On the edge of their seats: Comparing first impressions and regular attendance in arts audiences

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a questionnaire and interview study with arts audiences in a UK city, and compares the experiences of arts attenders with those of an "audience exchange" group, in which participants were taken to unfamiliar arts events and then discussed their expectations, first impressions, and intentions for future arts engagement. The study considers how the established values and behaviours of regular audience members might be inhibiting or alienating to first-time listeners, and identifies continuums of engagement that draw on psychological frameworks of identity and belonging. Differences between the factors in audience satisfaction in cinema, theatre, and music are explored, and the effects of familiarity with one art form on understanding a first encounter with a new one highlight the range of perspectives that audience members bring to any given event. The implications of these findings for audience development strategies are considered, showing how research with audiences can be a developmental tool in itself, by encouraging reflective discussion of arts experiences amongst new attenders.

Keywords

arts events, audiences, belonging, classical music, identity, jazz, opera

Research contexts: Audience expectations and experiences

Research with arts audiences takes place across a variety of academic disciplines and commercial contexts, from market research to sociology, and from contemporary art to live-streamed cinema. This distributed investigation is sometimes to the detriment of progress within the field, as findings within one genre or discipline are slow to inform discussions in another (Baker, 2000). Often, the understanding of "audience" is different across disciplines, with contradictions emerging between a focus on consumer behaviour (Hand, 2011) and audience values (Peterson, 1992), and between the generalisations of audience segmentation studies (DCMS,

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2012) and the specificity of individual experiences (Pitts & Burland, 2013). "Audience experience", in its various definitions, is also notoriously difficult to access through empirical research: Belfiore and Bennett (2007) highlight the disjunction between a theoretical understanding of the arts that increasingly focuses upon the interaction between the art work and its audience, and a lack of research evidence regarding the nature of that interaction. Drawing on de Bolla's (2001) concept of "mutism" to explain audience members' struggles to articulate their aesthetic experiences, they suggest that "affective responses to works of art are under-researched because they necessarily require the use of a lexicon of emotions and feeling with which academic language and discourse are fundamentally uncomfortable" (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007, p. 240). Despite these constraints and challenges, there is a growing call amongst researchers across disciplines and art forms for empirical evidence that captures the richness of audience experience, setting the "purely" musical, theatrical or artistic encounter within the context of social decision-making, cultural choice and personal identity formation (e.g. Radbourne, Glow, & Johanson, 2013; Burland & Pitts, 2014).

Psychology of music has a particular contribution to make in connecting empirical data from audiences with established knowledge of listening and participation, exploring the extent to which an experimental understanding of music cognition, perception and emotion is replicated in live arts settings. However, studies of whether music listening alters in the social setting of a concert have so far been inconclusive, noting only that "whether social influences intensify or lower emotional responses to music, their importance should not be overlooked" (Egermann et al., 2011, p. 321). Other investigations have isolated aspects of live music performance for consideration, showing that being able to see as well as hear the players can generate stronger emotional responses (Krahé, Hahn, & Whitney, 2015), that players' concert dress influences judgement of the quality of the performance (Griffiths, 2010), and that programme notes can unintentionally reduce enjoyment by over-emphasising the intellectual aspects of the listening experience (Margulis, 2010). Case studies in a range of arts event settings have explored individual and group audience experience more contextually, exploring social factors including audience loyalty (Pitts & Spencer, 2008), community and belonging (Burland & Pitts, 2010), and the effects of performer–audience interaction for both parties (Brand, Sloboda, Saul, & Hathaway, 2012; Lamont, 2012).

A broader theoretical context for these case studies is provided by research in sociology and cultural studies which builds on the foundations of Bourdieu's (1984) social stratification of cultural tastes. Later writers in this tradition have increasingly challenged those class distinctions, updating them in the light of changing habits of arts consumption and access (O'Brien, 2013). Recent empirical studies have proposed instead the notion of a "cultural omnivore" (Peterson, 1992) who is comfortable in a range of arts encounters or, alternatively, the emergence of new "taste communities" (Savage & Gayo, 2011, p. 353) who are divided by age and open-mindedness rather than by class and education. Using the Arts Council England's *Taking Part* survey data (see Martin, Bunting, & Oskala, 2010), Miles and Sullivan (2012) offer a comprehensive analysis of current patterns of arts attendance in England, confirming Bourdieu's theory of the inter-generational transmission of cultural practices, but noting that those outside "high art" do not necessarily view themselves as being deprived of that access. They suggest that the "deficit" model commonly used in arts policy discourse is therefore unhelpful, since all participation has value, asserting however, that cultural and social mobility should still be supported by policy-making and arts education (2012, p. 321). The interests of psychology of music, which examines individual and social experience of processes of live arts consumption, and sociology of music, which considers the broader cultural power relationships of those experiences, therefore converge on a question that O'Brien highlights as "the conundrum

of cultural policy: how best to narrate culture's value" (2013, p. 5) – to which a related concern might be added, of how to capture and explore that value through appropriate research methods.

