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Article:

Burland, K. and Payne, E. orcid.org/0000-0003-2109-8126 (Accepted: 2025) *Towards a Multi-dimensional Understanding of the Performer–Audience Relationship*. Performance Research. ISSN 1352-8165 (In Press)

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This article has been accepted for publication in *Performance Research* 30(1), 'On Music'. N.B.: Page numbers do not correspond to the published version.

Towards a Multi-dimensional Understanding of the Performer–Audience Relationship

Karen Burland and Emily Payne

Introduction

The performer–audience relationship is a powerful aspect of live performance,^{[note]¹} with performers' strong emotional experiences with music frequently involving an audience response (Lamont 2012). Despite the large body of research on audience experiences of live performance, the impact of the audience on performers remains under-explored. In this article we examine performers' experiences with audiences, drawing on selected findings from a larger research project. Using a series of vignettes that illustrate how performers' experiences are dynamically related to their performance environment, we propose a multi-dimensional understanding of the performer–audience relationship. We suggest that this orientation is useful in helping to disentangle the messy connections and interactions within live performance that are otherwise unaddressed in current performance studies scholarship, as well as offering potentially valuable applications for musicians' well-being and training.

Performers and audiences

Research on audience experiences of live music has shown how they are active participants in performances (Burland and Pitts 2014), offering insights into why they attend live events, what makes for an optimal experience and identifying strategies for enhancing engagement (Sloboda and Ford 2019). By contrast, empirical evidence on the impact of the audience on performers is limited. Performing in front of an audience can be a formative experience for musicians and can lead to a range of feelings including vulnerability and nervousness, but also happiness, acceptance, confirmation

of identity, shared experiences with the audience, increased self-confidence and self-esteem and a desire to continue to perform music (Gabrielsson 2011).

The potential significance of the performer–audience relationship is hinted at by existing work on live performance across a wide range of artistic cultures and traditions. Audiences have been described variously as performing the role of ‘moderator’ to which free improvisers respond (Burland and Windsor 2014: 112), or a ‘catalyst’ for successful jazz performances with the potential to impact performers both positively and negatively (Brand *et al.* 2012: 646). The interplay between performer and audience has been compared to a ‘game of ping-pong’: ‘you get the ball back all the time; if they really get going, we get going even more’ (Gabrielsson 2011: 238). Writing on theatre, Erika Fischer-Lichte has highlighted the inherent contingency of the ‘self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop’ that results from the co-presence of live performance, arguing that ‘[p]erformance exemplifies that all forms of physical encounter between people stimulate interactions even if their shape is not always plainly evident ... [Y]ou cannot *not* react to each other’ (2008: 38–43, emphasis in original). These perspectives highlight the importance of the audience’s role in performers’ live music experiences. Yet, little is known about how performers view their audiences, the extent to which audiences directly impact performers’ practice and the potential consequences of this for their creative process.

An ecological approach to the performer–audience relationship

We emphasize that live performances are about more than the co-present interactions between the people ‘in the room’; they are also co-constituted by the less immediate exchanges between the people, materials, cultures and ideologies ‘outside the room’ (Clarke *et al.* 2016: 121). The ways in which performers’ creative work is enmeshed with their environment have been highlighted by research on distributed creativity (Clarke *et al.* 2013; Van der Schyff *et al.* 2018). This work situates the practitioner in an active engagement with elements of their surroundings and draws attention to the complex interplay between subjects and objects in musical events. Some ecological accounts of musical creativity have documented the relational aspects of audience experience and

reception (Browning 2020; Martin and Nielsen 2024). If the musical environment is a rich resource of attentional engagement and sense-making for audiences, then performers' experiences are similarly intertwined with these dynamics.

Performances take place in distinctive settings that present performers with varied affordances, which invite certain responses and behaviours (Van der Schyff *et al.* 2018). The performer's relationship to their instrument can shape their engagement with those watching; being seated at a piano, for instance, can affect how the pianist sees the audience and how they convey expressive information through movement. The physical properties of a performance space can be categorized as topographical and climatological (Burland and Windsor 2014). The former (for example, layout, acoustics, sightlines) determine the performer's proximity to the audience and can have implications for the nature of their interactions (Dobson 2010). Climatological aspects (for example, lighting, temperature, humidity) affect the level of comfort (physical and emotional) of those in the room. They can also have attentional consequences for performers (for example, limiting their field of vision or causing other distractions) and lead to changes in performance behaviours that are conscious or otherwise (for example, through the need to adjust tuning, or mistakes due to a lapse in concentration).

