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What makes an audience?  
Investigating the roles and experiences of listeners  
at a chamber music festival

***Abstract***

The views of audience members on their listening experiences are rarely heard in the research literature, although much speculation occurs on their roles and perspectives. This article reports on an investigation of audience experiences at a chamber music festival, and examines the ways in which social and musical enjoyment interact to generate commitment and a sense of involvement in the event. Audience members' anxieties for the future of classical music listening are discussed, and recommendations made for research and practice that could recognise more effectively the central role of the listener in contemporary musical life.

The traditional practices of the Western concert hall assume for listeners a relatively passive role, leaving them able to respond to decisions made by performers and promoters only in the extent of their applause and their future attendance. The unspoken conventions of listening behaviour – all designed to promote an absence of movement or noise during performance – are implicit even in the architecture of many concert halls, which place the audience members at a distance from performers, and firmly delineate the social and musical aspects of concert-going through fixed seating which 'suppresses individual display in the auditorium and displaces it to corridors, bars and salons' (Chanan, 1994: 157). Christopher Small, an ethnomusicologist resistant to the 'false reassurances' offered by the apparently isolated world of orchestral concerts, describes listeners as spectators with 'nothing to contribute but our attention to the spectacle that has been arranged for us' (Small, 1998: 44). This article questions the validity of prevailing assumptions about the passive status of the audience by analysing the experiences of committed concert hall listeners, and offering new insight on their roles and perspectives.

*Listening – in the concert hall and beyond*

Listening practices and habits have undergone rapid change in the past few decades. Widespread access to music of all genres through increasingly affordable and portable technology enables many listeners to construct a 'soundtrack' to daily life (DeNora, 2000), accompanying everyday activities with music that helps to generate 'a sense of identity

within an often impersonal environment' (Bull, 2000: 24; see also Sloboda *et al.*, 2001). Listening, much more than for previous generations, has become a self-regulated, expressive activity, used to deepen or escape personal moods, and to enhance knowledge of and involvement in diverse aspects of contemporary musical culture.

Greater autonomy and choice in listening to recorded music means that listening is now a diffuse and adaptable practice, of which concert hall attendance forms only a small part. Indeed, the performance of classical music has been variously held to be in a state of crisis (Johnson, 2002), although many writers have responded robustly to such accusations, suggesting that 'those who speak of a "crisis" in classical music are really describing the irrevocable demise of old, familiar attitudes, expectations and ways of working' (Levitt & Rennie, 1999: 7). Richard Peterson (1992) suggests that broader social trends of tolerance and exploration are partly responsible for the decline of the classical music 'snob', who listens to 'high art' repertoire and nothing else:

Elite taste is no longer defined simply as the expressed appreciation of the high art forms and a corresponding moral disdain of, or patronizing tolerance for, all other aesthetic expressions. [... The] aesthetics of elite status are being redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms along with the appreciation of the classic fine arts. (Peterson, 1992: 252)

Even though Peterson's analyses of the relationship between musical taste and occupational status show a broadening of attitudes and access to classical music (Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996), the conventions of the concert hall can seem to be at odds with contemporary life, so presenting barriers for all but the most habitual attenders. Young people, in particular, express the desire to use their available leisure time for activities which incorporate a stronger social element than might be typical at a classical concert (Harland & Kinder, 1999):

For many people, classical music seems like a solitary activity, not just in its production but also in its reception. Performers on stage behave in highly formalized ways and seem to interact with one another very little. Audiences, even when they are large, show virtually no collective activity except the simple, ritualistic act of applause.

(Johnson, 2002: 69)

Johnson, in his spirited defence of classical music, offers some examples of how performers 'engage in a collectivity that exceeds their individual contributions' (p. 69), but there is no comparable discussion of the audience member's social experience. Musicological research has

historically privileged the musical text over the musical experience, focusing on analysis of the art object rather than its life beyond the printed score. Interest in the cultural study of music has grown in recent years (cf. Clayton, Herbert & Middleton, 2003), but there remains a lack of empirical evidence to support or challenge prevailing theoretical and anecdotal views of audience membership.

