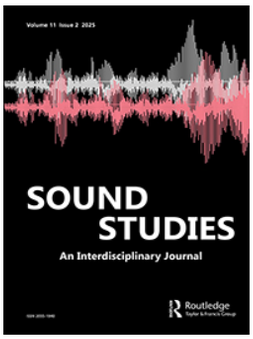

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Relaxed performances: supporting aural diversity and neurodiversity among classical concert audiences in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Current discourse at the intersection between sound studies and disability studies has highlighted the phonocentric nature of conventional understandings of listening – especially in relation to engagement with classical music performance. The perpetuation of ableist notions of "normal" and "expert" listening risk overlooking multimodal and embodied listening practices of the kind advocated by aurally-diverse and neurodiverse concert audiences. In this article, we evaluate the extent to which Relaxed Performances (RPs) may offer opportunities for such diverse ways of listening, through surveying the existing provision of RPs in the United Kingdom and reviewing three examples of performances by the Graeæ Theatre Company, the English National Opera, and the BBC Proms. We conclude that further work needs to be undertaken for emergent RP practices to be codified and become widespread, but highlight the importance of this work in making classical music performance more accessible and beneficial for people who experience differences in sensory processing.

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Introduction

The interdisciplinary field of sound studies has long been preoccupied with the "audiovisual litany" (Sterne 2012, 9): the cultural dispositions that place seeing and hearing in dichotomous tension, associating seeing with modern forms of objective knowledge and hearing with primitive forms of subjective knowledge. Scholars, sound artists, and musicologists have gone to great lengths to circumvent unfavourable visual biases through, for example, arguments for historical "perceptual equilibrium" (e.g. Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012, 12), "acoustemology" ("sound as a way of knowing", Feld 2015, 12), or the "special" affordances of aural experience (e.g. A. Cox 2016, 173).

However, in seeking to redress the longstanding legacy of ocularcentrism, some scholarship has shifted towards the deification and disembodiment of "the sound" (cf. Fisher and Lochhead 2002) or the rejection of discursive approaches "concerned with signification, representation, and mediation" (C. Cox 2011, 146). This phonocentrism, in turn, can perpetuate inaccurate and potentially ableist

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conceptualisations of engagement with sound and music. Current discourse at the intersection between sound studies and disability studies has particularly highlighted the phonocentric nature of conventional classical music performance, and the barriers this can pose for people who experience differences in sensory processing (Ceraso 2014; Drever 2019; Holmes 2017).

In this article, we argue that phonocentric notions of classical music performance sustain narrow understandings of "normal" and "expert" listening that overlook the multimodal and embodied listening practices of the kind advocated by some aurally-divergent and neurodivergent concert audiences. We describe how this has contributed towards the ongoing, systemic exclusion of marginalised groups from cultural participation and its associated benefits, and reinforced stereotypes of homogenous, neurotypical concert audiences. We then survey the recent emergence of Relaxed Performances (RPs) within classical music contexts and evaluate their potential for encouraging and normalising diverse ways of listening. We suggest that though there is more work to be done in codifying and disseminating RP practices, they do offer a more flexible and inclusive approach to classical music that could be beneficial for some aurally-divergent and neurodivergent people. However, we acknowledge that no two listeners are the same, and that accounting for some multimodal ways of listening may discount or invalidate others. Performances such as RPs therefore need to prioritise clear signposting so that listeners can discern which opportunities will best meet their needs.

A note on positionality

As authors researching subjects including disability, neurodiversity, and accessibility, we acknowledge the importance of reflexivity in evaluating our motivation for and participation in discourse on these issues (Berger 2015). We come to this subject from the perspective of music studies, and although we are personally invested in our research for different reasons, we recognise ourselves as "outsiders" both to the wider fields of scholarship and to the lived experiences of aurally-divergent and neurodivergent communities. We are acutely aware that our research positionality may unintentionally contribute to the continued marginalisation of aurally-divergent and neurodivergent voices in research, and, for this reason, we acknowledge the limitations of our work and advocate for future research that centres the understandings of "insiders".

Personally speaking, Emily is comfortable with normative concert spaces as she is an able-bodied, neurotypical individual. She acknowledges her lack of lived experience but is passionate about the topic as a close family member has accessibility needs and has been excluded from concert spaces in the past. Ailsa is able-bodied, neurotypical, hearing, and does not experience barriers to concert attendance related to sensory needs. She acknowledges that her lack of lived experience of aural difference and neurodivergence limits her understanding of experiences of concert-going amongst these communities. Elizabeth is autistic and experiences some sensory sensitivities, but finds classical concert spaces to be accessible and comfortable. She recognises that all autistic individuals are unique, and does not presume to speak on others' behalf.

A note on terminology

Within the context of this article, we understand disability according to the social model of disability: that people are not disabled by physical or mental impairment, but by the failure of the world around them to account for difference (Iacovou 2021). Although we recognise the potential limitations of the social model (Shakespeare 2016; Watson and Vehmas 2020), we believe that barriers in society should not disable people from accessing sound and music, and that participation in cultural life is a human right (Laaksonen 2010; Series 2020; Williamson 2015). While we are aware that some disabled people and communities have specific preferences regarding the use of identity-first or person-first language (Dunn and Andrews 2015), in this article we use identity-first language in recognition of the sociopolitical and sociocultural framing of disability offered by the social model.

The term "neurodiversity" was popularised through the neurodiversity movement, which extended disability rights activism to celebrate people who experience cognitive, affective, and perceptual difference (Mcgee 2012) and to advocate the importance of listening to their voices (Bakan 2014). Neurodiversity refers to the variation in neurocognitive functioning across humankind (Walker 2021). Neurodivergence (as opposed to neurotypicality) describes neurocognitive functioning that differs from dominant social norms (Walker 2021), such as that associated with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia. Although the neurodiversity paradigm understands neurocognitive difference as natural and valuable, it can also be misunderstood and lead to the understating of the needs of some disabled people (den Houting 2019).

In this article, we use the broad category of neurodiversity with an emphasis on differences in sensory perception. Divergent sensory experiences relating to hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling are thought to affect up to 90% of autistic people, potentially arising from altered temporal processing mechanisms (C. E. Robertson and Baron-Cohen 2017). Hyper- or hypo-sensitivity to stimuli such as loud noises and bright lights have been found to be positively correlated with autistic traits across neurodiverse populations (A. E. Robertson and Simmons 2013), and may also be associated with heightened anxiety (Hwang et al. 2020). In particular, studies have indicated greater prevalence of hyperacusis among autistic children, who may find sounds of medium intensity to be "too loud". This in turn may lead to the emergence of specific musical preferences, irritation caused by everyday noises, and the decline of psychosocial functioning in situations of sensory overstimulation (Bhatara et al. 2013; Kenna 2022; Khalfa et al. 2004).

