footnote] [24] For a broader review of the method, see Jenna Hartel, 'An arts-informed study of information using the draw-and-write technique,' Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 65 (2014), pp. 1349–1367. [/footnote]

Analysing such free-form data is of course challenging, but achieved in this case by categorising drawings (for instance, including/not including notation, people, patterns, nature), and triangulating the drawn and written responses with the group interviews that followed the performance.

The responses were illustrative of the emotional journeys undertaken by the new listeners: one response was a network of emoji-style surprised, non-committal and puzzled faces, finishing with a broad smile in the middle.

Figure 1: Write-Draw card (Source: Author's own)

Several depicted elderly or snoring listeners, one drew a face with the mouth crossed through to indicate the silence of the audience, while another drew music notation in place of eyes and mouth, showing (as described in the group interview) how much the audience members appeared to be immersed in music.

[footnote] [25] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 54. [/footnote]

Figure 2: Write-Draw card (Source: Author's own)

The interview explored the respondents' expectations and experiences of the concert, and here their greater comfort as pop music fans was evident in their attempts to make sense of this unfamiliar mode of listening. One commented that it felt strange to see audiences repressing their responses, in contrast to the movement and participation that would be part of a pop audience experience:

> *The audience never seem like they enjoy the concert very much while the musicians are playing (maybe it's because they're concentrating on the music). I'm not used to seeing audiences with no emotion.*
>
> [footnote] [26] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 55. [/footnote]

The attempt to understand the unfamiliar audience behaviour – as concentration rather than lack of enjoyment – appears to offer a way in to articulating the differences in modes of audience listening that could be a productive part of welcoming new listeners. However, some other responses highlighted ways in which the music itself violated the conventions of pop music listening in ways that were alienating to the respondents:

> *I didn't find it constant. It flipped up on me too much, I would rather it was constant. I know some people like it. I didn't like it.*
>
> [footnote] [27] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 52. [/footnote]

This respondent was not alone in experiencing genuine frustration at not being able to interpret the emotion of a piece of classical music, and therefore not knowing how to respond. Used to listening to much shorter pop songs, with a clear emotional message, the young people reported being 'very confused as to what feeling was being wakened in me'. Strategies for dealing with this emotional confusion including zoning in and out of attention (a feature of established audience listening that I am convinced is under-represented in research), and devising imagery or narrative to interpret the music in real time:

> *for every single piece I heard, there was a visual in my head, say like a little animated sequence of what was going on.*
>
> [footnote] [28] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 52. [/footnote]

Respondents brought expectations from popular music in relation to authenticity too, and in some cases expressed confusion over whether it was the performers or the composers who were being given the audience's attention. One young person applied the notion of a cover band to understand this relationship, stating that 'No one is going to play Beethoven like Beethoven can'.

[footnote] [29] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 55. [/footnote]

While it is easy to deride a statement like that, or to bemoan the absence of classical music from the school curriculum, a more constructive response is to consider what it demonstrates about the musical expertise these listeners *do* have, and how that could form a bridge to fuller engagement as an audience member.

Some of the respondents were clear in their assertion that this music was 'not my type of music and not for me',

[footnote] [30] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 52. [/footnote]

and it was apparent that in these cases their first experience of concert-going had entrenched existing views of classical music audiences as stuffy and unapproachable. Others were tolerant of different musical tastes, stating that they knew some other people liked it, or expressing surprise at how much they had been drawn into the experience themselves.

On the question of whether they would attend again there was a low level of commitment, with responses ranging from clear refusal to a range of practical obstacles including ticket prices, having friends to attend with, and 'getting round to it':

> I would definitely like to, but whether I'd get round to doing it is
> another thing. If I could just be teleported here like once a week I
> would love to do that but it's like getting round to doing it, like
> finding out what is going on and having time.

[footnote] [31] Dearn and Pitts, 2017, p. 56. [/footnote]

The young people in this study were put off in some cases by the sense that there was a 'proper' way to enjoy classical music, to which their musical experience and education had not previously given them access. This raises again the marketing challenge of how to communicate with people who are not already within an audience community – and a much greater challenge around whether it is concert life that needs to adapt and change to allow for more than one way to engage with classical music.

As in so many aspects of organisational development and adaptability, the arts promoters are ahead of the academics in trying out new approaches, such as the informal, late-night concerts offered by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment or the nightclub vibe of Haçienda Classical. These initiatives offer fascinating potential for understanding how classical music can be presented and approached differently, and exploring the impact of that change on both new and established listeners.

[footnote] [32] Haferkorn, 2018. [/footnote]

c) Understanding audiences for the contemporary arts

The final case study of these three highlights another 'alternative' route into audience engagement with live music, exposing another risk in assuming that all audience experiences are similar and require the same kinds of marketing and support. Contemporary music – and contemporary arts more widely – is often presented in

marketing and programme notes as challenging historical conventions, pushing at boundaries, or overthrowing established norms. This perspective is likely to be that of the composer, performers, and indeed of any music graduate who acquired their knowledge of music history at 'the beginning' (as defined differently according to the locally agreed curriculum). However, our research with audiences for contemporary arts has found many instances of people crossing art forms and arriving 'straight in' at contemporary music without that historical context.