*Researching the audience experience*

This article aims to challenge received ideas about the nature of concert listening through an empirical case study of audience experiences. The research reported here was carried out at the week-long Music in the Round chamber music festival, held in May 2003 at the Crucible Studio Theatre in Sheffield. The festival consisted of a week of lunchtime and evening chamber music concerts given by members of the host string quartet and their 'friends', many of whom have been regular performers throughout the festival's twenty year existence. The programming of festivals is usually the responsibility of the first violinist in the quartet, in his additional role as Artistic Director, and in the past they have often had a particular theme - individual composers, or repertoire linked by time or place. In 2003 the programme was an 'audience choice' mixture of previously heard works, which included such varied repertoire as a Spohr Octet, Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* and Schubert's *Winterreise*, as well as a range of quartets and quintets by Mozart, Brahms, Britten, Tippett and others. This retrospective of the festival's history was heightened by news of the quartet's imminent retirement, bringing an inevitable sense of nostalgia to the week, as well as considerable anxiety about the festival's future.

Through questionnaire, interview and diary responses, audience members reflected on their engagement with the festival and its role in their lives, demonstrating a high level of loyalty, awareness and involvement which allowed them to feel fully participant in the musical event. Antoine Hennion suggests that this kind of qualitative research into musical behaviour has become problematic as 'people are now so "sociologized" that when you ask them what their musical tastes are, they will begin by apologizing: "my family was very middle-class, I was taught by a private tutor, my sister played the violin..."' (Hennion, 2001: 5). I found few examples of such apologetic self-analysis amongst my respondents, but it is inevitably true that they were engaged in a certain degree of self-presentation, conveying their own interpretations of their attitudes and experiences as part of their response to my questions. For many respondents, such analysis and reflection seemed to be a familiar part of their discourse and their concert-going behaviour, and so its artificial separation here would be undesirable as well as near impossible. Multiple methods of data collection ensured that where representative audience views were sought, these could emerge through repeated or

widespread questioning, but the idiosyncratic views that lie outside these general trends provide just as valuable an insight on the experience of being 'in audience' at the festival.

The discussion that follows will consider the extent to which the ethos, style and continued success of this festival are affected in substantial measure by the views and behaviour of repeat attenders. The social effects of the audience upon one another will also be examined, taking into account the diverse experiences of newcomers and more established listeners, some of whom have been attending since the festival was founded twenty years ago. The experience of being a listener will be considered in relation to audience members' other musical activities, showing how connections are forged between attendance at the festival and the desire for further musical involvement. Finally, the assumptions surrounding concert listening will be revisited in the light of this new empirical evidence, and some suggestions made for reconsidering the notion of the participant listener.

#### *The effects of venues and spaces*

The Music in the Round festival gets its name from the venue where it takes place; an intimate 'in the round' setting, where the audience occupies raised seating around a small stage area. Audience members attributed much of the intimacy and informality of the event to the fact that the spaces occupied by performers and audience were less clearly delineated than in traditional concert halls, enjoying the feeling of being able to 'read the music over their shoulders almost' [I13]<sup>1</sup>. As the audience filed out in the interval, across the stage area that had just been vacated by the performers, a few people would often look at the printed scores that had been left on music stands, or stop to chat with friends that they had spotted across the room. The overlapping of musical and social spaces was striking, and seemed to encourage discussion about the music and the festival as a whole, which might have been more forced if it was displaced to the 'public' arenas of the theatre's bars or foyers.

In such an unusual setting, audience members often had fixed ideas about where they wanted to sit, some enjoying the illusion that 'you're sitting in the middle of the stage with the performers around you' [Q10], and others liking the distance of the upper tiers where they could withdraw occasionally from the intensity of listening [I6]. Many felt that the venue had 'spoilt [them] for other kinds of concerts' [I12], where the audience 'all in rows and the performers up on stage in a line' [I11] felt

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<sup>1</sup> Direct quotes are taken from the qualitative data gathered from audience members during and after the festival: 347 questionnaire responses [coded Q1-347], 20 follow-up interviews [I1-20], and 13 diaries [D1-13]. Participants were assured of anonymity in their responses and so personal details have been omitted where necessary.

regimented and stuffy by comparison. One listener recalled hearing the same performer at Music in the Round and then in Sheffield Cathedral, and finding the setting and ethos of the second concert less engaging:

It's the venue, and the atmosphere, the approach, because at the cathedral she was just very much, you know, wonderful performer, on a stage, strutting her stuff sort of thing; whereas in Music in the Round, you know, she talked, there's this sort of feeling between the audience and the performer, which is just, just makes the whole thing so different and so exciting. [I12]

By exposing and questioning the conventions of the concert hall, Music in the Round has encouraged its regular participants to value the proximity and intimacy that the round venue affords. In the Crucible Studio, unusually for a classical music venue, participants appeared to feel part of the 'communication loop' described by Paul Berliner as being beneficial to jazz performance: 'Just as the design of the hall, the stage and the lighting frames the band's activity for the audience's observation, it also frames the audience's activity for the band to observe' (Berliner, 1994: 459).

Being 'in the round' meant that the audience had a clear view not only of the performers, but also of other people engaged in listening. This was variously felt to be a distraction or an advantage, offering opportunities for people-watching, locating friends and 'regulars', and observing 'the effects of the music on the rest of the audience' [I10]:

If you do glance up occasionally and you see somebody with a slight smile [...] their involvement adds to your joy, your enjoyment, it does to me anyway; we're all really enjoying this, that's lovely, it's a nice feeling. [I10]

I expect if you're not used to it, it perhaps is a bit peculiar to see the audience as well as the players, but you know, it now seems funny to us and a bit dull when we don't have that, so we're spoilt really. [I11]

These comments reveal a liking for two aspects of concert attendance that are rarely given due attention in discussions of listening: the visual impact of performers and other listeners, and the collective experience of being part of an audience. Both of these might be assumed to be peripheral to the music 'itself', but they are strong components in the social experience of attending a concert, and as such featured prominently in the research data. Proximity to the stage area was seen as beneficial in allowing close visual engagement with the performance, either through a focus on the players - 'when you can see it and hear it at the same time, it's often a revelation, how the music is put together' [I10] - or, particularly for

contemporary music, the printed score; 'I was sat right behind one of the musicians and I could see marks on the score that, sort of lines kind of going down across the score, which was quite interesting' [I13]. The responses discussed so far are particular to the 'in the round' performing space, but they also reveal some generalisable points about the importance for audience members of feeling 'at home' in a given venue. An auditorium which allows regular attenders to recognise their peers and friends, even if spaces for sustained conversation are restricted, appears to foster a sense of belonging, such that Music in the Round listeners felt themselves to be 'part of and involved with the music' [Q274].

The close connection between venue and ethos being expressed here appeared to be widely felt amongst the audience, most of whom saw the few failings of the venue as being far outweighed by its advantages. Those who remembered pre-Festival concerts played twenty years earlier in a nearby chapel, speculated that the relaxed ethos would not have evolved so successfully in another venue. The sense of occupying a familiar and well-known space seemed to be part of the pleasure experienced by regular festival-goers, and the fact that almost all parts of the venue were accessible to the audience members must have contributed to this feeling of being 'at home'. Although there was a backstage area – a sparsely furnished and functional space closed off by a security-coded door – the performers spent little time there, and were often to be seen chatting with the audience in the foyer outside the Studio. Performers also joined the audience to listen to pieces in which they were not playing, and so the opportunities for audience and performer interaction were an apparently natural part of the festival, valued by many of the regular attenders.

Of course, such an atmosphere does not suit everybody, seeming particularly alien, perhaps, to those who are accustomed to more conventional styles of chamber music performance. One diarist wrote of feeling uncomfortable with 'the "hype" surrounding the concerts, which is really nothing to do with the music and does to a small extent interfere with my enjoyment of the performance as a whole' [D1]. Another had brought some friends to one concert, and been surprised at their lukewarm reaction to a context in which she clearly felt very comfortable:

We brought a cousin of my partner and his wife (our guests for the weekend). They had been to the festival before – but find the intimacy, energy, emotion and enthusiasm of the audience and the performers hard to take. We realised afresh how privileged we are, how special the festivals are – and how sad and purist lots of other folks are! They will not be invited again – we have too many other friends who *do* want to come. [D11]

Those expressing similar discomfort with the festival were rare amongst my questionnaire respondents, perhaps because those who felt familiar and happy with the event were the most willing to participate in the research. The few voices of dissent stood out as a reminder that the pleasure experienced by 'insiders' can itself act as barrier to newcomers, a fact that a few regular attenders acknowledged with some concern. Those conventions that seem 'natural' to people who have seen the festival develop over twenty years can strike the novice audience member as strange or alienating, with the unusual venue perhaps serving to highlight this by requiring the audience to move comfortably through performing spaces that are out of bounds in more conventional auditoria.