The term "aural diversity" – which is inclusive of the auditory hyper- or hypo-sensitivity experienced by some neurodivergent people – is more recent in its origins. It "describes the plurality of senses of hearing, [. . .] as an acknowledgement of the complexities of lived and embodied experience in all its diversity and fluctuation" (Drever and Hugill 2022, 1). The concept of aural diversity recognises a "multitude of elements that place the hearing modality in a state of constant flux" (Renel 2018, 40), and posits that most people will experience hearing differences at some stage during their life due to sensorineural factors (such as inner ear damage caused by noise exposure or infection), conductive factors (such as blockages or unequal pressure in the ear), or divergent auditory perception (such as hyperacusis or diplacusis) (Hugill 2022). Within the remit of aural diversity, we also

distinguish between "Deaf" and "deaf" (Holmes 2017). Use of the uppercase "D" typically refers to "Deaf" people who "identify with the linguistic customs and minority standpoint of Deaf culture" (173). On the other hand, the use of a lowercase "d" refers to "non-culturally deaf or hard of hearing" people (173), who often assimilate into hearing culture using phonetic language with the support of either a hearing aid or cochlear implant. This distinction between "Deaf" and "deaf" is driven by the idea that, "for hearing people, the term 'deaf' speaks of the body and its failings; it does not invoke a vibrant, subaltern culture with a language, community, and history of its own" (Edwards 2012, 1). The term "d/Deaf" therefore refers to the full spectrum of "auditory and sociocultural constructions of deafness" (Holmes 2017, 173).

Throughout this article, we define "classical music" in the broadest sense: as a general term referring to art music – typically Western art music – that is associated with concert-going practices in which (elite) performers communicate the work of (genius) composers to (receptive) audiences (LeGuin 2006; Small 1998; Taruskin 2006). In keeping with this definition, our survey of classical music organisations in the United Kingdom primarily comprises orchestras, choirs, and opera and ballet companies. "Listening" is broadly understood "to involve a deliberate channeling of attention toward a sound" (Rice 2015, 99), while we consider "hearing" to entail the simple existence of a (human or non-human) body and mind that is responsive to sound (Sterne 2015). However, while we note the varied conceptualisations of listening and hearing that have been expounded by scholars in sound and music studies – such as ubiquitous listening (Kassabian 2001), everyday listening (Herbert 2011), structural listening (Dell'Antonio 2004), and ecological listening (Clarke 2005) – we agree with John Drever and Andrew Hugill (2022) that such theorisations "are suffused with auraltypical tendencies" (3). We argue that the narrow idealisation of "normal" and "expert" listening – especially in relation to classical concert attendance – demarcates ableist, neurotypical, and exclusionary boundaries around cultural participation. Nonetheless, we contend that increasing opportunities for RPs and similar initiatives could go some way to eliminating these barriers and facilitating more equitable and beneficial concert experiences for aurally-diverse and neurodiverse audiences.

"Normal" and "expert" listening

Discourse surrounding so-called "normal" listening can be traced back to the development of the telephone during the interwar period (McGuire 2019). After the First World War, the telephone grew in popularity, transitioning from a luxury item to a household necessity. In the United Kingdom, the Post Office was responsible for testing the quality of telephone transmissions using the "artificial ear". A 1928 report explained how the artificial ear was designed to resemble a real ear as closely as possible: the Post Office gathered data from "12 male ears" (McGuire 2019, 142), excluding two that they found fell into "abnormal" limits. The data collected provided the representative standard for "normal" hearing; those who fell outside these parameters would be required to use the "telephone for deaf subscribers" (139).

The concept of normal listening has subsequently been further entrenched through studies in music cognition – a growing body of research that uses an information-processing framework to understand people's musical knowledge (Tillmann 2005).

Despite purporting to represent how people "normally" listen to music, studies in music cognition are often biased through the over-representation of participants under the age of 25 and with multiple years of musical training (Straus 2011, 153; e.g. Egermann et al. 2013; Morgan et al. 2019). In its methodology, music cognition has subsequently become a "normalising enterprise", eradicating "abnormal" or apparently "unmusical" modes of listening through a positivistic lens (Straus 2011, 153).

Musicological discourse concerning "normal" and "abnormal" ways of listening is not far-removed from classical concert practices. As Joseph Straus (2011) elucidates, "normal listeners are not given, they are created" (157). Listening practices are learnt in classrooms and lecture halls, through radio stations and streaming services, and in theatres and concert venues. Education plays a fundamental role in the curation of listening habits, as a site for explicit sensorial entrainment (Ceraso 2014). It also has a formative role in delineating "expert" listening practices, whereby certain concert musics are considered only accessible by those whose practices extend "beyond an assumed normative standard [. . .] to a highly receptive, eagle-eared state of exceptional auditory acuity" (Drever 2019, 8). Notable twentieth-century composers and critics such as Milton Babbitt and Theodor Adorno expressed how "serious" music could only be appreciated by those with specialised training (3), and some musicologists have suggested that "experienced listening" (Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1996) or "structural listening" (DeBellis 2002; Dell'Antonio 2004) is a prerequisite for fulfilling, proficient, and analytical modes of musical engagement. Such theories–Straus (2011) argues – call into being the implied presence of the "prodigious listener" (151), whose wealth of musical knowledge, aural proficiency, and capable body enables them to hear music efficiently, assess performances analytically, and respond appropriately within concert settings.

Diversifying modes of listening

The concepts of prodigious, structural, experienced, and normal listening are all dependent upon an ableist "normate template" that produces "auditory hierarchies where access and status are distributed in relation to the everyday realities and diversity of human hearing" (Renel 2022, 56). However, optimal otological function typically occurs only between the ages of 18 and 25, following the gradual development of auditory perception through childhood and preceding the onset of age-related hearing loss (Drever and Hugill 2022). Few people, therefore, experience "normal" hearing for more than a fraction of their lives. Furthermore, hearing differences are more prevalent than hearing loss, and include conditions such as tinnitus (hearing sound when no sound is present), hyperacusis (hearing sound with increased sensitivity), diplacusis (hearing pitch differences between the two ears), and palinacusis (hearing sound repeat after it has become inaudible) (Hugill 2022; Renel 2018).

