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# **(Un)popular music and young audiences: exploring the classical chamber music concert from the perspective of young adult listeners**

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## **Abstract**

This empirical study explores the responses of forty young people to a chamber music concert, considering how their greater experience of popular music listening formed a frame of reference for their responses to live classical music. Using qualitative methods including the ‘Write-Draw’ technique to investigate the young peoples’ responses before, during and after the concert, we demonstrate how the emotional, responsive listening of popular music conflicted with the etiquette of the concert hall and the structures of classical music. Our study sheds new light on the continued decline of young audiences for classical concerts, and presents a challenge to music education to equip young people for all kinds of live musical experience.

## **Keywords**

Young people, classical music, audiences, listening, write-draw method, concerts

## **Introduction: young people as music listeners**

In a journal concerned with understanding popular music education, the setting of a chamber music concert might seem an obscure place to begin an investigation. Audiences for live classical music rarely have a dual identity as pop music fans (Savage & Gayo 2011), and their arts engagement is often coupled with high levels of education, affluence and cultural capital, apparently far removed from the worlds of the average teenage pop music listener (North, Hargreaves & O’Neill 2000). Yet ethnographic research with both types of listener – the regular concert-goer and the avid pop consumer – has shown how they describe their musical involvement in similar terms, as offering meaning, value and enjoyment, promoting

friendships, and being central to their lives (e.g. Pitts & Spencer 2008; Cavicchi 1998). In this article, therefore, we set out to explore where the boundaries between older classical concert goers and younger pop consumers really lie, and what music education might learn from young people's experiences of first-time attendance at a chamber music concert.

In exploring these questions, we are tackling a challenge familiar to arts promoters, that of the ageing demographic of classical music audiences (Keaney & Oskala 2007; Kolb 2001), which suggests low levels of interest amongst young people, even those with high levels of cultural awareness or engagement in non-classical music or other art forms (Kolb 2000; Dobson 2010). Kolb's research shows that patterns of arts attendance are established relatively early in life and strongly influenced by family: this suggests that an increasingly ageing population and audience demographic is not necessarily good news for arts organisations, particularly when factors such as declining health, mobility and social networks in older age are taken into consideration (Keaney & Oskala 2007: 331). Of greater urgency for arts organisations, therefore, is the focus on attracting younger audiences to live classical music, with the absent 'young' demographic including those of parenting age as well as their offspring.

Considerable research has been devoted to exploring the dichotomy between the ubiquity of music in everyday life (DeNora 2000; Bull 2005), and the decline in concert attendance around the world (League of American Orchestras 2009; Australian Council for the Arts 2010). Johnson (2002) and others (e.g. Kramer 2007) have focused on asserting the value of classical music, seeing its declining status as reflecting 'the embattled state of music education and a widespread social ignorance about music' (p. 119). By contrast, Hesmondhalgh articulates the value of music in society more widely, but observes that 'an understanding and appreciation of classical music may be difficult to develop, and may be more accessible to relatively privileged social groups' (2013: 91). Both authors use the word 'music' in an unqualified sense throughout their arguments, though it is clear that their meanings and frames of reference are different, so highlighting the difficulties of talking across genres and contexts when considering the roles of musical meaning and identity in young people's lives.

Much of the previous research on contemporary attitudes to classical music has been theoretical, rather than empirical, so any assumptions about whether young people's views and expectations are shaped by antipathy or apathy have remained largely unexplored. Our research, involving young people as first-time attenders at a chamber music concert, aims to address this lack of empirical evidence, and to give voice to those first-time concert-goers, respecting their perspectives as experienced listeners in an unfamiliar setting. Through arts-informed creative research methods, our study explores the young people's expectations and first impressions of the concert, and the ways in which their prior learning and engagement as pop music consumers form a potential bridge or barrier to their classical concert listening.