Writers on theatre architecture are familiar with the need for 'the energy of actors and audience [to] be channelled, exchanged and heightened through effective theatre architecture' (Mackintosh, 1993: 159), but discussion of auditoria design for music is generally preoccupied with acoustics, paying little attention to the social effects of being in a shared listening space. Even Michael Forsyth's (1985) history of concert hall architecture, sensitive though it is to the changing relationship between musical works of different eras and their performance setting, makes little mention of the experiences of listeners, and none at all of the 'non-listening' spaces within concert halls – the bars, foyers and ticket queues where opinions about the music and its performance might be shared. The heightened awareness of listening space revealed by the Music in the Round audience suggests that further research into the impact of listening venues is needed to help to increase understanding of musical reception and experience in the concert hall setting.

#### *Creating an ethos: dress codes and social conventions*

The accessibility fostered by the Studio venue was supported by other features of the festival, which all emphasised the intimacy of the performing space while counteracting the intensity that could easily result from the tightly-focused auditorium. Striking amongst these was the dress of the musicians: T-shirts in white, grey or black, printed with the logo of the '20<sup>th</sup> anniversary' festival, were worn by all performers, and were also on sale to the audience. Only a few performers resisted the uniform; one pianist wore a collared shirt under his long-sleeved T-shirt, and a 'cellist who chose to wear a jacket was teased that 'there was no need to dress up'.

Music in the Round is by no means alone in abandoning the archaic musicians' uniform of dinner jackets and evening wear, but Christopher Small (1998) questions whether the now commonplace change to 'a stylised version of everyday dress' is a true indication of a new relationship between performers and their audiences: 'the uniform remains a uniform, which continues to set the listeners apart from the musicians' (Small, 1998: 67). A few members of the audience suggested



that the youthful associations of such casual dress had become increasingly anachronistic as the quartet and their guest performers had aged with the festival, admitting 'not everybody looks quite right in those T-shirts' [I17]. However, enthusiasm for the convention was still widespread, and a small number of the audience were to be seen throughout the week in a range of T-shirts from previous festivals, so sharing the 'uniform' of the performers and demonstrating their long-standing involvement and sense of closeness with the festival.

Audience members spoke often of the friendliness and informality of which these conventions were both a symptom and a cause. Regular attenders felt themselves to be part of a 'very sophisticated, broadminded and dedicated audience' [Q186], but while this has led to friendships within and beyond the festival for some, even the more sociable listeners acknowledged that social interactions could be limited: 'It has taken time to get to know people, we were once rather guarded and too polite to intrude on another's privacy - now we seem *much* more relaxed and open' [D6]. For many audience members, even those who had been attending for some years, 'friendliness' at the festival was not synonymous with 'friendship', consisting mainly of recognising familiar faces across the auditorium rather than of more sustained social interactions. Most seemed to enjoy the sense of easy companionship that such an atmosphere afforded, with only infrequent visitors finding the tone 'complacent, uncritical and unthinkingly responsive' [Q129]. For the majority, the welcoming informality of the festival enhanced enjoyment of the music, such that the experience of listening was closely linked with its social context: 'A wonderful opportunity to hear top class musicians in a friendly informal setting' [Q146].

Although the extent of interactions between audience members may be limited and varied, it is clear that nearly all expect to find a friendly welcome at festival concerts, and to feel at home amongst like-minded, dedicated listeners. To investigate this aspect of attendance, questionnaire respondents were asked to describe a 'typical' member of the audience and then say how closely they fitted that model themselves. The unanimity of responses was striking and emphasised the ageing profile of the audience, their likely occupations in education, professional work or retirement, and their tendency to be musically knowledgeable, if a little conservative. The desire to broaden the age range and social profile of the audience was frequently mentioned: as one respondent wrote, 'I would love to see the audience profile expand - not that I have anything against retired white middle class academics' [Q95]. Audience members are faced with the dilemma of wanting to preserve the ethos of which they enjoy being a part, whilst recognising that change may be essential to its continued success.