The reality of such aural differences across populations highlights the importance of "attending to both the bodily affects of sound and the multiple sensory modes that can be used to experience a sonic event" (Ceraso 2014, 109). Without embedding such a theorisation in pedagogies and practices of listening, many concert settings are likely to remain inaccessible to people who experience sensory-processing differences; but enabling and normalising varied modes of visual and vibrational listening has the potential to support aurally-diverse and neurodiverse audiences across classical music practices.

Visual listening

In exploring the ways in which d/Deaf people navigate the world around them, Benjamin Bahan (2007) highlights how they often construct a "highly visual sensory world and appear to be pushing the boundaries of vision far beyond limits known by other human groups" (96). World-renowned percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who became deaf at the age of 12, has explained how watching musical instruments vibrate or trees moving in the wind means that "subconsciously my brain creates a corresponding sound" (Glennie 2015, n.p.). Performing artists such as Christine Sun Kim have translated this phenomenon into performance art in which "the voice manifests across a visual spatial plane rather than an acoustic one" (Holmes 2016, 543). Kim's *Face Opera ii*, first performed in 2013, is a multi-act work written for nine prelingually-deaf artists who perform solely through nuanced facial expressions. By displacing the expressivity of the singing voice from its assumed origin, Kim challenges the audience to acknowledge how "the singing body extends beyond that which we conventionally recognise as the vocal instrument" (Eidsheim 2015, 111), and dismantles assumptions of phonocentricity within listening practices.

Research has also suggested that some neurodivergent people experience differences in audiovisual binding – the perception of simultaneous aural and visual stimuli (C. E. Robertson and Baron-Cohen 2017). Although this may be associated with impairments in speech and language, some autistic people have described rich and rewarding multisensorial listening experiences resulting from their capacity to perceive minute details and structural patterns within musical and environmental soundscapes (Davies 2022). Such experiences may be enhanced by auditory-visual synaesthesia (Baron-Cohen et al. 2013) and absolute pitch (Ockelford 2013), both of which occur more frequently among neurodivergent populations.

Vibrational listening

Multimodal listening recognises that in addition to being heard and seen, sonic stimuli can also be felt (Ceraso 2014). An appreciation of sound as vibrational is important to some neurodivergent people who possess superior tactile detection for sounds that gradually grow in amplitude (C. E. Robertson and Baron-Cohen 2017), and also unites sound studies and Deaf studies (Friedner and Helmreich 2012). Musicologists have described the central role of music's "material waveband" – its propagation by physical vibration – in stimulating corporeal and sociocultural affect (Henriques 2011, 22). While affect often manifests positively, the vibrational aspects of sound also equip it with "a force of attack and sharpness of edge" (37) that can be commandeered in sonic warfare (Cusick 2013; Daughtry 2015; Goodman 2010).

Meanwhile, the haptic nature of music-making is also fundamental to Deaf musicianship: Glennie (2015) describes hearing as "basically a specialised form of touch" (n.p.), and typically performs barefoot to attune to the vibrations of her instruments. Sound artists and composers such as Ricardo Huisman have also explored vibrational sound art. Huisman's installation "the bone conductor", premiered in 2017, featured a large bone-shaped sculpture made of wool that vibrates in conjunction with a soundscape. The public were invited to listen through touching or holding the bone while wearing bone-

conducting headphones, thereby "listening and feeling soundscapes with the whole body" (Huisman 2023, n.p.).

However, although the lived experience of vibrational sound is universally shared, investigation into vibrational effects within the human body has demonstrated that no two individuals experience these effects in the same way. Bodies' internal organs have different resonant frequencies depending on their direction and position in relation to a vibrational stimulus (Duarte and Pereira 2006), and therefore people all "feel" sound differently. This means that vibrational listening practices have the potential both to stimulate inclusive and pleasurable experiences, and to cause significant physiological and psychological harm when used to exploit somatic vulnerabilities (MacGregor 2022). Vibrational performance raises important questions around the submission of a listener to the will of a creator, especially when music is particularly intense in volume or timbre: listening in such a way may be "to yield our inner voice to the composer's dominion" (Maus 2004, 24). Exploring the possibilities of multimodal listening for classical concert audiences, therefore, has significant ethical ramifications for its potential impact upon listeners' wellbeing.

(Re)embodying multimodal listening

Multimodal listening practices that attend to the heard, seen, and felt aspects of sonic experience are often difficult to explore within classical concert settings. This, in part, results from restrictive concert-going etiquette that became prominent during the rise of private theatre performances during the seventeenth century (Lancaster 1997). Higher admission prices, among other factors, amplified the separation between performers and listeners, and "bred a more passive and elite audience" (76). Similar expectations surrounding audience conduct have persisted to the present day, with audiences "seated on chairs, quite close to other listeners" (LeGuin 2006, 259), and unable to respond to the music physically or vocally. Such etiquette leads to a "severe containment of our listening bodies' exteriority", making them "invisible and inaudible to others" (259) and restricting opportunities for multisensory listening practices.

According to William Renel (2022), the perpetuation of such expectations in performance spaces reinforces an auditory normate through four primary factors: the effective prohibition of sonic practices such as multimodal listening; the systematic distortion of communication; the legislation of accepted hearing norms; and the social (re)production of auditory normalism. Within classical concert settings, this can create a major obstacle for many people who experience differences in sensory processing, such as those with sensorineural, conductive, or perceptual hearing differences (Hugill 2022). However, RP is one approach that some arts organisations have adopted to welcome people who traditionally find it challenging to access live artistic performance.

Relaxed performance in the United Kingdom

The original aim of the RP movement – which began in cinemas and theatres – was to champion "equality of experience". Adjustments to performances primarily focussed on environmental factors, with as few changes to the artistic or aesthetic content as possible (Dupagne 2020, 68). Adaptations typically involved keeping the house lights up during

performances, removing loud or sudden sound effects, and offering calm spaces to mitigate overstimulation (Fletcher-Watson 2015). Within the last decade, RP has begun to enter classical music performance spaces, perhaps most visibly with the BBC Relaxed Proms beginning in 2017. However, the first two BBC Relaxed Proms deviated from the "equality of experience" aim: they were custom-made bespoke concerts featuring major artistic changes; for example, including presenters and music segmented into short sections (Dupagne 2020, 70). Many other arts organisations have since adopted this bespoke style of classical music RP.