### **Literature review: classical music and its audiences**

In popular music studies, attenders of live concerts are often thought of as consumers or fans (Duffett 2013), using the latter term themselves to describe their musical identities (Cavicchi 1998; Bennett 2015). Audiences for classical music, by contrast, tend to be portrayed – both by themselves and by researchers – as communities, rejecting the term 'fan' and favouring the 'high brow' alternatives of 'conservative fanatic, committed listener, aficionado' (Baker 2007: 20). The value of community, defined as 'a group of people joining together publicly over a shared passion, in the same geographical setting, who are united by a social matrix' (Dearn & Price 2016: 3), is frequently asserted in empirical research with classical music audiences: it forms part of the enjoyment of live music listening for regular attenders (Baker 2007; Brown 2002; Arts Council England 2004; Obalil 1999) while presenting something of a barrier for young people who seek the support of like-minded peers in attending concerts (Brown 2004a; The Audience Agency 2013; Dobson & Pitts 2011; Kolb 2000).

Although classical music audiences might reject the term 'fandom' to describe their concert listening, their collective behaviour holds many similarities with definitions of fandom from popular music and media studies. Jenkins (1992) describes how film and television fans are united by asserting 'their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons' (p. 18), and the interval conversations, ticket purchasing decisions, and loyalties of classical music listeners fit closely into this definition (O'Sullivan 2009).

Likewise, Cavicchi (1998) observes how rock music fans use fandom 'to signify and think about their personal identity [in which] the music was more like a mirror, enabling them to recognize themselves' (p. 135), and classical music audiences do this too, referring to the pleasures of being among 'like-minded people' as they listen (Pitts 2005a). However, when Hills (2002) suggests that 'fans are fans because fan communities exist and can be entered' (xiv), it is clear that applying the frame of fan behaviour to classical music audiences who reject that label requires some careful thought. The 'ethnography of an obsession' presented by Benzecry (2011) in his study of the Colón Opera House deliberately challenges the absence of fan theory from 'high culture', demonstrating how opera 'fanatics' are as willing to queue outside the venue and attend multiple performances as any Springsteen fan (Cavicchi 1998). Our research with young people aims to explore these similarities further, and also to expose some of the misunderstandings that occur between the 'fans' (of popular music) and the 'not-fans' (of classical music), as their behaviours intersect in the classical concert hall setting.

Where there has been empirical research into young people's listening, this has focused mainly on their uses of recorded music, showing how musical preferences can influence (and be influenced by) friendships (North, Hargreaves & O'Neill 2000), with consequent effects on self-esteem, school engagement and mental health (Miranda & Claes 2009). A recent study of music for consolation included high ratings from the adolescent participants for the statement, "I'm sure that other fans feel the same", showing that 'oneness' with other fans contributed to the effect of the music, though not as strongly as the lyrics and music itself (ter Bogt et al. 2016). The same study separated responses by musical genre, noting that 'much classical music and jazz is instrumental music; therefore, text cannot be a source of consolation, which, apparently, listeners preferring these types of music expect' (p. 14). These studies suggest that young people make powerful emotional use of their listening, shaping their identities and daily lives through a self-chosen soundtrack, consistent with DeNora's accounts of 'music's role as a building material of self-identity' (2000: 62). Classical music listeners also report 'chills and thrills' (Sloboda 1991) and 'strong experiences of music' (Gabrielsson & Wik 2003), but these emotional responses sit within a discourse in which musical quality, performer excellence and cultural status tend to dominate, and displays of emotion within the concert hall are kept to a minimum (Small 1998; Pitts

2014). These differences in emotional expectations between pop and classical listeners, younger and older audience members, are a focus for further exploration in our research.