### *Musical preferences and priorities*

While discussion of the venue and atmosphere of the festival dominated questionnaire responses, such discussion took place against an assumption that audience members were also fully committed to and appreciative of the musical aims of the festival: the high quality performance of a wide variety of chamber music. Audience members' decisions about which concerts to attend were inevitably shaped in part by pragmatic considerations – particularly the limitations of time and finances – although these were avoided by season ticket holders, who aimed to keep the duration of the festival as free from other commitments as possible. The musical decisions that informed concert selection were more revealing of the audience's preferences and values, showing a predictable loyalty to the host string quartet alongside a balance of views on the desirability or otherwise of new or unfamiliar music:

Concerts must have at least one item I know or believe I shall like e.g. by a composer I like. [Q51]

I rely a bit on [the Artistic Director's] choice and often go to something new: I am always – almost always – really elated. Otherwise I choose what I know. [Q115]

Overall, the audience attitude could be described as cautiously open-minded: having learnt to trust their Artistic Director's choice over the years, most were prepared to risk new experiences, and for every audience member who would avoid 'obscure works by composers I don't know' [Q104], there was another who preferred a challenge and would stay away 'if I already know the works inside out' [Q41].

The Audience Choice festival of May 2003 was itself indicative of the range of musical tastes held by regular festival-goers, although the list of nominations printed in the festival programme revealed that individual votes had carried considerable weight: only 355 votes had been cast in total, by fewer than 100 people in the audience [I4]. Diverse reasons for this fairly low voting response emerged from the questionnaire responses, including not just those who had missed the call for nominations the previous year, but also those who assumed that 'sufficient others would' [Q12] or felt that 'knowing the choice was coming from past festivals I cannot think of anything I would not value re-visiting for at least a second hearing' [Q48]. For those who had made successful nominations, performances had an added excitement: 'it was a real thrill them playing something you'd chosen, because I got quite a few choices, so that was a buzz, you know' [I10]. Audience members themselves reflected on the choices they had collectively made, expressing varying levels of enthusiasm:

It is very varied and there are some surprise inclusions – people haven't just voted for the more popular favourites. We have become a more open-minded audience! [Q81]

Great for a celebration but would be like a Christmas cake made only of icing if it happened too often. [Q218]

Lots of marvellous music, but not the same feeling of discovery that accompanies an 'in depth' festival focussing on a particular composer, period or nation. [Q161]

Respondents like the last one who had missed the themed approach of previous festivals illustrated the strongly educative function that Music in the Round had served for many of its long-standing listeners. While the enjoyment of music was evident from the questionnaire responses, it was clear that this was located within a desire to be challenged and developed as well as entertained.

The impetus for self-development that was widespread amongst the audience was perhaps connected with their liking for chamber music, itself a category which could encompass varied audience tastes within a broadly shared preference. Music in the Round listeners were prepared to debate and discuss their musical tastes in ways that can be notably absent in other, more clearly defined genres: listeners in a parallel study at a Gilbert and Sullivan Festival, for example, engaged in little critical discussion of the repertoire, priding themselves on their detailed knowledge of a small range of works rather than their willingness to engage with new stagings or interpretations (Pitts, 2004; forthcoming). The constant factor of the host string quartet at Music in the Round meant that loyalty to the performers encouraged many listeners to be more adventurous in their concert selections, exposing them to new experiences that might otherwise have been avoided. Established relationships are therefore shown to have a significant effect on listening: knowing that the majority of their listening experiences at this festival and with these performers have been pleasurable, listeners become more willing to take risks – but rarely transfer their more adventurous musical choices to other settings.

#### *Learning and loyalty*

Many regular attenders felt that their knowledge of chamber music had been deepened through their years of listening, and saw the introductory talks given by the performers as playing a valuable role in developing their listening skills and awareness. The leader of the host string quartet took on this task most frequently, and several interviewees commented that he was 'gifted in that respect' [I2], combining an informal, conversational style with obvious enthusiasm for the music. The talks fulfilled a dual function, giving an educative context to the music that

followed, whilst also welcoming and relaxing the audience with in-jokes and asides. One interviewee suggested that the proximity to the performers encouraged a conversational style in spoken introductions, so adding to the informality and 'unstiffness' which was a valued feature of the festival:

If the same thing was done in [a larger venue] the tone would be quite different – the voice would have to be lifted, and it would have to be more rhetorical and slower – but as it is you can get throwaways, and lots of the artists obviously love that because they can bring in their absurdities and the like, you know, those sort of throwaway lines. That breaks up the formality of the music too, and people relax and laugh and enjoy themselves and then turn round and start listening to the music, you know, in a relaxed way. [I16]

Just as the T-shirts did not suit everybody, so some performers seemed less comfortable with the need to emerge from behind the barrier of their instrument, perhaps sharing the pianist Susan Tomes' experience that the mental focus of the performance 'seemed to be randomly dispersed if we had to think about speaking as well' (Tomes, 2003). Tomes suggests that the prevalence of television and radio commentaries has left audiences unable to deal with silence or lack of verbal information, but despite her reservations about spoken introductions, she acknowledges their effectiveness, recalling the reaction of audiences hearing a contemporary piece by Judith Weir:

It was obvious to us all, rather annoyingly, that the more we said about it, the better was the audience's response to the music. Where we said nothing at all, the reaction was muted, no matter how good the playing. Where we described our friendship with Judith, how she came to write the piece, what fun we had had rehearsing it, and so on, the applause was noticeably warmer at the end.

(Tomes, 2003)

Tomes' recently published diaries of her years as a pianist with the Domus ensemble reveal that finding the right tone for spoken introductions has in fact been a prevailing theme in her performing career, and in an entry from July 1981 she notes the benefits of granting audience members social as well as musical contact with the players: 'Once again I conclude that one can really take nothing for granted in the audience; one assumes that the audience sees through the mask of dignity which we wear on the platform to the lovable souls underneath, but in most cases this is simply not possible for them to do, given so little evidence' (Tomes, 2004: 15).

These rather contradictory accounts of Susan Tomes' experience illustrate the tensions and dilemmas of speaking to an audience – perhaps shared by visiting ensembles at Music in the Round. Audience members' accounts, though, confirm her view that the sense of personal contact provided by speech helps to build connections between performers and listeners that are valued by the majority of the audience. Music in the Round audiences responded well to the anecdotal touch; there was an audible murmur of sympathy when the leader of the host quartet mentioned the heart attack he had suffered ten years previously, and references to previous concerts, within this festival and beyond, seemed to add to the general feeling of community. Talks tended to use a minimum of technical language, whilst assuming a considerable knowledge of repertoire, a style which the majority of the audience clearly found appropriate and helpful:

These festivals are for the initiated – people who already know these kinds of work and want to both re-hear things they know and discover new works. It's obvious that there are a lot of musically very well-informed people in the audience and the introductory talks assume that this is so – and this is *not* a criticism. [D2]

The diarist above touches on a dilemma acknowledged by many audience members: how to ensure a welcome for newcomers at the concerts while preserving the ethos and standards that are valued by regular attenders. As mentioned earlier, the need to expand the audience profile in order to ensure its survival was recognised by the majority of respondents, but there was nevertheless strong resistance to change, and a feeling that the festival needed only to be promoted more widely: 'I would like to see more diverse audiences, and more outreach work – many in the city are unaware of what's on offer and haven't had opportunities to discover it' [Q96]. In their desire to 'convert' others to chamber music listening, a proportion of the respondents were reflecting their own experience of being brought to chamber music through Music in the Round, seeing the festival as 'one of the major cultural influences of my life and a constant source of pleasure' [Q50]. It is a little ironic that the festival's initial aim to bring new audiences to chamber music was so successful that the original audience is still there, willing in principle to be joined by more recent converts, but in practice leaving no room for such expansion.

#### *Connecting the festival with everyday life*

Those listeners who enjoyed being educated within the festival also prepared for and reacted to their listening through self-directed activities; collecting and listening to CDs, researching composers through books or websites, and following the activities of the host string quartet through the newsletter distributed to the 'Friends of Music in the Round' fund-

raising organisation of which many were members. There was some dissension amongst the audience on the relationship between recorded listening and concert attendance: a few were adamant that CDs were a poor substitute for live listening, whilst others found their concert experiences to be enriched by preparation and follow-up listening. After a performance of Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time, identified as a highlight of the festival by a number of listeners, one diarist wrote; 'I have a CD of this work. But I don't think I want to listen to it ever again. Nothing can replicate what we have experienced this evening' [D2]. Another listener had an opposite reaction to a performance of a Beethoven quartet: 'I have not been playing my Beethoven CDs and LPs for a long time - now this live performance has opened these Beethoven pieces to me again. I shall go back and listen - and listen to Beethoven more attentively after the festival' [D6]. Both diarists acknowledge here the connections between their live and recorded listening: one experience informs the other, even if their relationship is at times an uneasy one.