In its earliest iterations in cinema and theatre, RP was designed to open performance experiences to a wider population by "relaxing" the "rules" around audience conduct (Lamarre, Rice, and Besse 2021, 189). In particular, it challenged "the cult of the quiet audience" (Simpson 2018, 227), thereby enabling participation in multimodal engagement. Although RP in cinema and theatre varies in style between organisations, co-director of the disabled-led organisation Touretteshero, Jess Thom (2016), argues that all RP should include seven key elements: (1) clear expectations for audience members set out prior to booking; (2) pre-show information describing what will take place; (3) staff with an inclusive approach; (4) an understanding that audience members can make noise, move around, and leave and re-enter as they wish; (5) consideration of sound and lighting levels; (6) assured handling of audience complaints; and (7) a quiet space available to access outside the auditorium during the show.

Although reception to RP has been largely positive (Potter 2013), it has also received widespread criticism. Attempts to cater for multiple accessibility needs within a single performance can seem presumptive and homogenising (Fletcher-Watson 2015, 77), especially since "one person's idea of a relaxed space may be another's accessibility nightmare" (Lamarre, Rice, and Besse 2021, 197). Adaptations to sensory stimuli can be beneficial to some listeners while detrimental or seemingly "lacklustre" to others (Brooks 2017, 4). This is especially pertinent in the case of aural difference and neurodivergence, in which wide spectrums of sensory sensitivities may create potentially conflicting needs.

Furthermore, there exists a significant lacuna in research into RP – especially in relation to classical music performance. Although RP, sensory processing needs, and sonic accessibility have drawn attention from researchers in relation to theatre performance (e.g. Kempe 2015; Umeda and Jirikowic 2019), film screening (e.g. Vize 2014), and museum access (e.g. DeBoth et al. 2021; Renel 2019; Silverman and Tyszka 2017), investigation into sensory-friendly concerts is sparse. To date, only one survey of RP has included examples of RP in classical music as well as in cinema and theatre (Dupagne 2020). Several studies in Canada and the United States have specifically explored the perspectives of caregivers on concert adaptations suitable for neurodivergent audiences (e.g. Richards and Parkes 2023; Shiloh and Blythe LaGasse 2014). But from the existing literature it is difficult to construct a picture of the place of RP in classical music contexts in the United Kingdom, and challenging to evaluate the significance of RP for supporting multimodal listening among aurally-diverse and neurodiverse audiences.

Therefore, in the remainder of this article, we present preliminary findings from our own empirical research into the frequency and presentation of classical music RP in the United Kingdom, with a view towards opening up new avenues for future discourse and development in this area. First, we present a synopsis of RP practice

from 2012 to 2022, and offer three first-hand vignettes of relaxed classical music performances by the Graeæ Theatre Company, the English National Opera, and the BBC Proms. We then evaluate recent developments in light of the need to diversify the modes of listening available to aurally-diverse and neurodiverse audiences, and recommend possible ways forward for the continuing development of RP in such contexts.

Organisations offering relaxed performance

To establish the RP offering available from classical music organisations in the United Kingdom between 2012 and 2022, a list of eligible organisations was first compiled via an exhaustive search of three sources: the Association of British Orchestras directory (2022), the Musical Chairs directory of orchestras and opera houses (2017), and BBC Radio 3's list of professional orchestras and ensembles (2006). To be eligible, organisations had to meet three inclusion criteria: they had to be active in the United Kingdom at the time of the search in 2022; they had to be professional (rather than amateur, semi-professional, or ad hoc); and they had to be working predominantly in the domain of classical music. Amateur or inactive organisations – and those working across varied art forms, such as theatre companies – were excluded from further study. This process resulted in a final list of 96 organisations, including orchestras, opera companies, chamber groups, period ensembles, and choirs.

Next, a systematic search process was used to identify evidence of RP from the websites of each eligible organisation. Each website was searched using the search string, relax* OR chill* OR inclus* OR access* OR comfort* OR *friendly OR sensory. In addition, internet search engines were also used to search, "[organisation name]" AND (relax* OR chill* OR inclus* OR access* OR comfort* OR *friendly OR sensory). In instances when the search process identified evidence of RP, the advertised title and date were recorded, along with any features distinguishing the RP from other performances offered by the same organisation.

The results of this search showed that the number of classical music RPs per annum increased exponentially between 2012 and 2022–from a single performance in 2014 to 19 in 2022 (see Figure 1). 2020 was a clear outlier in the overall positive trend, since the COVID-19 pandemic caused extended periods of time in which performances of any kind could not take place during lockdowns. However, RP remained uncommon among arts organisations in the United Kingdom. Of the 96 organisations that met the inclusion criteria, only 20 were found to have engaged with RP in the last ten years, including 13 orchestras, four opera companies, two ballet companies, and one choral society. Just 14 out of 20 (70%) organisations advertised more than one RP in the last ten years (Figure 2).

Features of relaxed performance

The survey also evidenced the lack of consistent presentation in classical music RP across organisations in the United Kingdom. Figure 3 shows the frequency of RP features advertised by the organisations that offered classical music RP between 2012 and 2022. A relaxed attitude to noise, breakout space, open-door policy, and alternative seating were relatively consistent across organisations, but other features – such as performance

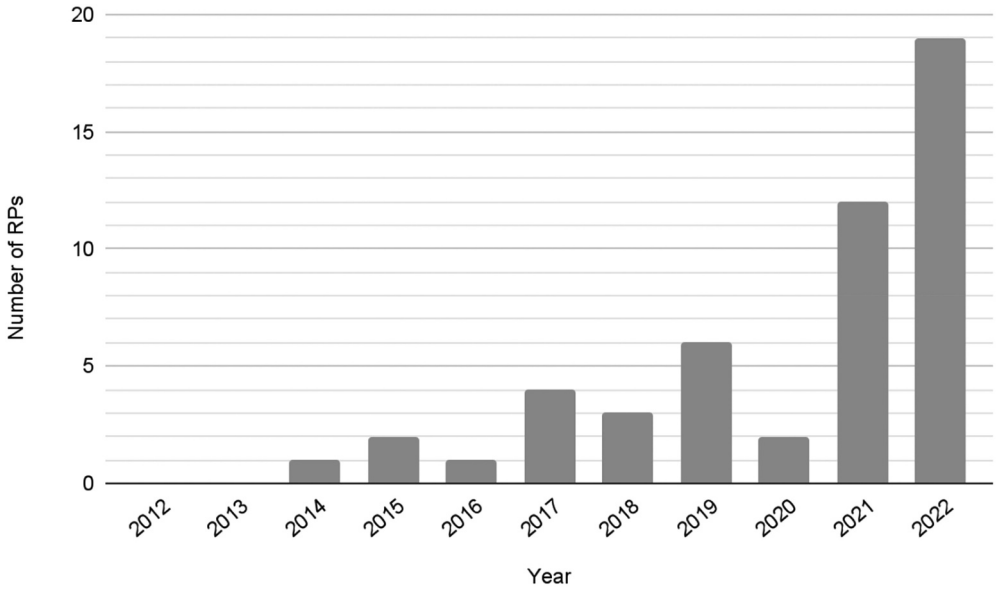

Figure 1. Number of classical music RPs per annum.