Young people's demonstrable appetite for music listening, and the strong emotional and identity work that it performs in their lives, arguably presents an opportunity for live classical music promoters to introduce younger listeners to a new (to them) form of music and its emotional power. However, the absence of a younger demographic from classical concerts persists (Kolb 2001), and research studies that have introduced young people to live classical music have found that a mixture of uncertainty and low commitment is mixed with a concern that classical music requires training and understanding in order to be thoroughly appreciated (Dobson & Pitts 2011). In the English school music classroom, meanwhile, such training in classical music has been (quite rightly) subsumed into a more inclusive curriculum that recognises the learning styles of popular musicians (Green 2002), and yet this plurality is not without its problems: students within this system typically view classical repertoire as 'old people's music' (Green 2006), and distance their own definitions of 'popular' music from those offered by their teachers (Kruse 2015).

Concert series aimed at increasing the engagement of 18-35 year olds have explicitly borrowed from the presentation of popular music: prominent among these initiatives is 'The Night Shift', run by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE), which offers concerts in non-traditional venues, accompanied by a DJ and bar, and encouraging interaction between audience members and performers. The Night Shift website appeals directly to their target audience in its explicit distancing from the standard presentation of classical music:

'Classical music concerts can be horrible – stuffy, stuck-up audiences, deathly silence and pre-poured glasses of wine that cost the earth. But it doesn't have to be like that, and it hasn't always been' (OAE n.d.). The emphasis in this marketing is strongly on the presentation of classical music, with its stuffiness and silence, and the very positive evaluations of the scheme focus similarly on changing expectations of the concert setting, rather than the music: 'in the course of an hour or so attenders moved from expectations that the experience will be expensive, formal, long, middle aged, proper, strict and stuffy to an understanding that it can be accessible, comfortable, inclusive, informal, laid back, relaxing, spontaneous and "studenty"' (CultureHive 2013: 4). The responses of The Night Shift attenders to the

repertoire and performers (Dobson 2010) suggests that the club-like environment helps young listeners to make comparisons with attending pop gigs: our research considers whether these parallels are drawn (or could be further encouraged) even in the traditional setting of a concert hall.

### **Research methods and participants**

Our research took place as part of the Music in the Round (MitR) chamber music concert series, which has been running in Sheffield for over 30 years and is the largest provider of chamber music outside London. The organisation takes its name from the ‘in the round’ tiered seating arrangements of its home venue, the Crucible Studio, shown in Figures 1A and 1B. This setting provides the audience with proximity to performers and is coupled with an informal style, featuring spoken introductions from the resident musicians, Ensemble 360, and the visiting artists who also contribute to the concert series. These features have been reported by regular MitR audience members to contribute to feelings of accessibility and inclusivity, building audience community through familiarity with the performers and the opportunity to watch other audience members as they listen (see Pitts 2005b; Pitts & Spencer 2008). Our research sought to investigate whether the effects of venue, audience behaviour, and performer interaction were similar for new audience members, and in particular how young newcomers made sense of them in relation to their experience of pop music listening.

**[Insert Figures 1A and 1B here]**

The concerts attended by participants included works by Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms: all but one event took place in the Studio, and the other was held in the nearby church venue, Upper Chapel, which is also familiar to the regular audience but does not have the ‘in the round’ seating arrangements.

The participants for the study were recruited to represent different levels of prior musical education and experience within the under-25 age group (U25s), which is under-represented in classical music audiences in general, and at MitR (see Dobson & Pitts 2011). Three

‘bands’ of young people were targeted according to their engagement in music education and the arts more generally: these comprised music students (Band 1), students of the creative arts but not music (Band 2), and young people not formally engaged with any art forms (Band 3). These categories allowed us to explore the effects of music education on concert experience (B1), the concept of the ‘culturally aware non-attender’ explored in prior studies of young people’s concert-going (B2) (Kolb 2000; Dobson 2010), and the experiences of those for whom engagement in ‘high arts’ is not currently a feature of their lives (B3). Finding participants in Bands 2 and 3 proved challenging, and several false starts with art colleges and community groups had to be abandoned: this accounts for the low numbers in B2 and B3, and illustrates how the barriers of getting first-time attenders to concerts were not easily overcome, despite the offer of free tickets, transport costs, and a supportive peer group. Full details of participant characteristics, recruitment and numbers are shown in Table 1: ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Sheffield, and participant responses are presented anonymously, using codes to indicate their B1, B2 or B3 category.