This project aimed to tackle some of the questions of motivation, identity and belonging that have been addressed previously in relation to specific audiences, and to consider how they might be affected across the arts by attendance habits and level of experience. Recent studies in separate art forms have identified distinctive features of dance (Reason & Reynolds, 2010), theatre (Sauter, 2002) and opera audiences (Jobst & Boerner, 2011), and yet have generated overarching themes: quality of art and connection with performers emerge as the strongest factors in audience satisfaction (Sauter, 2002), with the peripheral aspects of venue comfort and friendliness having least overall effect (Jobst & Boerner, 2011), but helping to mitigate the risk of attending an unfamiliar work in a familiar setting (Maitland, 2000). By conducting a cross-arts audience survey within one UK city, this project looked at different audiences' experiences in a small range of venues, exploring the variables of attendance habits, motivation and attitude across a local population before investigating these in greater depth through interviews and focus groups with first-time and frequent attenders.

The principal research questions of the study were prompted by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's "Cultural Value" programme, which aimed "to make a major contribution to how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society" (AHRC, 2012). The particular focus for this study was to explore the differences between the "cultural value" articulated by regular arts attenders, and those values expected and experienced by audience members who attend less frequently. A subsidiary focus was to compare values and expectations between different art forms, and so to find out if experiences associated with specific music genres are distinctive, or fall readily into a cross-arts pattern of attendance. Finally, the project sought to explore the practical, psychological and philosophical dimensions of motivation for arts attendance, from the practicalities of cost, access and availability, through the effects of prior engagement and education, to the perceived individual value and social impact of the arts.

Methods

Working with research assistant Katy Robinson, a three stage enquiry was designed to capture a range of perspectives on live arts consumption:

- *Questionnaire*: an online survey which sought to gather demographic information, level and type of current and past arts engagement, attitudes towards the provision of arts in Sheffield and the place of arts engagement in the lives of respondents. A slightly modified survey was also distributed to students at the University of Sheffield to increase the data sample and seek their particular views on arts engagement during student years.
- *Interviews*: follow-up interviews were conducted with questionnaire respondents who had indicated a willingness to talk in more depth, with an emphasis on formative experiences of arts engagement, and factors affecting rates and choices of attendance.
- *Audience exchange*: the online survey was also used to recruit participants for an "audience exchange" scheme, in which first-time jazz, opera and chamber music attenders were taken to an event, and then participated in a focus group discussion about their expectations and first impressions.

Table 1. Age range of audience questionnaire respondents.

Age group ($N = 138$)	Categories
76+ (5)	Mainly retired respondents
66–75 (26)	(23% of sample)
60–69 (1)	
56–65 (32)	Mid–late career respondents
50–59 (1)	(39% of sample)
46–55 (19)	
40–49 (2)	
36–45 (7)	Early–mid career respondents, including those in postgraduate education
30–39 (6)	(30% of sample)
26–35 (14)	
22–29 (14)	
18–25 (6)	Young adults, including those in undergraduate education
18–21 (5)	(8% of sample)

Flyers giving details of the survey were distributed at arts events in Sheffield between October and December 2013, and additional advertising was done through social media, university staff and student mailing lists, the newsletter of the local University of the Third Age (U3A), and an article in an independent local magazine, *Now Then*. Ethical approval for the study was granted through the University of Sheffield, and permissions sought from arts organisations as well as from participating individuals.