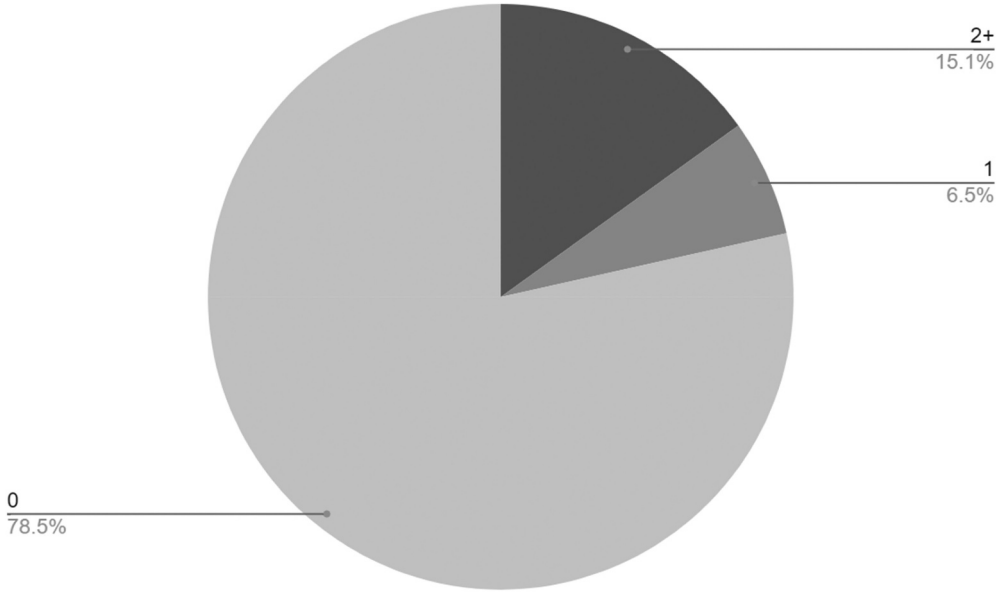

Figure 2. Number of classical music RPs per organisation.

familiarisation, sound and lighting adjustment, and picture communication – were advertised by less than half of organisations.

There was also significant inconsistency in how RP features were advertised by different organisations. In some instances, different terminology was used to refer to features with the same function (such as "chill out zone" or "alternative quiet space"), while

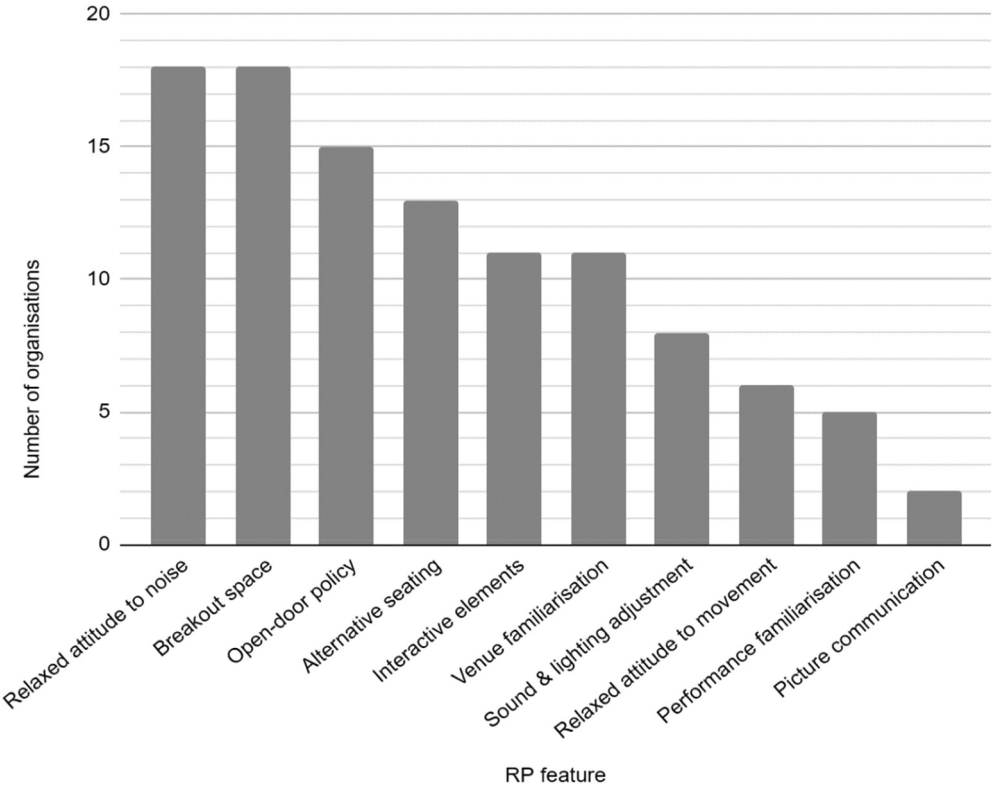

Figure 3. RP features advertised by classical music organisations.

features such as "performance familiarisation" could comprise diverse elements such as social stories introducing the venue, programme notes to download in advance, or links to online playlists.

Categories of relaxed performance

Although the features that characterised different RP offerings varied across organisations, all classical music RPs could be categorised as one of two delivery styles: *adapted RP* or *bespoke RP*. Adapted RPs were those that were direct adaptations of existing shows; bespoke RPs were those that were specifically curated for an accessible setting. There was a close correlation between RP delivery and type of organisation: all opera and ballet companies offered adapted RP, while (with one exception) all orchestras and choirs engaged in bespoke RP.

Overall, 55% of organisations offered bespoke RP, while 45% delivered adapted RP. The slight prevalence of the bespoke style of delivery suggests that classical music RP may be becoming more independent from the origins of RP in theatre practice. However, since RP of any kind continues to be infrequent and inconsistent among classical music organisations across the United Kingdom, it remains difficult to codify standard practice. Although features of RP such as breakout spaces and open-door policies seem to be commonly shared between organisations, other features are offered inconsistently or marketed

differently. This poses some challenge when assessing the place of RP in supporting aurally-diverse and neurodiverse concert audiences and promoting multimodal ways of listening.