**[Insert Table 1 here]**

An initial questionnaire with the participants confirmed the differences in their prior musical experience: all the B1 music students had previously been to a classical concert, and 75% of B2 creative writers, but all B3 participants answered ‘never’ to this question. This contrasted strongly with their stated listening habits for recorded music, where B3 respondents reported the highest level of music listening: 78% of B3s listened to recorded music for more than four hours a day, compared with 50% of B2s and 35% of B1s. Of this recorded music, the quantity of classical music heard was indicated by the response to the question ‘is there classical music on your iPod?’: 75% of the B1s and all of the B2s answered yes, while 78% of the B3s said no. While the B1 and B3 results can be easily explained in reference to the participants’ relationship to studying music, the high proportion of listening to both live and recorded classical music amongst B2s (though admittedly small in number) shows an open-mindedness that could be useful to arts marketers – and the variety of responses shows that generalising about ‘young people’ should be done with great caution.

Half of the B2 and B3 respondents stated that they had never been to a live pop gig, but the other half reported going monthly or yearly, showing a variability in attendance that could be indicative of financial or other constraints as much as level of interest. B1 participants were most likely to attend pop gigs monthly (42%) or yearly (37%), with only 16% never having attended. Attendance at other arts events (e.g. jazz concerts, theatre, exhibitions) was highest amongst the B2s, who all reported going monthly to an arts event, compared to 60% of the B2s going monthly, and 85% of the B3s answering 'never'. These responses, while of no statistical significance due to the small and unevenly balanced numbers, demonstrate the range of experiences that the 40 participants brought to the study, and the strong differences in cultural engagement, musical preference, and previous concert-going across the three bands.

After collecting this background data from participants via a questionnaire before the concert, a further two stages of data collection followed. During the concerts participants were asked to give a verbal and visual response to the concert, creating a Write-Draw card (see Angell et al 2014 for a history of this method; also Hartel 2014). After the concert participants joined a focus group where the Write-Draw card produced during the concert led this discussion in the 'Tell' phase of this method. Participants therefore had opportunities to express themselves in a variety of media – drawn, written and spoken – and at three distinct stages in the concert experience. This generated rich, qualitative data and provided opportunities to reflect on expectations and first impressions in the post-concert discussion, so revealing any changes in attitude that had occurred during the event.

### **Thematic discussion: the classical concert experience for young first-time audience members**

Our analysis of the visual and verbal data collected from the three bands of participants facilitated a comparison of expectations and experiences before, during and after the concert, and our discussion here is structured in those three chronological stages. At each stage, we considered how the participants brought their experiences of popular music listening to their roles as classical music audience members, looking for evidence of transfer of skills and

learning from one genre and its listening practices to another, with the aim of understanding how that transfer could be better supported by arts promoters and music educators.

*(i) Before the concert*

As part of the questionnaire completed before the concert, the U25s in this study were asked to complete a timeline showing their expectations of the concert experience: this consisted of a simple line with a start and end point, to which they could add drawing or writing to express their expectations. Variety in the responses was considerable, with B1 participants giving the most detail in their timeline, and therefore demonstrating the highest level of prior knowledge about the expected format and atmosphere of the concert. Their responses were closest to the accounts of concert-going given by regular attenders (e.g. Pitts 2005; O’Sullivan 2009), focusing on listening to the music, absorbing “information” (B1) from the programme and performers, and talking with friends and fellow audience members (B1). Figure 2 shows a sense of anticipation about the concert and the friendly nature of this experience.