Whilst there were some listeners for whom concerts were simply 'a good way to have a break from work' [Q267] or 'a pleasant interlude in a mundane life' [Q277], there were many more who experienced the festival intensely and felt a sense of 'bereavement' when it was over: 'one plans a wake (we always do): on the Sunday, whatever the weather, we walk the Peak' [D5]. Other members of the audience had joined an impromptu party at the end of the festival, where 'we celebrated the festival and talked and talked and wound down and made the "withdrawal" from all that music more bearable' [D6]. Just as the festival disrupted the routines of daily life, so the transition back to 'normality' required a change of focus, when 'it takes about a week to overcome 'withdrawal' symptoms - and the memories linger on...' [D7]. The language of pain and loss - albeit sometimes with an ironic tone - was common to many reflections on the end of the festival, as listeners emerged from an intense week of listening and considered its continuing impact on their lives. The sense of a community dispersing - at least until the next festival - was also expressed by some, illustrating the wordless communication of shared values and experiences that was felt between regular attenders: 'There's a feeling of shared celebration as if we've been on a journey and are surprised that we came so far - realising we've shared such wonderful experiences together' [D7].

The majority of listeners returned to fulfilling and active cultural lives, whether as audience members at the local theatres or arts cinema, or by participating in musical activities as amateur performers. A high proportion of respondents reported taking instrumental or vocal lessons, or participating in chamber music groups and orchestras, offering some support for Julian Johnson's assertion that 'those who have engaged most profoundly in classical music have almost always practised it themselves' (Johnson, 2002: 119). The greater profundity of a performer's listening might be open to question, particularly amongst these well-informed

listeners, but some audience members agreed that experience of playing, at whatever level, offered additional insight on the music they heard during the festival. Some listeners who performed regularly felt that they had learnt directly from the performing styles in the festival, one singer, for example, had found herself emulating the spoken introductions in the realisation that 'if you're going to perform you have to communicate with the audience' [I6]. Others who played mainly for their own pleasure acknowledged a more subtle influence; perhaps an impetus to practice or to try new repertoire, despite feeling 'quite happy to let other people do the playing really; it's quite good to have a bit of basic knowledge though' [19].

Audience members at Music in the Round saw one another as highly knowledgeable, but often dismissed high levels of past or current musical involvement in their appraisals of their own 'musicianly' status. Respondents sought new phrases to capture the depth of their commitment to listening, variously describing themselves as 'a music lover' [Q20], 'an appreciative listener' [Q98], 'a life-long accomplished listener' [Q121], 'an avid listener' [Q159], 'musical and with a good knowledge of music' [Q188], and 'an enthusiastic audience member' [Q225]. There are clear levels of 'listener-ship' amongst these participants, ranging from occasional attendance at single concerts, through to full membership of the audience for all festivals and associated events. In perceiving hierarchies of commitment amongst their number, the Music in the Round audience shares the preoccupations of the Bruce Springsteen devotees in Daniel Cavicchi's study, who distinguish between the 'temporary role of audience member and the more permanent role of fan' (Cavicchi, 1998: 91).

Music in the Round listeners were sparing in their use of the term 'fan', which is after all more usually associated with the emotional excesses of the pop music world (Jenson, 1992: 21), but there were nonetheless striking similarities between their attitudes and those of the Springsteen followers:

Fans see ordinary audience members as passively responding to the more obvious and superficial elements of rock performance, interested only in having fun, partying, and being entertained. But by strongly weaving their performance experiences into their daily lives, fans see their own participation in rock performance as far more active, serious, and interpretive, as shaped by something larger than the performance itself.