Participants

A total of 138 audience questionnaire responses were collected, comprising 109 from the general questionnaire (coded AQ1–AQ109) and 29 more from the slightly modified student questionnaire (coded SQ1–SQ29). Of these responses, 67% ($n = 93$) were female, and 33% ($n = 45$) were male, a bias more likely to reflect differences in inclination to complete a lengthy questionnaire than the overall demographic of the audiences (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The risk of excluding respondents who did not have access to the internet was countered by offering a paper questionnaire, and these were requested by a small sample of older respondents. The recruitment method of distributing flyers after performances and advertising the study in various print and online media meant that reminders to participate could not be sent, which potentially reduced the response rate further. Table 1 shows how the age distribution reflected the older attenders typical of theatre and classical music audiences (Kolb, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2009) but also provided a substantial sample of the elusive "young adult" audience, some in employment and some in education. The different age group categories used in the two questionnaires were intended to distinguish undergraduate students (usually aged 18–21) from postgraduates in the student questionnaire, but these have been grouped into broader age categories in the analysis.

Respondents were asked to indicate their frequency of attendance at a range of arts events, and the categories they selected were then used to generate an average attendance rating: 5 points were scored for attending "most weeks", 4 for "most months" and so on to 0 for "never been before". Calculated in this way, a high average attendance score could be obtained by frequent attendance at a few art forms, or occasional attendance across a wider range. Although respondents were self-selecting, and therefore more likely to include those keen to reflect on

Table 2. Attendance levels of audience questionnaire respondents.

Category	Average attendance rating ($N = 138$)	% of sample
High attendance	2.6–3.2 (13)	9
Above average attendance	2.05–2.55 (49)	35
Average attendance	1.6–2.0 (43)	31
Below average attendance	1.05–1.59 (26)	19
Low attendance	<1 (9)	6

Table 3. Audience interview participants.

Pseudonym	Code	Age group	M/F	Average attendance rating	Preferred art form
Mark	AQ70	66–75	M	3.1	Multiple: all arts
Marion	AQ45	66–75	F	1.05	Music: concerts
Sheila	AQ48	66–75	F	1.8	Music: concerts
Sue	AQ89	56–65	F	1.7	Theatre
Josie	AQ61	46–55	F	2.1	Theatre
Paul	AQ98	46–55	M	1.4	Music: gigs
Jim	SQ16	40–49	M	2.2	Comedy
Colin	AQ36	36–45	M	1.9	Cinema
Lucia	AQ94	26–35	F	2.6	Galleries
Caroline	AQ103	18–25	F	2	Music: gigs

their arts participation, a sufficient variety of frequency and type of attendance was achieved (see Table 2) to enable some broad trends to be identified, and these were followed up in greater detail through the interview stage of the investigation. The attendance ratings ranged from 0.2 to 3.1, with an overall average of 1.88 across the sample: the distribution of responses is shown in Table 2.

At the next stage of data collection, a further layer of analysis considered how respondents' attendance ratings were achieved, from "dabbling" across many arts to "specialising" in one or two (terms used by Stebbins, 1992, amongst others). A selection of respondents was recruited to participate in the next stages of the research, designed to include a range of ages and attendance habits, including those who were specialist in one art form but inexperienced in others, as well as those who had broad arts consumption habits, at varying levels of frequency. Ten individual interviews were carried out, and three audience exchange focus groups took place involving another 14 people. These participants were assigned pseudonyms and their discussions transcribed in full. Table 3 shows the characteristics of the interview participants, and Table 4 those of the audience exchange members.

Descriptive statistics were used to understand the demographics and attendance patterns of the survey population, and thematic analysis undertaken of the more extensive qualitative responses included in the survey, as well as in the interviews and focus group discussions. Since the sample was small, relative to large-scale audience surveys carried out regularly by the Arts Council and others (e.g. DCMS, 2012), the emphasis here was on gaining qualitative understanding of patterns of behaviour, and exploring the relationships between arts preferences, attendance habits and level of satisfaction and engagement. There is potential for this qualitative insight to be used to inform future, larger-scale studies, and these possibilities will be

Table 4. Audience exchange events and participants.

Exchange 1: Jay Phelps Sextet jazz gig

Participant pseudonym	Data from questionnaire:				
	Code	Age group	Gender	Average attendance rating	Preferred art form
Joyce	AQ58	56–65	F	2.9	Theatre/ballet
Malcolm	n/a	56–65	M	n/a	n/a
Antony	AQ76	36–45	M	2.55	Galleries
Alice	AQ77	36–45	F	1.9	Cinema

Exchange 2: Nabucco opera

Roger	AQ9	56–65	M	1.9	Music: concerts
Rose	n/a	26–35	F	n/a	Galleries
Phil	AQ8	56–65	M	2.3	Cinema
Alison	n/a	18–25	F	n/a	Theatre/ musicals
Alice	AQ77	36–45	F	1.9	Cinema
Jane	n/a	26–35	F	n/a	n/a
Dan	n/a	18–25	M	n/a	Musicals