**[Insert Figure 2 here]**

B1 participants also mentioned “analysis” of the music, and seeking further knowledge of the music that was going to be played: one B1, for example, would “research what is going to be played so that I am more familiar”. This sense of needing to be prepared for a classical music concert has been commented upon by other new attenders (Pitts 2015), and is a strategy used by some regular concert-goers to enhance their listening experience. While this might seem to reinforce the dependency of classical music listening on high levels of education and prior knowledge, popular music listeners have been shown similarly to value their familiarity with an artist’s recorded output in getting maximum enjoyment from a live performance (Bennett 2015). It is striking, therefore, that only B1 participants stated a preference for feeling prepared for the concert, suggesting that they were drawing on their prior knowledge of classical music concerts, rather than transferring the pop music listening practices that were familiar to all participants.

For B2 participants, anticipation of the concert focused more on the research experience (see Figure 3), perhaps suggesting an element of reluctance in their attendance, or at least a sense that its purpose was primarily for the research rather than for their own anticipated enjoyment.

**[Insert Figure 3 here]**

B3 responses were different again, focusing on physical and emotional responses to the concert-setting, all negatively framed and including the sequence “headache, uncomfortable, hometime”, and statements of anxiety and boredom. The stated lack of expectations for this group highlighted an anticipated level of risk in their attendance: where B1 and B2 participants had found a ‘way in’ to the concert experience, whether through the music or the research process, the B3 responses showed no such strategies or cultural reference points, leaving them at a disadvantage before the concert had even begun.

*(ii) During the concert*

Given their different states of preparedness and anticipation, it is to be expected that the responses to the concert experience varied across the three bands of respondents. B1 respondents had anticipated listening analytically, and their Write-Draw responses show this to have been the case:

*Made the most of crescendos and climax points, soloists really worked together well, especially where dynamics are concerned. Much attention to detail regarding articulation and the differences between light and dark sections of the pieces. (B1, Write response)*

These evaluative comments show a confidence in responding to the music that was generally evident amongst the B1 music students. Taking part in the research might have foregrounded the tendency to give a response of this kind, but even so, this indicates an expectation that this was the ‘right’ approach to classical music listening. While the B1 participants drew on their existing classical music knowledge and vocabulary to comply with those expectations, B2 and B3 respondents showed greater uncertainty over what they ‘should’ be listening for, acknowledging that their responses were “complicated” (B2) or “confused” (B3) in several cases:

*What is the point of classical music: to create feeling within people. On some of the melodies I felt very confused as to what feeling was being wakened in me. The moments where it was really hitting me were amazing.*  
(B3)

This B3 response shows a desire to engage with the music emotionally, rather than through the evaluative lens of the B1 response quoted earlier. This could be viewed as a listening mode adopted from popular music, where using music to change or enhance a mood state is a widespread and clearly articulated practice, including by young adult listeners (DeNora 2000; Miranda & Claes 2009). B3 respondents who had approached the classical concert in this way had been frustrated by what they perceived to be inconsistent emotional states in the music:

*B3: Right, there were moments where it was sad then it just flipped on me. I don't like that because I can't chill to it, do you know what I mean?*

[Researcher]: *So were any bits relaxing?*

*B3: 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.* (B3)

Both B3 responses above also illustrate a tendency to generalise from this first concert experience to all classical music, questioning “the point” of the genre and stating “I know some people like it”, in a way that distances these respondents from the experience and the rest of the regular audience. Other similar comments included “not my type of music and it is not for me” (B3), so illustrating that this first concert experience had, for some participants, entrenched their low expectations of classical music rather than challenging them. Contrasting responses were also received, however, from B3 respondents who enjoyed the “immersive experience” (B3) and B2s who found it “fun and interesting: it wasn’t something I had personally been to before” (B2). Some expressed “surprise” at their levels of enjoyment – “I actually, surprisingly, enjoyed it; I really did” (B3) – showing that they had come with negative expectations and found these overcome in at least some parts of the concert.