Examples of relaxed performance

Due to the varied approaches to RP taken by different classical music organisations, it is hard to evaluate the extent to which the movement as a whole supports the notion of re-embodied, multimodal listening that is inclusive of aurally-divergent and neurodivergent audiences. At least in some cases, it is likely that steps taken to make performances accessible to some audiences could exclude others. For example, a relaxed attitude to noise suitable for parents of babies and young children could prove distracting to those who experience hyperacusis or difficulties with auditory streaming. With this in mind, in what follows we offer three vignettes of RPs in order to describe how their typical features are realised at live events and the impact they have on modes of listening and attention.

The three examples form a purposive sample taken by the three authors between January 2022 and August 2023, to illustrate the variation in existing classical music RP (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The first vignette is taken from the Graeæ Theatre Company, a disabled-led arts organisation "founded on the mission to create theatrical excellence through the vision and practice of Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse artists" (graeae.org/who-we-are/our-history/). Although the Graeæ Theatre Company does not exclusively work in the domain of classical music – and therefore was excluded from our survey of classical music organisations – it is a world leader in the provision of accessible performance. In 2022 it staged Errollyn Wallen's chamber opera *The Paradis Files* with a disabled-led cast. The second vignette is taken from the English National Opera's 2022 season, which included a RP of Leoš Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. The English National Opera first introduced RPs in 2019, drawing on the pioneering methodologies of disabled-led organisations such as Include Arts and Touretteshero (Renel 2019). Finally, the third vignette returns to the BBC Relaxed Proms, which were responsible for first bringing classical music RPs to public attention in 2017. In 2023, one of two Relaxed Proms featured disabled horn player Felix Klieser, who at the time was artist-in-residence with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

The Paradis Files (Graeæ Theatre Company) – Emily

In April and May 2022, the Graeæ Theatre Company toured the United Kingdom with Wallen's chamber opera *The Paradis Files*, based on the life of pianist and composer Maria Theresia von Paradis. The story followed Paradis, who lost her sight at a young age, as she recalled the ways her parents and doctors had sought to cure her. Although the performance was not billed as a RP, all Graeæ Theatre Company shows prioritise accessibility as of first importance. Prior to the performance, members of the audience could access a synopsis with trigger warnings, an audio flyer, and audio-described pre-show notes describing the characters, musicians, stage set, and storyline. Further information was also provided through a visual story – an accessible tool developed by Include Arts to communicate information and expectations prior to attending a performance – and a sonic story. The sonic story format, informed by visual stories, was established by the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design in collaboration with Touretteshero, to offer "a visual

representation of an environment, exhibition or event which highlights the key elements of auditory significance such as loudest and quietest spaces or areas in which the sound might change dramatically" (Renel 2019, 395).

The chamber opera itself was highly innovative, most notably in its foregrounding of disabled bodies. To begin the performance, everyone on stage (including the orchestra) introduced themselves, including their name, their appearance, whether they were disabled, and who they were playing. This enabled both performers and audience to embrace diversity and disability, with "people really owning their impairments and feeling quite happy to declare that on stage" (Graeæ Theatre Company 2023). Not only did the process of audio description benefit blind listeners, but it also immersed non-disabled listeners into a sense of collaborative participation and engagement in the performance.

Following the introduction, British Sign Language, captioning, and audio description was incorporated creatively throughout the performance. In doing so, *The Paradis Files* highlighted alternative listening practices and explored how accessible performances that celebrate disability could be forces for creative innovation – or an "aesthetics of access" (graeae.org/about/our-artistic-vision). As the director of the Graeæ Theatre Company, who is Deaf, commented, "our opera is accessible [. . .] I can feel it, I can see it, and from that I feel like I can hear it through my skin" (Graeæ Theatre Company 2022).

The Cunning Little Vixen (English National Opera) – Ailsa

In February 2022, the English National Opera staged a RP of *The Cunning Little Vixen* by Janáček. When booking tickets, there were options for detailing access needs where necessary. The website stated that the performance was "for everyone", and "may particularly benefit those who might normally find it challenging to access theatre". This "might include anyone with dementia, learning disabilities, an autism spectrum condition, Tourette's syndrome, sensory disorders, anxiety, bladder and bowel conditions, and those with young children and babies". The performance would have an "open-door policy", "removal of any sudden loud sounds", and a "chill out space". Before their visit, ticketholders received an email containing pre-show resources including a visual story (English National Opera 2022b) and a sonic story (English National Opera 2022a). Through providing such resources, the English National Opera reinforced the valuable work of organisations such as Include Arts and Touretteshero, and validated diverse ways of listening to *The Cunning Little Vixen* that responded to the structure, staging, and multimodality of the performance.

On arrival at the performance venue, audience members were greeted by ushers wearing brightly coloured shirts. Many people had taken their seats early. Before the opera began, the conductor introduced different sections of the orchestra who each played short extracts of the music. Many people stood up to get a better view of the orchestra pit. Then a performer came on stage and explained what to expect from the sound and lighting. As advertised, the house lights were not dimmed, the curtain rose, and the opera began. During the performance, a few members of the audience left and returned to the auditorium through the open doors. Some made vocalisations or movements such as standing up and sitting down, but most remained still and quiet throughout. At the interval, most of the audience left the auditorium to use the toilets, buy refreshments, or engage in activities such as colouring in and dressing up. During the second half, some people stayed in the chill out space, where there were cushions

and mats and a livestream of the performance. The elements of the performance itself aligned with the sonic story and the content warnings that had been provided.

BBC Relaxed Prom (Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra) – Elizabeth

The BBC Relaxed Prom in August 2023 featured the horn soloist Klieser and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra conducted by Kirill Karabits. The concert took place the morning after the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra had played an evening Prom, also at the Royal Albert Hall. It was described in the programme as "a chance to hear some of the music performed here last night [. . .] in a relaxed environment" (BBC Proms 2023, 2). A footnote on the first page of the programme added, "please be considerate to the performers and other audience members, while also recognising that listeners may show a variety of responses to the music" (2).