Exchange 3: Music in the Round chamber music concert

Akasuki	SQ7	30–39	F	1.1	Theatre
Asako	n/a	22–29	F	n/a	n/a
Duminda	SQ3	22–29	F	2.45	Theatre/cinema
Amelia	SQ4	18–21	F	0.65	Heritage properties
Dan	n/a	18–25	M	n/a	Musicals

addressed in the final section of the paper. In the discussion that follows, the questionnaire and interview findings will be integrated in an analysis of responses by art form and attendance level, before the experiences of first time attenders are explored further in the audience exchange study that formed the final stage of the investigation.

Results

Audience habits and expectations: Questionnaire and interview findings

Analysis by art form: Audience motivations in cinema, theatre and music. One aim of the audience questionnaire was to explore notions of audience loyalty and discover whether audience members shape their attendance habits around particular genres or venues, or are likely to cross these boundaries in their pursuit of a culturally or socially enriching experience. Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred art form, within the variety of their attendance: 18% of the sample ($n = 25$) favoured cinema, 17% ($n = 23$) theatre, and 28% ($n = 39$) selected live music of some kind, dividing roughly into 16% ($n = 22$) for concerts of mainly classical repertoire, and 12% ($n = 17$) for rock, pop and local band gigs, with both categories including some

jazz and folk listening. A further 18% ($n = 25$) gave multiple answers: responses including 2–3 choices or more were usually congruent art forms, for example, "Live music/theatre/musical theatre" (SQ12), but a few demonstrated more eclectic tastes, for example, "opera/Shakespeare plays/heavy rock concerts" (AQ26).

Closer examination of the cinema, theatre and music groups revealed both overlaps and differences in the reasons given for these preferences, which helped to capture the sense of "cultural value" ascribed to each art form by its regular attenders. Cinema-goers seemed to be the most satisfied audience members, suggesting only small changes to venue facilities or catering, or more often specifying that they "would not change a thing" (AQ77). Their enjoyment was related to the quality and range of the films available, and the capacity of film to "transport" the viewer (AQ66), either through "relaxation" (AQ88), or "something of interest that invites further thought" (AQ72). Around half of these respondents mentioned their satisfaction with the venue, referring to the independent cinema of which several were members, or regular attenders at particular screenings: "Regular reduced price screening for over 50s, every Thursday. See the same people – very friendly atmosphere" (AQ4). The intertwining of habit, social life and affordability captured the appeal of cinema attendance, as its offer of varied cultural experiences for low financial risk made it a readily accessible art form for many respondents: "This event is available every week during the day and it fits into my lifestyle" (AQ80). Several interviewees spoke of the ease of spontaneous cinema attendance as being preferable to planning ahead for theatre and concert trips, though Colin reported "peaks and troughs" of attendance, affected by the "hotspots around the year for when the good films are out".

The theatre and classical music responses were distinct from cinema in showing higher expectations of the event: attenders in both cases were seeking a "high quality" experience (AQ23 and others) of "serious attention from the performers to giving the audience the best that they can do" (AQ38). While attending with friends or like-minded people was similar to the social aspects of cinema-going, the quality and liveness of the event were of greater priority: "I like the immediacy of theatre and although I also enjoy film, live performance is qualitatively different – exhilarating if it's good" (AQ54). Jane also linked theatre and cinema in the experience of being "in another world while you're watching it", but theatre was for her a more "special" experience – "the ambience [...] the dressing up to go to the theatre, all that sort of thing". With their greater expectations of the theatre experience, respondents were also more likely than cinema-goers to be critical of other audience members for disrupting this: a respondent who described theatre as "getting lost in a different reality" also wrote that she would "ban people from passing boxes of sweets around, rustling papers, dropping sweets on the floor, giggling ..." (AQ89). Shortcomings of venues were also noted, particularly in relation to booking fees, parking difficulties and refreshment facilities, and the costs of tickets were cited as limiting attendance or reducing the willingness to take risks. One theatre-goer wrote of wanting to "see in advance whether it was worth going especially if the ticket is expensive and we have travelled some distance to the event" (AQ81), thereby seeking a guarantee of a good night out which might inhibit attendance at new or unfamiliar work, one-off performances and short runs of productions in particular.