Despite some reported feelings of alienation from the concert experience, most B3 respondents had found ways to engage with their listening, with one describing how “for every single piece I heard, there was a visual in my head, say like a little animated sequence of what was going on”. This combination of listening and imagery suggests a transfer of approaches from interpreting pop videos or music in films: other B3 respondents looked similarly for external references, with one drawing an “abandoned house” to signify her absence from the listening experience, while another drew a poppy and commented that the music she had heard “was like the instruments that play at the Remembrance Service that I watched on TV”.

**[Insert Figures 4A and 4B here]**

While any wholly negative responses were concentrated in the B3 group, B1 and B2 responses were not immune to expressions of “boredom” or “drifting off” during the performance, as illustrated in the Write-Draw responses shown in Figure 5.

**[Insert Figure 5 here]**

Like the B3 listener who had been frustrated by music that “flipped up” and disrupted his emotional engagement, B1 listeners tuned in and out emotionally and attentionally throughout the concert, but were more likely to reference the technical prowess of performers as stimulating their re-engagement:

*B1: I think it had its moments. I thought like wow that is really good, and then some moments well I was just watching I wasn't really experience anything. I am not saying it was bad, just for me personally I was just watching and then I was like wow.*

*[Researcher]: So what were the bits that made you go wow?*

*B1: Umm, especially when he was playing really fast and crossing his hand, basically his technicality was wow.*

Although this participant was impressed by the technical ability of the player, there are clear limitations in the language (“wow”) used to describe these moments of absorbed listening. Finding ways to articulate the kinds of listening experienced during the concert was challenging for many of the respondents, and appeared to reinforce their sense of difference from the regular audience members, who were assumed to have more knowledge and experience of the classical concert setting, in contrast with respondents who felt “I haven’t been trained to listen to that kind of music” (B2). The regular listeners were strikingly quiet and attentive, creating a feeling of being “judged silently” (B3) amongst the younger newcomers, and making it hard for them to recognise the enjoyment and engagement of the established audience, as shown in the Write-Draw response of a B1 respondent (Figure 6).

**[Insert Figure 6 here]**

Some of the young listeners made explicit comparisons with pop gigs, both in relation to the audience behaviour and to the interaction with performers: “If you go and see a rock concert, people come out and say ‘Hi everyone, thanks for coming’, [so] it can get a bit sterile to come in – sit down, clap, play, and go” (B3). Interaction with performers is reported by MitR regular audiences to be a strong feature of the organisation’s concert ethos (Pitts, 2005; Pitts and Spencer, 2008), and some of the B1 participants did note that this element of the concert presentation had exceeded their expectations and enhanced the listening experience:

B1A: *The interaction was good.*

[Researcher]: *Were you expecting that?*

B1B: *No, I wasn’t really expecting [the performer] to talk at all. But he seemed to make everything really light-hearted; the fact he was playing something extremely hard and he was like “oh it doesn’t matter”.*

[Researcher]: *And how does that make you feel?*

B1B: *You feel more connected and comfortable.*

B1C: *Inspired, I’d say.*

For these B1 listeners, making comparisons with other classical concerts, the relaxed style had affected them in the same way as regular MitR audience members, but for the B2 and B3 listeners whose cultural reference points were more strongly based in popular music, the format of the concert had been problematic in a number of ways. One listener, in particular, applied the concept of ‘cover versions’ to the eighteenth century repertoire he heard, so finding the performance unsatisfactory because of its distance from the writer of the music:

*Language is not adequate to explain it but she [flautist] didn’t have it. We could talk about the music all day but it is not the music, it is the performance. That song or melody was not written for the women on stage. No one is going to play Beethoven like Beethoven can. That’s the X Factor, no one knows what it is, and it’s just the X Factor. (B3)*