The project Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts (UACA) began with an invitation from Tim Rushby, then marketing manager at Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG), to explore the hunch that audiences for contemporary arts were in some way different from those I had studied previously, and specifically were more open to cross-art form experiences.

[footnote] [33] A pilot phase of the project was funded in 2014–15 by an Impact, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange grant from The University of Sheffield, and the second, ongoing phase (2017–19) by an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) large grant. Research associates on the project have been Dr Jonathan Gross (2014–15) and Dr Sarah Price (2017–ongoing). [/footnote]

The pilot phase research in Birmingham established a network of partner organisations ranging across theatre, dance, visual art, craft, film and music, and used qualitative methods to explore the life histories and recent cultural experiences of audiences associated with those organisations.

[footnote] [34] Jonathan Gross and Stephanie E. Pitts, 'Audiences for the contemporary arts: exploring varieties of participation across art forms in Birmingham, UK,' Participations 13, no. 1 (2016), pp. 4–23. [/footnote]

With the word 'contemporary' immediately entering our discourse through BCMG's name, we began by asking interviewees to define what the term meant to them, reaching definitions that encompassed new art works that speak to today, or are in some way experimental, strange or different.

[footnote] [35] Gross and Pitts, 2016, p. 9. [/footnote]

Within these descriptive definitions, judgements incorporating audience response quickly emerged, often using the word 'very' to distinguish works and events as 'very contemporary', 'very difficult' or 'very weird.'

[footnote] [36] Gross and Pitts, 2016, p. 10. [/footnote]

Much more than audiences for the 'very classical' (whatever that would be), these respondents were comfortable in expressing their opinions, incorporating emotional and intellectual responses, and shaping an audience attitude that our ongoing research has summarised as 'it's okay not to like it'.

[footnote] [37] Stephanie E. Pitts and Sarah M. Price, in preparation. [/footnote]

We found among the responses many varieties of participation, incorporating volunteering and advocacy as much as attendance at events. Practical contributions were made by audience members hosting cast members at BE Festival's week of new plays, and financial support offered by BCMG's sponsors of new works, Sound Investors.

[footnote] [38] Stephanie E. Pitts, Marta Herrero and Sarah M. Price (in review), Listening to the Audience: Liminality in Arts Organisation Crowdfunding and Membership Schemes. [/footnote]

A high proportion of our respondents had ambitions as artists and makers in their own right (both amateur and professional), and were supporting arts organisations out of a sense of collective responsibility for the sustainability of that art form and of the cultural life of their city.

[footnote] [39] Gross and Pitts, 2017, p. 12. [/footnote]

Audiences for the contemporary arts do appear, therefore, to be distinctive, and while we have taken care in our follow-on study to seek greater diversity in our sample of respondents, the findings are consistent in showing a strong relationship between arts practice and consumption, and in offering reflectively-defined ideas of open-mindedness (usually within quickly emergent boundaries). Contemporary arts audiences value highly the access to the unfinished, back-stage aspects of the creative process, seeking multiple ways to engage with unfamiliar work, and to understand their initial responses, whether positive or puzzled.

[footnote] [40] Gross and Pitts, 2017, p. 12. [/footnote]

We used the 'audience exchange' method again with these respondents, and found them to be highly engaged in the post-event conversations, where there was a greater willingness to express strong opinions than had been the case in earlier group interviews.

[footnote] [41] Pitts and Gross, 2017. [/footnote]

Contemporary arts audiences perhaps offer a model for helping newcomers to classical music to explore their initial experiences in a way that is non-judgemental and does not presume a 'proper' way to respond. The valued aspect of the audience exchange conversations in the UACA project was the sense that all respondents were equally unfamiliar with the work, and could benefit from hearing other people's opinions and reflecting on the connections with their wider cultural experiences. This is arguably what we all do when we hear a live performance: the layers of whether it is socially and culturally acceptable not to like or know what is heard are added by the

context, and might usefully be removed by more careful management of newcomers' experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate how qualitative research methods offer at least a partial solution to exploring the expectations and experiences of live classical music audiences, particularly where talk-based and visual methods are deployed in ways that aim to understand audience experiences without disrupting them. The three case studies have illustrated the diverse routes into live music engagement that are potentially replacing the traditional concert-going habit formation of school and parental influences. Regular arts attenders' exploration of new art forms, young people's expertise as pop music fans, and contemporary arts audiences' willingness to engage with the new and challenging all share an evaluative component that can be stifled by concert settings that seem to promote only one 'proper' way to be an audience member.

Arts organisations are, in many cases, embracing the challenge of matching their cultural offerings with their audiences, recognising that audience members do not always want to be coerced into trying something that they do not expect to enjoy. Starting with arts attenders' existing expectations and needs is one possible way in to being more flexible in the way that classical music is written about, researched and promoted. The respondents in each of the case studies showed themselves to be reflexive, tolerant and willing to be challenged, suggesting that there is much to be learned from research with non-attenders and newcomers, as well as from comparisons between their experiences and those of established concert-goers.

The answer to 'what are concert-goers doing when they listen?' is perhaps no closer as a result of this provocation, but it is fairly certain not to be what is going on in the head of an academic music researcher. The need for multiple voices in the debate is therefore compelling, and calls for some sensitive, sustained research with a diversity of listeners, in order that concerts remain (or become) welcoming places for the next generation of audiences.

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