Classical music respondents shared the theatre-goers' preoccupations with quality and the live experience, but were less likely to be affected by other audience members, emphasising the repertoire and performance rather than the social experience of attending. The greater homogeneity of the audience could perhaps have contributed to the absence of distracting behaviour, but several respondents commented negatively on the lack of "younger people in the audience" (AQ48 and others) or called on concert promoters to make events "less 'precious' so that all ages and backgrounds can enjoy them" (AQ73). In this art form particularly, "cultural value" was expressed as being an inherent and obvious feature of the genre: one respondent stated that

"classical music can be very rich in emotions, drama, and beauty" (AQ5), while another response was "sorry, no words to express the inexpressible" (AQ21), thus invoking the "mutism" described by art theorist de Bolla (2001) as a common reaction to deep aesthetic experience: "the sense of running out of words [...] in the face of the art work" (p. 4). In addition to these affirmations of classical music in general, respondents expressed clear preferences for particular repertoire, illustrating the programming challenges of arts organisations through contradictory requests to "try more contemporary music" (AQ14) or avoid "too much unknown music" (AQ32) – or as one honest respondent put it, "have more of the music I like" (AQ21). Unfamiliarity with the genre was also mentioned in interviews as a barrier to attendance, with Lucia feeling that she would need to attend opera or classical music with "someone who can explain a bit about it".

While one respondent stated that "live music is in a class of its own whatever the style of music" (AQ93), the responses of those attending rock gigs and local bands were distinct from the classical audiences, and focused much more on the atmosphere of the event: "The adrenalin of seeing your favourite artists perform live and the feeling of being part of the event along with other complete strangers" (AQ10). Critical comments about venues were very detailed, expressing frustrations about seat comfort, leg room, acoustics and booking policies: however, several respondents offered the view that while "the venue is important, the attitude and behaviours of venue staff – nothing can make up for a poor performance though" (AQ15). Pop music audiences made more mention than classical audiences of the relationship between live and recorded listening, both in their tendency to see their "favourite artists" (AQ10) and the opportunity for "hearing new material, that I can then find out more about in recorded form" (AQ35). Like the stand-up comedy audiences with whom they shared most of their preferences and concerns, pop music listeners enjoyed seeing a familiar performer in a new setting: "informal, lively atmosphere, no rules or set formula means it can often be unexpected" (AQ82).

The comparison between cinema, theatre and music audiences show how similar elements are present in their expectations and evaluations of the live arts experience, but are given different priority according to the level of risk and engagement inherent to each setting. Cinema-goers appear to be most easily satisfied, since a wide choice of readily accessible events make their attendance seem less risky; one poor film will soon be followed by a better one, and the social aspect of a night out with friends is enhanced even by discussion of a less enjoyable movie. Classical music listeners express greatest satisfaction when the repertoire matches their own preferences, but are disappointed when those preferences are not more widely shared or promoted; theatre-goers, meanwhile, might be less risk averse and more open to unfamiliar work, but like concert-goers are discouraged by the cost of tickets and the small irritations of the venue. Listeners at gigs, where ticket prices are often high, feel nonetheless that they are getting value for money, in the experience of seeing a "star" in close proximity, or in sharing the atmosphere of the live music experience. These are bold generalisations to make from a small sample, though they are consistent with previous studies of audiences for specific art forms (e.g. Walmsley, 2011; Reason & Reynolds, 2010), and begin to make a contribution to comparisons across the arts which are notably absent in the literature (Carnwaith & Brown, 2014). These preliminary findings also illustrate the challenges that are familiar to arts organisations of recruiting and satisfying ticket purchasers whose habits are easily influenced by factors external to the event itself, therefore highlighting the complexities of what constitutes audience engagement and how it can best be supported.

Analysis by attendance level. Having established that each art form within the survey responses offered a distinctive profile of audience expectations, the next stage in analysing the data was to consider whether these changed over time: in other words, whether there was also a distinctive "newcomer" or "established" audience member profile, either within or across different arts.

Audience segmentation studies, such as those conducted by organisations including Arts Council England (DCMS, 2012), Australia Council for the Arts (2010) and the League of American Orchestras (2009), often assume this to be the case, classifying potential audience members by their expected attitudes to the arts and their wider cultural behaviour. This study, while much smaller than the national segmentation reports, is able to offer greater qualitative insight on people's attendance decisions, and so to question common marketing assumptions about how to increase and sustain audiences.