This response highlights the framework that an experienced pop music listener has brought to a classical concert, going far beyond the familiar concerns about when to clap and how to behave (Dobson & Pitts 2011), to a more fundamental misaligning of cultural expectations, built on an informed but different understanding of the roles of the performers, composers and listeners in the musical process. A passion for music is evident in the response, but is acting as a barrier to the concert experience, as the criteria for quality and enjoyment are so far removed from those acquired by the respondent in his pop music listening. This is the most extreme response received, with many other B2 and B3 respondents finding at least some element of the concert “immersive” (B3) or “weird but entertaining” (B3). However, in their observations of the audience’s silent, still behaviour, and their difficulties in articulating how they had experienced the concert, many of the respondents demonstrated that pop music listening is not automatically transferable to classical concert-going, but would require more thought and reflection from both the participants and the arts organisation to form an effective bridge to a new musical experience.

*(iii) After the concert*

Despite the many challenges of their first concert experience, 90 per cent of the respondents stated a willingness to attend another similar event, though acknowledged that this was a low priority for them, with one describing how “especially in the middle of the day, I would probably feel I should be doing something more constructive with my time” (B2).

Committing to attending was coupled with lack of time and information in this response from a B1 music student:

*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. (B1)*

Others were concerned about the financial risk of buying a ticket for an event that they might not enjoy: “we might have hated it and left in the first twenty minutes [...] and if I had just paid £20 for a ticket, I would have been pretty annoyed” (B3). When informed that the ticket price for under-35s was in fact £5, not £20, respondents reflected that this was “cheaper than the cinema” (B1) and “cheaper than getting drunk” (B1), so demonstrating that they were weighing up the cost as a social night out, and revising previous expectations that the event would be prohibitively expensive.

The likelihood of attending again was still low, however, and dependent on having friends to go with: “If it was just down to me I won’t go but say if there was another outing, or someone I knew wanted to go, I would probably tag along” (B3). One B1 respondent acknowledged that being amongst other music students had heightened the experience, because “we can actually all appreciate this sort of music together” (B1), contrasting this with trying to persuade “friends from home because they just wouldn’t want to do it”. Another B1 participant revealed some inherent assumptions about whether pop music listening was sufficient preparation for classical concert-going:

[Researcher]: *How did you feel coming as a group, would you like to come on your own?*

B1 A: *I would come with someone else.*

B1 B: *And someone who actually liked music, like I wouldn’t come with someone that only listened to popular music or didn’t really talk about it or anything like that. You know what I mean it would have to be someone who was as musically inclined as I was.*

Being “musically inclined” means something specific to this B1 respondent, that is different from the reference points of the B3 X Factor listener quoted earlier. Both feel passionately about their own musical perspectives, and implicitly express a strong musical identity: hardly surprising, then, that finding this identity under threat in an unfamiliar musical setting was uncomfortable for some of the B2 and B3 respondents. One B2 respondent reflected on this

mismatch of musical expectations, describing it as a “sense of obligation” to enjoy a concert in a particular way – though encouragingly he reported that arts education had helped him to overcome this hurdle:

*I wonder if that is part of the problem; the sense of obligation when you go there you are supposed to enjoy it in a different way somehow or that there is a different enjoyment that you are missing out on...but I think there is a sense that if you are doing it another way you are doing it wrong like you're watching it in a wrong way which is certainly something I think I had prior to going into education but now it's a sense that all art is available and to be had and to be enjoyed (B2).*

Another reflected with less enthusiasm on how familiarity with classical music might reduce the sense of not being able to “catch the flow”, making the comparison that “if your mum makes you eat porridge all the time you start liking porridge” (B3). Overall, these post-concert responses show that some of the barriers to engagement had changed for these participants, focusing more on lack of time, commitment, friends and finances, and less on disinterest in the musical genre and concert experience. These obstacles, while practical and apparently surmountable, nonetheless remained substantial for the participants, and the likelihood of them returning to a MitR concert seemed slim, at least in the immediate future.