The audience for the concert was relatively small, with most people clustered in seats nearest the stage. As is typical at the BBC Proms, some people had "promming tickets" to stand in the arena immediately in front of the stage. Since the arena was not full, many people sat on the floor or wandered around during the performance, coming closer to the stage when they wanted to watch the musicians closely. Many of the audience members in the arena were families with small children, and there was plenty of space for people to sit, stand, run, dance, or stim. The atmosphere was convivial, with children making new friends and parents introducing themselves to those standing nearby. There were stewards positioned at all the entrances and exits to offer people directions and help when needed. As advertised, the house lights stayed up, there were chill out rooms available, and the hand dryers in the toilets had been turned off.

The performance itself was an hour long, with no interval. Each piece was introduced by a presenter and a British Sign Language interpreter. There were also British Sign Language interpreters in the stewarding team. Before the first piece (William Walton's *Orb and Sceptre*), the audience were warned that some passages including the organ would be loud, and that they could leave the auditorium if they needed. Some people did leave and re-enter the concert at different stages during the performance, and some wore ear-defenders. The central feature of the programme was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 4. The soloist, Klieser, was born without arms and plays his horn with his feet. He gave a brief introduction to the audience before playing, in which he described the difference between the horns of the eighteenth century and the modern horn he plays. Attention was not explicitly drawn to Klieser's limb difference; nevertheless, many parents brought their children to the front of the arena to watch and point out how he was using his toes. In the programme notes, an interview with Klieser addressed questions about the Horn Concerto No. 4 and his experience with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. Klieser added, "when you're a horn player who has no arms, there's a danger nobody will believe in you. But I have a specific mindset: if you have a problem, it doesn't matter how big it is, you can solve it. It's crucial that you believe in yourself" (BBC Proms 2023, 10).

Affordances of relaxed performance

The contrasting examples of relaxed concerts by the Graeæ Theatre Company, the English National Opera, and the BBC Proms illustrate the rich array of inclusive, multimodal

practices currently being explored by some arts organisations across the United Kingdom. In accordance with our survey of RP provision throughout the country, the English National Opera's *The Cunning Little Vixen* exemplified adapted RP, with the opera unchanged apart from the opening introductions and sensory adaptations, while the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's BBC Prom was a specially designed bespoke RP. Although the adapted and bespoke programmes differed in their musical and aesthetic offerings, both encouraged the re-embodiment of multimodal ways of listening. The flexible seating arrangements allowed audiences to move with the music: to capture its rhythm, respond emotionally, or engage visually by watching from different perspectives. Vibrational and tactile opportunities were also available, through lying on the floor of the arena in the Royal Albert Hall, touching the edge of the stage, or dressing up and exploring props during the performance interval. Although sensory adaptations could not necessarily cater for all individuals' diverse needs, a relaxed attitude to using ear-defenders and alternative quiet spaces ensured that listeners had multiple options to make the most of their experience.

However, while the Graeæ Theatre Company, the English National Opera, and the BBC Proms made effective use of their space to offer multiple ways of listening to their audiences, they were also limited by the physical affordances of their venues. In all three instances, seated audiences were separated from on-stage performers: "the edge of the platform forms a social barrier that is for all practical purposes as impassable as a brick wall [. . .] it places some in a dominant position and others in a subordinate position" (Small 1998, 27). For a touring performance such as *The Paradis Files*, specific accessibility requirements were different for every location and necessitated additional planning and adaptation; in the Royal Albert Hall, the size of the auditorium meant that not all seats offered a sufficient view of the British Sign Language interpreter; and in the London Coliseum (the home of the English National Opera), the age and architecture of the building, with steeply raked seating, limited ticket availability for wheelchair users. Although meeting such accessibility requirements is not essential for staging a RP (Thom 2016), such challenges may go some way to explaining why our survey found that relatively few classical music organisations in the United Kingdom engaged with RP or similar initiatives between 2012 and 2022. It is possible that for some organisations, being unable to provide for the physical needs of some disabled audiences (such as through wheelchair access or hygiene facilities) was perceived as preventing the implementation of other inclusive adaptations necessary for RP.

Nevertheless, a number of arts organisations have pursued innovative ways to overcome the limitations of traditional classical concert venues. Some – such as the Sensory Friendly Concerts initiative in the United States (themusicalautist.org/sensory-friendly-concerts) and the Aural Diversity network in the United Kingdom (auraldiversity.org) – have adopted flexible community spaces for performances, where the liminal space between stage and seating allows the audience to engage in multimodal participation. Through providing room to move around and tactile stimuli such as foam blocks and vibrating floors, aurally-divergent and neurodivergent participants can shape their concert experience according to their sensory needs:

> a child may engage in dance or block building to the sound of a jazz trio. Another person may feel the vibrations of the piano by touching the sides while hearing a concerto. A musician

> may have their first experience seeing someone enjoy their music with joyful hand-flapping, jumping up and down, and rocking. (Shiloh and Blythe LaGasse 2014, 120)

Drawing on principles similar to those in the earliest iterations of RP in theatres and cinemas, these spaces offer numerous ways of listening: in breakout rooms or open-air environments, through hearing aids or haptic devices, or through videographic or signed evocation (Chapman 2023).

The home of the Graeæ Theatre Company, the Bradbury Studios in east London (graeae.org/about/space-hire), is a further example of an inclusive and accessible approach to concert and performance space. The rehearsal studios, meeting rooms, and equipment hire are all fully accessible to d/Deaf, blind, and disabled users, and include hearing induction loops, audio description systems, and Brailling facilities (Graeæ Theatre Company 2019).

Likewise, the Battersea Arts Centre in south-west London (bac.org.uk/relaxed-venue) is groundbreaking in the ways it has sought to overcome the limitations of traditional performance venues. In response to the RP movement, the Battersea Arts Centre has worked in consultation with Touretteshero to develop a unique Relaxed Venue model. Their approach seeks to ensure that principles of RP – specifically a relaxed attitude to noise, the encouragement of uninhibited listening and responding, and the welcoming of diverse and disabled audiences – are integrated into the entire programme at the Centre (Renel and Thom 2022). This means that it prioritises the creation of no new physical, structural, digital, community, creative, or emotional barriers; that it values diverse experiences equally and challenges ableist norms; and that it actively addresses potential psycho-emotional – as well as structural – disablement (360–362). Not only has this transformed disabled access to the physical space,

> it has completely altered how we think of ourselves and our relationship to the world. There's a new immediacy and contact between the live performers and audiences that didn't previously exist. This isn't just a positive economic or ethical choice for us, it is a positive artistic one. The work we have done has been transformational, not just for a few people, but for everyone who comes into our building. (bac.org.uk/relaxed-venue)

Conclusions

As demonstrated by the Relaxed Venue initiative pioneered by Touretteshero at the Battersea Arts Centre, for many arts organisations the decision to pursue RP reaches beyond questions of inclusion and accessibility, and prompts a radical reconsideration of aesthetic and artistic practices. In doing so, RP offers valuable opportunities for rethinking notions of "normal" and "expert" listening and extending multimodal practices of engagement to aurally-diverse, neurodivergent – and, indeed, neurotypical – audiences.