Finally, performance environments are also infused with distinctive traditions and mythologies, aesthetic expectations, rituals, practices and behavioural codes (both tacit and explicit). The conduct of musicians and audiences at an event is influenced by the 'rules of engagement' (O'Neill and Sloboda 2017: 324) that are learned through continued socialization and that are appropriate to a particular repertoire. Live performance is therefore ripe with opportunities for rich and complex interactions and encounters that are contingent and multi-dimensional, meaning that they are impossible to attribute to a single influencing factor. Adopting an ecological approach, through which we can explore the various dimensions both within and beyond the performance space, can offer a useful lens through which to understand the complexities and entanglements of these connections and their implications for musicians and audiences (Nitsch 2009).

Performers' experiences with audiences

We present here a series of vignettes that illustrate key features of a multi-dimensional understanding of the performer–audience relationship. These are drawn from responses to a questionnaire survey of musicians' perceptions of live performance completed by seventy-eight musicians across different styles.[{note}]² The study aimed to understand how performers perceive their audiences and characterize their audience-facing experiences. Most participants self-identified as professional musicians, and the most frequent styles of music performed were classical, pop/rock and folk. A total of 88 per cent of participants reported having more than ten years' playing experience. Here, we present and reflect on selected responses about performers' positive and negative memorable experiences involving audiences.

Vignette one: 'All the pews facing away from us'

I had a TERRIBLE experience in college playing a concert at a church in town. The orchestra was set up in the back, with all of the pews facing away from us, so that audience members had to look over their shoulders to see us. When we walked in no-one clapped, probably because the organization and character of the space were so unfamiliar. There was very little response in general and it felt extremely awkward. (Cellist)

This example highlights how the interaction between temporal and socio-cultural features outside the room are interwoven with the physical performance space and impact the performer's perception of the audience and their (rather negative) feelings about the event.

The performance took place in a church – an 'adopted' space with characteristics that are often well-suited to classical performances (Kronenburg 2014: 36). The forward-facing pews disrupted the usual conventions of an orchestral performance and constrained the visual information that was available for both performer and audience.

The impact of this appears significant for the performer since it is reported as 'TERRIBLE'. Without visual cues, the audience were not fully able to participate (by clapping at appropriate moments or providing visual feedback to the performers about their levels of engagement or enjoyment). The performer's perceived awkwardness points to the importance (for them) of being able to see the audience, gauge their response and feel a sense of connection. The performer also seems aware of potential audience discomfort, which shaped their overall feelings about the event.

There are numerous other accounts within our data of performers emphasizing the importance of communication and connection with their audience. Reports ranged from concerns that 'an audience member may look very serious and even annoyed' (Mezzo-soprano) to the joy of '[s]eeing people dancing near the front of the stage ... made me feel excited and connected to the audience' (Guitarist). The interplay of elements suggests that there might be distinct categories of affordances within different performance contexts. For example, the performer in vignette one appears to be relatively experienced (they are recounting a story from music college) and so has, over time, developed a set of expectations for live performance (at least in relation to particular genres of music). We might conceptualize these influences in relation to temporality (Darvill 2021): the experiences and events that an individual encounters with the passing of time, and that are associated with specific musical traditions and social practices and rituals relating to how the music should be played and experienced by an audience. These broader socio-cultural systems frame the performance, even before it is contextualized within a particular setting, dictating programming, marketing, venue choice, dress code and so on. The venue's physical features, including (among others) the acoustics, ambience, layout and sense of comfort, place selective pressures on the performer that could afford or constrain different types of feelings, thoughts and behaviours. These can have consequences for the performer's sense of connection with an audience (and, perhaps, other performers), in subtle or more radical ways. The next example deepens our exploration of the interplay between person, place and time in the performer–audience relationship.

Vignette two: '... in a small town up in the mountains ...'