The group of lowest attenders, for example, might be assumed to be least engaged in the arts, but their comments on the events that they had attended demonstrated that they were selective rather than reluctant in their attendance. They saw the benefits of live arts attendance as including "atmosphere, good value for money" (AQ20) and contributing to "happiness and wellbeing" (AQ28), and described the specific events they had been to see in terms of quality, enjoyment and comfort: "[the comedian] was very funny, it was good value for money and we had great seats near the front, so we weren't watching him on the big screen" (AQ2). Their descriptions are closest to the commercial evaluation of pop/rock listeners than the aesthetic judgements of the theatre-goers in the genre-based analysis above: engagement with the event is presented as being more of a transaction than a commitment, but is nonetheless satisfying and identity-affirming, as it confirms and deepens preferences and offers a chance to share these with friends and strangers.

The survey asked respondents to describe the audience at a recent event they had attended and state whether they had felt comfortable as part of this group, to which one infrequent attender stated, "Yes, but I would feel comfortable with any audience if we were all there to enjoy the same show" (AQ28). Others in this group, however, reported some of the stereotypically alienating aspects of joining a new arts audience, with one describing her fellow theatre-goers as "over 30, arty, sandal wearing, red wine drinking – all of which can be a little off-putting!!" (AQ20). The same respondent suggested that this social factor, as well as ticket price, would prevent her from trying an unfamiliar art form, in her case ballet or opera: "I would feel uncomfortable trying this event surrounded by other guests who are more interested in it. Price prevents trying something new" (AQ20). Other respondents expressed their reluctance to try new art forms in more essentialist terms: "absolutely hate musicals" (AQ13), "modern art – it's a joke" (AQ10) and "don't like jazz music" (AQ2). Amongst the high attending interviewees, strong dislike of a particular genre was usually accompanied by a story of having fulfilled a sense of obligation to experience it at least once: "I was taken to opera once, because you ought to have been to opera once – it wasn't very inspiring!" (Mark). At both ends of the attendance spectrum, these responses show that fixed opinions about a genre can result from quite minimal experience – and are often comfortably held by the respondents, who understandably focus their available time and resources on enriching their preferences rather than addressing any perceived gaps in their arts consumption.

The high attending respondents gave generally longer and more qualified answers, keen to explain the nuances of their attendance habits and preferences within the confines of a survey response: "The opportunity to see, hear and enjoy these events enhances my quality of life. I also enjoy shared experience with friends/family and discussions afterwards" (AQ71). Their statements about the benefits of live arts attendance were likewise much more focused on emotional and imaginative experience than on comfort and value for money, though these practical aspects were mentioned as areas for improvement in specific events attended recently. Descriptions of the audience often included expressions of concern at the lack of younger people or ethnic diversity, or offered explanations for who was there – and not there:

> Poetry events tend (in my experience) to attract enthusiasts, so I imagine the majority of attendees
> would have been to one before. I always suspect events like this will be very middle class and enjoy

having my expectations quashed – there was obviously a huge mix of backgrounds as well as ethnicities. (AQ52)

Reasons for not attending were dominated by comfort and preference, most often in relation to the high volume of pop and rock gigs: "mostly the amplification – I have even had to leave performers I enjoy on CD because the sound has been unbearable. This can also be true in the cinema" (AQ70). However, several high attenders made reference to having recently seen something unfamiliar or unexpected – "didn't know what to expect so made me concentrate" (AQ86) – and also to seeking out new experiences, sometimes with the frustration that these were not always easy to find: "I think there is a lack of co-ordinated information about what's on, hence a feeling of constantly just having missed something" (AQ97). As a less frequent attender, Sue (rating 1.7) noted similar difficulties of finding information, but felt this was easier to access once attendance had already become habitual: "If you go to the theatre, you pick up leaflets and see what's on next – and if you don't go, you're not sort of looking to see what's on".

Between these two extremes of high and low attendance, respondents identified similar factors in their enjoyment, and frequency of attendance was not a reliable predictor of satisfaction and experience. When asked to rate their satisfaction with their level of attendance, the lowest ratings were in the mid-range of actual attendance levels, where respondents cited obstacles of time, money, lack of childcare and lack of information as preventing them attending more often. Across the spectrum of attendance, most respondents claimed to feel comfortable amongst the audiences they frequented, explaining this with reference to their "fit" to the audience demographic, the company of friends, or the tendency to be "not bothered about other people" (AQ16), sometimes acquired through previous attending experiences: "I personally didn't feel too comfortable amongst these people. However, I have attended enough arts events to know how to deal with it" (AQ99). Views varied over the need for company at arts events, with the majority seeing this as part of the pleasure of attending, while some more frequent attenders actively avoided it: "I go to the theatre alone as its often more enjoyable not having to fit around others' wishes. I don't like people talking to me when I am immersed in a show" (AQ109). As one interviewee pointed out, frequent attendance makes the need for company at an event less pressing, since "as soon as you get there, you see all the people you know anyway" (Marion). It is easy to imagine how this ready-formed community of regular attenders is both a deterrent to newcomers and an extra, almost unnoticed pleasure for established audience members: being at an event with "people you feel comfortable with" (Colin) adds to the enjoyment, and can be harder to achieve without friends who share artistic tastes (see also Dobson & Pitts, 2011).