However, our survey has shown that across the United Kingdom, RP practices within classical music contexts remain both uncommon and inconsistent. We found only 20 classical music organisations that staged RPs between 2012 and 2022, and the adaptations made to these performances varied widely. Those that could be categorised as adapted RP typically made adjustments to improve disabled access, but made minimal changes to the aesthetic content. Those that adopted bespoke RP were more likely to make artistic changes such as the use of short musical extracts, audience participation,

educational commentary, and embedded audio description or British Sign Language interpretation.

The vignettes from both the Graeæ Theatre Company and the BBC Proms illustrate a further dimension exceeding the categorisation of adapted RP and bespoke RP, concerning the foregrounding of disabled performers. In both cases, the performances did not just make space for aurally-diverse and neurodiverse audiences, but advocated and celebrated the place of disability culture. For the Graeæ Theatre Company, this is integral to their mission to be "boldly placing Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent actors centre stage and challenging preconceptions" (graeae.org/about/our-artistic-vision). For the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra – performing with Klieser as their artist-in-residence – the unspoken but ever-present reality of Klieser's disability trod a careful line between celebrating difference and masking disability using the rhetoric of musical ability (Cheng 2020). We suggest that in both approaches, this expansion of the RP movement towards advocating, celebrating, and enriching disability culture within classical music has perhaps the greatest potential to encourage and support aurally-diverse and neurodiverse audiences.

Limitations

We acknowledge the significant limitations of our research presented here, specifically with regard to the scope of the survey method and our own positionality. Since there exists no single list of arts organisations in the United Kingdom that engage in classical music performance, our survey captured only those organisations that were actively involved in the professional performance of classical music. By necessity, some organisations with a broader artistic remit were therefore excluded by our parameters – such as, for example, the Graeæ Theatre Company. Furthermore, the data collection process was limited to publicly available online sources, which may not reflect all past and present RPs. Although our search aimed to be as systematic and comprehensive as possible, the widespread inconsistency of RP terminology means that some reporting or advertising of RPs may not have been consistently picked up by our search terms. Finally, the data collection was finalised in mid-2022, which meant we were unable to provide an overview of RP provision into 2023 and 2024. Our survey results were also skewed by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Walmsley et al. 2022), which meant that results in 2020 (and to some extent, 2021) deviated from the prevailing trend.

Despite our personal interest in the RP movement and the inclusivity of classical concerts, we cannot claim that our insights are in any way representative of audiences or musicians who experience significant aural difference or are neurodivergent. We suggest that future research should draw on growing networks of aurally-divergent and neurodivergent performers, who can offer important resources and examples of lived experience to enhance research efforts and advocacy (e.g. Drever and Hugill 2022; Shiloh and Blythe LaGasse 2014).

Recommendations

Given the wide variation among RP practices that we have documented, we believe that there is significant work still to be done in both research and practice in inclusive classical

music performance. Although we found evidence of arts organisations that explicitly highlighted opportunities for distinctive, multimodal ways of listening, we also exposed the disparate usage of RP formats and the concern that this could present misleading perspectives on who is and is not validated in classical music participation.

One possibility for improving practice in this regard would be to support organisations within the classical music sector in the United Kingdom in joining together in consistent and unified discourse surrounding RP. The difficulties we faced in conducting a nationwide survey of RP opportunities go some way to illustrating the current incoherence across the field of inclusive concerts – in basic vocabulary, accessibility provision, and aesthetic content. Drawing on our observations of the clear differences between adapted RP, bespoke RP, and RP that foregrounded disabled musicians, we suggest that there is potential for arts organisations to move towards a more consistent categorisation structure which carefully defines the provision at each event and explains what audiences can expect. This could be done, for example, using a system akin to existing Universal Access symbols (Figure 4). As shown in Figure 5, different RP symbols could be associated with specific terminology defining distinctive practices. For example:

(1) Relaxed Adaptation: this performance is the same as a regular performance but with features in place to meet additional accessibility requirements. Audience members are not required to stay silent or seated, an alternative quiet space is available outside the auditorium, and sudden changes in sound and lighting have been removed.
(2) Relaxed Original: this performance is based on a regular performance but with bespoke features to make it more inclusive and accessible. For example, short musical excerpts may be accompanied by spoken commentary, audio description, or British Sign Language interpretation. Audience members are not required to stay silent or seated, an alternative quiet space is available outside the auditorium, and sudden changes in sound and lighting have been removed.
(3) Relaxed Venue: all performances in this setting celebrate the diversity of disability culture. Meeting accessibility requirements through architectural design, the use of audio description and British Sign Language interpretation, and providing information in alternative formats is integral to all performances. When attending a performance, audience members are not required to stay silent or seated, an alternative quiet space is available outside the auditorium, and sudden changes in sound and lighting have been removed.

Sign language interpretation | Assistive listening system | Closed captioning

Figure 4. Examples of universal access symbols.

Figure 5. Examples of Relaxed Performance symbols.

However, in order to build on the groundbreaking work already done by disabled-led organisations such as Touretteshero, Include Arts, and the Graeæ Theatre Company, such a system would need to be built upon research and practice that foregrounds the voices of the diverse performers and audiences who participate in RP. While some such research has begun to take place in music and theatre contexts in North America (Richards and Parkes 2023; Umeda and Jirikowic 2019), in the United Kingdom there is an ongoing need to prioritise the experiences of aurally-divergent and neurodivergent participants in the development of RP practice. Such first-hand perspectives have the potential to demonstrate how RP practice affects audiences, and how persistent exclusionary factors may continue to affect the cultural participation of disabled communities. Only through amplifying the voices of aurally-divergent and neurodivergent individuals who both do and do not (or can and cannot) engage in classical music performance can research and practice in accessible and inclusive ways of listening meaningfully move forward. But in beginning to break down barriers to musical participation, diversify classical concert audiences, and celebrate the place of aural diversity and neurodiversity in art and creativity, such developments have the potential to benefit "a huge range of audiences including autistic people, those with learning disabilities, movement disorders, or dementia – or just people with very loud laughs" (bac.org.uk/relaxed-venue).

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