I used to play a Christmas concert every year in a small town up in the mountains. We performed in the town courthouse, which was a terrible space, but we would totally pack it and everyone had such a great time. I think it was the only music of that sort they were able to see locally, and we were always very much appreciated. The same old guy would always give a speech beforehand, with terrible jokes.
(Cellist)

This description provides insights into how wider contextual affordances of a performance can override the potentially disruptive impact of the venue; instead, the prevailing focus becomes the sense of ritual and shared connection with the audience. As in vignette one, this performance also took place in an adopted space that was perceived as ‘terrible’ due to its topographical features. The courthouse may have been a relatively small and inflexible space that is likely to have restricted the layout of the space for performer and audience alike. However, the overall event is described positively by the performer. This was probably a familiar space to the community, undoubtedly with its own local stories and connotations shaping the expectations of those performing and attending. As reported, this event happens annually, which offers the performer (and presumably the audience) a sense of familiarity, comfort and affection for the occasion. The reference to ‘the same old guy’ and his ‘terrible jokes’ emphasizes, again, the role of temporality, suggesting that being part of a shared tradition enables the performer to feel valued and connected.

The combination of the location and timing of the performance seems important to the overall atmosphere and enjoyment of the event. In the Western world, Christmas is associated with numerous social rituals, and the sense of occasion, coupled with the novelty of the music being performed, may motivate attendance, enhance audience appreciation and intensify the experience. This account also highlights the interwoven affordances that contribute to the performer’s positive perceptions of the event. Their familiarity with the event over time undoubtedly builds expectations (and associated rituals) about the atmosphere and novelty of the event within that local context, which are intensified by the festivities and counteract the frustrations with a suboptimal venue.

The importance of the 'fit' between the expectations and reality of the performance emerged in other examples within our data. Where individual or ritualized expectations are thwarted, the effect on the performer is unsettling and detrimental, as highlighted in another response:

We were asked to put on a very informal performance at my college campus out on the quad for an outdoor interactive arts event and I thought for sure that people would come and go and engage in chatting, crafts, etc [sic] while listening to us play, but several classical music faculty showed up and sat very close to us and listened very closely with very little chatting or moving and with polite applause after each set of pieces. It was the weirdest and most unnatural thing I've ever experienced! (Violist)

In a different performance setting, an attentive and appreciative audience would be ideal and sought-after, but the perceived poor fit between expectations, the informal setting and audience behaviour emphasizes the entangled interplay of physical, personal, social and cultural dimensions. The contexts of performance reach beyond the individual performer(s), audience and venue, and are also shaped by broader temporal, social and individual rituals and expectations. Our final vignette explores what this means for an individual performer and their in-the-moment evaluations of their performances.

Vignette three: 'I was really uncomfortable'

An online show where I was playing banjo (not my main instrument). My musical partner went on to perform songs that I hadn't practiced, and it was live online. I was really uncomfortable, and it was a duo so there was nowhere to hide. I think knowing that I could watch myself back in embarrassing detail might have been the thing that made me the most uncomfortable. I'm sure the audience didn't notice at all. (Violinist)

The discomfort expressed in this third vignette is related to three main factors: playing a less familiar instrument, the co-performer's actions and the perceived permanence of the livestreamed performance. These factors appear to be connected: not performing on a main instrument may result in feelings of insecurity or take up more cognitive resources and consequently inhibit the performance; the addition of responding in real-time to unexpected (and unpractised) pieces perhaps disrupted the flow of the performance, or perhaps caused a breakdown in trust with the co-performer. It may also have exacerbated fears about the quality of the performance for the audience and the potential embarrassment (and perhaps challenge to self-perceptions) that might be caused by the permanence of the recording. Individual factors, such as a performer's sense of feeling comfortable and in control of the performance, seem to be important for even beginning to consider the audience and their reaction (Ginsborg and Chaffin 2011), as highlighted by other participants: 'I was aware of the mistakes I'd made and was brooding on them, rather than hearing what applause there was' (Harpist/Mezzo-soprano). At this fundamental level, individual factors may exceed the perceived impact of wider contextual affordances (for example, vignettes one and two). Greater levels of experience presumably help the performer to develop tools and resources to cope with the extent to which these individual factors influence a performance and their relationship with co-performers and the audience, but the context of the event is also important for the way in which it is perceived. For example, in the scenario described in vignette two, where the atmosphere was welcoming and familiar, trying something new might not have felt so risky; in vignette three the permanence of the recording and the potential discomfort arising from re-experiencing the performance exacerbated the performer's fears.