## **Conclusions and implications**

In exploring these young people’s experiences of chamber music attendance, we have explicitly sought to understand their perspectives rather than imposing the agenda of an arts organisation wanting to increase its audiences or reach a younger demographic. Just as The Night Shift report (CultureHive 2013) promotes ‘a valid musical experience in itself [with] no plans to encourage attenders to cross over to “regular” OAE events’, we were not seeking to convert our participants to classical concerts, but to understand how they experienced them within their existing cultural and social frameworks. Despite this, some of the responses in our study show an implicit (or sometimes explicit) resistance to the notion that classical

music is ‘good for you’, and an associated suspicion that popular music listening habits would be viewed as inferior by a regular concert audience. Exploring participants’ responses before, during and after the concert allowed us to gauge whether there were changes in open-mindedness, engagement and enjoyment through the experience. While some respondents were pleasantly surprised by their enjoyment, or impressed by the performers, most remained fairly fixed in their views, and it would clearly take more than one concert to begin to assimilate classical music listening within their established musical identities. A longitudinal study to explore the impact of repeated concert attendance on this age group would be needed to investigate this further, and holds exciting possibilities for young people to be co-researchers of their own peer group in order to gain a fully rounded picture of their arts experiences.

A striking finding emerged in relation to how these young people listen, and what purpose they expected their music listening to serve. While the more ‘culturally experienced’ and arts educated B1s and B2s found evaluative or analytical ways into their concert listening, all groups, and especially the B3s, found difficulty in relating to the emotional pace of the music. All were accustomed to responding to music emotionally, whether through lyrics, performance style or musical qualities, and several respondents expressed frustration that the concert performances did not readily serve this function for them. Occasional moments of emotional intensity were outweighed by the length of the concert as a whole, and the restrained behaviour of other audience members, which was interpreted by some as being indicative of a lack of emotional engagement. Indeed, the concert setting seemed only to compound the difficulties of responding to the music, serving as a distraction as participants became concerned with whether they were welcome and how they should behave. Ways of listening (Clarke 2005) are a challenge for empirical researchers, which our use of Write-Draw methods has helped to address in part, but the adapting of recent attempts to measure arts experience more systematically across a larger cohort (Radbourne et al. 2009) could contribute further in helping to identify the factors contributing to ‘quality’ for young audiences.

Participants made very little reference to how music education had prepared them (or otherwise) for classical concert listening, drawing much more heavily on their self-directed

popular music listening, and showing an indifference to school music that is consistent with other recent studies (Kruse 2015). This contrasts strongly with views collected from older respondents, for whom a classically-based school music education had laid the foundation for lifelong concert-going, particularly when also supported by parents' music listening habits (Pitts 2012). It is too easy to see this disconnect as a failing of music education, echoing Johnson (2002) in asserting that 'there is something suspect about a music education that focuses overwhelmingly on the music people consider their own' (p. 118). What our study demonstrates, however, is that the effect of music education for these young people is minimal, compared to the vast learning that they bring from their own musical worlds.

This situation certainly creates a challenge for music education – as it does for classical music promoters – but also a huge opportunity. Schools as a site for musical and cultural learning have the chance to cut across the barriers of family support and socio-economic status that inhibit young people's access to the arts (Martin, Anderson & Adams 2012), but our participants' responses show how important it is to understand the frames of reference that young people bring to their arts experiences, and to connect with what they know and how they use the arts in their own lives. Their exploratory, questioning responses to the chamber music concert hall are to be encouraged (Hess 2016), for the critical insight that these responses bring to the status and reception of classical music, and the new light they shed on the young people's existing fan behaviour and listening practices. The research methods used in this study offer one possibility for doing this, and their technological equivalents of live texting and tweeting also hold much potential for use by arts organisations and music educators (Bennett 2012). Through these practices, and a real engagement with how young people as experienced listeners interpret an unfamiliar musical setting, attending a classical music concert can become popular music education in its broadest sense, and the relationships between musical learning of all kinds might, over time, become a little stronger.

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## **Word count**