The audience survey respondents show themselves to be operating on a number of different continuums, which interact with but are not limited to the straightforward classification of "attender v. non-attender" or the "indifference to enthusiasm" identified in previous research (Bunting, Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney, & Oskala, 2008). Other continuums included "belonging/not belonging", "familiarity/unfamiliarity" with the art form, the venue, and the specific repertoire, and the extent of personal engagement with the event, which could be classified as "transaction/commitment". Qualitative exploration of these dimensions through the interviews showed how they affected venue choice, for example, as attenders weighed up the practical advantages of a venue with their sense of supporting an activity that they valued: Jane, describing her favourite cinema – "it's small, it's local, and it's nice, and it's independent" – showed how the experience of being somewhere "not so commercialised" suited both her comfort and her ideals, and so contributed to the overall experience. The city's theatres were also highly prized across the survey and interview responses, and the sense of obligation to support regional arts was further evidence of the transaction/commitment continuum that

underpinned the justifications of frequent attenders, but was less of a concern for those seeking a one-off or occasional experience.

Also in evidence was the extent to which interviewees felt arts attendance to be part of their identity, and were perceived by their friends, or by themselves, as people who "would go to anything" (Sheila). Jim described himself as "[not] really active, but we'll keep an eye out for things, usually take time to do some stuff", but these apparently casual activities generated an above average attendance (rating of 2.2) and an attitude of wanting "to be entertained, but I also like things to be thought provoking and a bit different as well". Our highest attending interviewee, Mark (rating of 3.1), described himself as a "cultural magpie" likely to attend an event at least weekly and to "welcome the chance to see and hear new things rather than regurgitating things". As in some of the survey responses, Mark's frequent attendance was linked to a high degree of critique, with clear preferences and priorities in choosing events, and some dissatisfaction with local venues for music, particularly. The sense of belonging, whether to specific venues or the arts scene in general, appears to bring with it a sense of entitlement to evaluate, noted similarly by Benzecry (2011) in his research with opera audiences. Whether these evaluations could be the beginnings of the "guarantee of a good night out" sought by less frequent attenders is worth investigating further, as the connections along the continuum from belonging/not belonging seem currently to be underdeveloped in both research and practice.

Exploring first impressions: The "audience exchange"

The final stage of our exploration focused specifically on music, using an "audience exchange" study to consider how the values and experiences of newcomers to a live music genre are different from those of established audience members. Volunteers who had responded to our online survey were invited to try a new musical event and discuss their experiences in a group interview afterwards. Three contrasting musical events were selected: an experimental jazz gig, a Verdi opera and a chamber music concert (see Table 4 for event details and participants). Volunteers from the survey were contacted and offered two free tickets to an event, in the hope that attending with a friend would make the experience less daunting and facilitate group discussion afterwards. A total of 14 participants attended, including two (Dan and Alice) who came twice: some attended alone, some with partners or friends, and two were father and daughter pairs. Average attendance ratings were varied, but generally low relative to the overall survey sample, and there was a spread of ages from undergraduate students to early retired. The "plus one" friends or relatives who were invited by the participants were asked to complete the survey after the event, but none in fact did this, so the information available about those contributors was more limited (indicated as n/a in Table 4).

Thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed three main factors affecting engagement in a new arts event: i) feeling the need for more knowledge and/or preparation, ii) assuming that other people's engagement in the event was deeper or "better", and iii) making comparisons with more familiar or preferred art forms. Although these were often expressed as negative elements of the experience in the group discussion, wrestling with these challenges had also been a source of engagement and reflection for a number of the participants, as they compared their own experiences with the behaviour of the more established listeners around them. Table 5 illustrates the first of these themes in relation to the three events, showing how the conventions of jazz listening, the unfamiliarity of the opera format, and the presence of live musicians in the chamber music concert all contributed to a sense that knowing more about the music was assumed to be necessary for full enjoyment.