Towards a multi-dimensional understanding of performer–audience relationship

Each of these vignettes offers a snapshot of performers' experiences with their audiences. Although brief, they highlight how the performer–audience relationship is bound up with a multitude of individual, musical and contextual features. Live

performance entails a continuous negotiation of managing and attending to performance contexts (including the audience and their responses). Temporality is entangled with socio-cultural practices, which could relate to genre, musical practices, concert/event programming, social media and structural inequalities that pervade the music industry (Bull *et al.* 2023). The ‘local’ or immediate performance situation is also enmeshed within these broader contextual categories; venues, co-performers and audiences all offer affordances for the performance and these will vary according to the wider context and the individual performer’s characteristics (including their perceptions, feelings, skill, confidence, identity and so on).

We therefore propose a move towards this multi-dimensional understanding of the performer–audience relationship to explore the ways in which entangled experiences of live performance, including with the performance setting itself, can impact those involved. This approach moves beyond the emphasis in previous research, which has tended to explore the experiences of live performance from *either* the audience or performer perspective, and in isolation from the performance environment (O’Neill and Sloboda 2017; Tsioulakis and Hytönen-Ng 2017). This has several important implications for the ways in which we train and support musicians, and how we design meaningful performances for our audiences. First, in terms of well-being, meaningful performance experiences (for example, involving social and emotional connection to others) can have eudaimonic benefits to performers (Lamont 2012). One possible mechanism for this is self-transcendence: the state of decentring from the self, which emphasizes a sense of connection with others and the outer world (Perdomo-Guevara and Dibben 2024). Besides potentially alleviating performance anxiety, these emotional experiences could sustain motivation and ongoing engagement in music (Lamont 2012; Sloboda 1991). Second, in relation to musicians’ skills and expertise, our research has applications for musical training. As we suggested above, levels of experience affect performers’ attitudes towards the audience and their development of strategies to enhance this relationship. Moreover, approaches for connecting with an audience appear to be developed intuitively or informally through experience. Conscious and more systematic attention to these aspects could help inform performers’ creative practice. For example, in situations where elements of the

performance environment (for example, layout, lighting) are adjustable, musicians and event organizers could use this knowledge to adapt the space in ways that optimize performers' sense of connection to the audience (O'Neill and Sloboda 2017). If, on the other hand, the performance setting is inflexible (as in vignette one), being equipped with strategies to adapt to less favourable circumstances could improve the performer's experience (and possibly that of the audience).³

Our discussion is based on our participants' subjective perceptions of their experiences, which preclude a more detailed theoretical understanding of their possible underlying processes. Musicians' real-time perceptions and experiences of performance are notoriously challenging to capture. Mixed-method approaches that draw together the phenomenological, behavioural and physiological aspects of musicians' responses to different performance settings could help to identify the mechanisms at play during these experiences. Moreover, as with any retrospective self-report method, participants' responses could be biased towards stronger and memorable experiences. Performers' everyday (less noteworthy) encounters with audiences might prioritize different characteristics. We therefore make no claims for the performer–audience relationship as being universal or equally significant. Nevertheless, these accounts give a broad sense of the conditions that might shape meaningful live performance experiences for musicians that could be applied and adapted to a range of contexts.

This article has presented outline findings, but several key questions arise for further research. First, in focusing solely on the performer's perspective, we have addressed only one side of the performer–audience relationship, rather than the collective experience that characterizes live performance (O'Neill and Sloboda 2017). Further work is needed to integrate audience and performer perspectives to understand the extent to which the two might interact during live performance, which could complement or challenge the arguments presented here. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, combining the perspectives afforded by psychological, ethnographic or musicological approaches, for example, could further enrich our understanding of performer–audience relationships. Second, our discussion is based on what musicians think and feel about audiences, but not what they *do* – in other words, how these perceptions and experiences might relate to creative practice, prior to, during and post-

performance. Besides offering new insights to existing research, a multi-dimensional approach contributes to an understanding of the performer–audience relationship as active, embodied and reciprocal and can shed light on what makes live music special, for performers and audiences alike.

Notes

1 In using the term ‘live’, we refer to music that is characterized by temporal and spatial proximity (Auslander 2022). Livestreamed and other forms of ‘virtual’ music events are not the primary focus of our research, although some participants (see vignette three) referred to virtual performances.

2 Responses were collected during July to December 2022. The project received ethical approval from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures’ Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (LTMUSC-137).

3 Some dimensions, such as systemic inequalities and discrimination (both implicit and structural), are beyond the control of the individual performer. For example, some participants disclosed experiences involving racist and misogynist audience behaviour. Recent reports (for example, Black Lives in Music 2021; Musicians’ Census 2024) provide insights into the experiences of performers from marginalized and under-represented groups in the UK music industry and offer recommendations for enacting change.

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