(Cavicchi, 1998: 91)

The strength of connections between concert attendance and daily life appear to be the determining factor in separating casual listeners from their more dedicated peers, and the symptoms of more involved listening

are detailed with pride; an eagerness to buy tickets, a willingness to give absolute priority to attendance, and a happy exhaustion at the end of a concentrated period of listening. The same behaviours, or close equivalents, are to be found in the Springsteen audiences and the Music in the Round festival-goers, although their similarities are disguised by surface-level differences in musical genre and performing style. Researchers, performers and concert promoters could learn much about classical music audiences through comparison with the more extensive literature on popular music listening, although even there David Hesmondhalgh has suggested that there is still much work to be done in gathering reliable empirical evidence (Hesmondhalgh, 2002: 118).

*Conclusions: being a participant listener*

The level of involvement felt by audience members at Music in the Round is clear from their responses: while one joked that 'I'm sure they managed without me on my days off' [D13], others took their participatory role more seriously, feeling 'as if [their] presence was significant' [D10]. Attendance at festival concerts represented the ideal listening experience for many, and such strong connections with the event make it hard to separate the effects of the many factors which were enjoyable for those listeners: the intimate venue, the regular performers, much-loved familiar repertoire, new musical challenges, and perhaps above all, the presence of like-minded listeners in the audience community.

This article has concentrated on the accounts of those who were committed to and fully involved in the festival, although there were of course exceptions amongst the respondents, who felt themselves to be distanced from the established audience:

At risk of sounding arrogant, I found an ever greater readiness than usual to respond exuberantly and – it seems to me – sometimes uncritically. All performances drew the same enthusiasm, perhaps justifiably, but there has been something a bit 'rote' about the constant cheering and stamping. [D1]

Perhaps it is inevitable – as in other social contexts – that a tight-knit community, such as an audience with a twenty year shared history, will leave some feeling excluded from the dominant values and experiences of the group. Some potential listeners will be prepared to tolerate that discomfort in the interests of hearing the music; many more will simply stay away. This problem for performers and promoters was acknowledged by many of the Music in the Round audience, and is supported by research with young people (Harland & Kinder, 1999), ethnic minority groups (Harris Research Centre, 1993), and the economically disadvantaged (Moore, 1997), all of whom perceive the homogeneity of current audiences to be a barrier to attendance.



Social comfort has been shown in this study to be important to Music in the Round listeners, who enjoyed recognising familiar faces across the auditorium, and were willing to attend concerts alone knowing that there would always be somebody to talk to. The friendliness of the festival was attributed in varying parts to the design of the auditorium, the informality of the performing style, the concentration of events in a week-long festival, and the presence of a well-established core audience. This combination of factors is rare, and Music in the Round is by no means typical of contemporary concert life; further research remains to be done on concert series, for example, where the process of establishing a listening community might take longer, if it occurs at all. Documenting a festival of this kind can be considered as the reception history of the future; considering the experiences of listeners at a time when their ways of behaving are being opened to question, not least by the audience members themselves.

There is much potential for further research into the impact of listening spaces, considering both the design intention for concert hall venues and their subsequent uses; how audiences at different kinds of musical event inhabit the space and come to feel 'at home' within it. By extension, the social conventions of concert attendance demand closer scrutiny: how these are established, who holds greatest influence in shaping or changing them, and who becomes included or excluded as a result. Comparisons with other art forms would be useful in illuminating the specificities of musical experience: research into theatre-going, for example, is relatively well-established (e.g. Mackintosh, 1993; Bennett, 1997), perhaps because audience response is much more tangible and on-going for the actor than the musician, who must wait for applause or comments after a performance to gain any real sense of how their work has been received. Audiences for music have had relatively little voice in the research literature until now, and their experiences and perspectives are undoubtedly worth further investigation.

This study has shown the close relationship between social and musical enjoyment that is at the heart of concert attendance; a connection well established in relation to musical participation, but given rather less attention in respect to audience experience (cf. Pitts, forthcoming for further examples and discussion). Audience members have been shown here to be committed, involved and self-aware, presenting opinions and analysis that shed new light on musical reception and experience. These findings could hold practical value for performers and concert promoters seeking to develop future audiences, since they offer a reminder that audience development should not be solely concerned with increasing numbers and broadening demographics. Individual experience is at the heart of meaningful listening, and recognition of the perspectives of audience members has much to contribute to practical music-making and to broader understanding of musical life in contemporary culture.

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