Of the three events, the opera appeared to have been the most "inaccessible" (Phil, FG2) to the new audience members, who drew on their experiences of watching film, theatre and

Table 5. Audience exchange theme (i): preparation for listening.

Event	Group interview quotes
Jay Phelps Sextet jazz gig	"I would've liked to have known more numbers that they were playing. There were probably – it wasn't until the second half that I really knew one. 'Cos if you don't know it – it's like in a concert – if you don't know what they're playing, or you've never heard it before, or you don't realise you've heard it before – then you don't appreciate it as much as if it's one of your favourite sort of songs." (Malcolm, FG1)
	"It may be better to work up to something like this, and go via the more – slightly more melodic jazz things first, and then get more used to it before you try this. So that may be a different way of going about it. [Our friend] said he'd make us a CD up, to educate us!" (Julie, FG1)
Nabucco opera	"Just from the subtitles, I couldn't totally follow – I could follow up to a point – but during the breaks I read up to the next bit – the previous bit and the next bit of the synopsis, so then I could follow it, just about." (Phil, FG2)
	"I would be interested [in seeing another opera], but I think I would research what I want to go and see a bit better, and know a bit more about it, so that I'd know it was something that would interest me more." (Jane, FG2)
Chamber music concert	"Honestly, I don't know what to do with the performers, all the time I went to concerts, I don't know what to see [i.e. where to look] – I thought it was performers, but I don't know how to play the violin, so they're just moving, but it has no meaning to me." (Akasuki, FG3)

musicals in trying to make sense of the opera, but found it to lack emotional intensity in comparison to these other art forms: "I was imagining I'd just be really grabbed by the love affair, and like, in tears, but I wasn't really" (Rose, FG2). One member of the group suggested that it had been the "wrong opera" (Roger, FG2) to choose, and that later Verdi, or Mozart, with "more interesting characters", would have been a better introduction for first-time attenders. At the jazz gig, too, a friend of two of the participants, "who is a jazz person" (Joyce, FG1), had suggested that the sextet was "quite a difficult group of people to listen to first of all if you're not used to jazz", leading to his offer of a CD of "more melodic jazz" to help Julie and Malcolm develop their new interest further (see Table 5). In attributing their self-perceived lack of understanding to this particular repertoire rather than the genre as a whole, the respondents arguably leave open the possibility of approaching the genre from a different angle, but also reinforce the inhibition that prior knowledge is needed even to make a choice of event, much less to appreciate it fully.

The idea of having started in the wrong place to access a new genre was not replicated in the third focus group, who seemed more confident in their expression of their own responses and more accepting of their unfamiliarity with classical music. The experience of "drifting in and out" of listening, also reported in the other focus groups, was seen by these younger respondents to be not only an expected feature of listening, but one which could be positive, facilitating emotional experience or relaxation. Akasuki (FG3) expressed this as a "right to daydream": "I don't think drifting off is a bad thing [...] if I paid money and I have a right to think whatever I like, I tend to daydream". Nonetheless, Table 6 shows how all three groups were conscious of other audience members' apparent listening behaviours, observing their levels of attention and making assumptions about their levels of knowledge. Appreciation for particular aspects of the

Table 6. Audience exchange theme (ii): other people's engagement.

Event	Group interview quotes
Jay Phelps Sextet jazz gig	"I could see they were skilful musicians, but it's like, at times, when people were clapping, it's like 'well, what were they doing there? Why is that – why was that skilful?' – I can kind of see sometimes the emotional part, when they were clapping, the rhythmical part of it, but it's like why was that particularly skilful or admired? I didn't quite think that I understood that." (Antony, FG1) "Yeah, I suppose, there were a lot of really hard core fans, I suppose, and [...] so I was kind of aware that I didn't know as much." (Alice, FG1)
Nabucco opera	"People who like the music are going to focus on that as well, and overlook the fact that it actually isn't that sort of, fluid, a performance. But if you're not actually that into the music to start with, which I'm not, um, it does get in the way a bit. I tried to sort of open my eyes and let it all flood in, as a spectacle, and I got some enjoyment from that, but overall I find the whole experience of opera, generally, that I've seen **–** I've seen bits on the television as well, as so stylised, as to be inaccessible, for me." (Phil, FG2)
Chamber music concert	"It did definitely seem like an older audience, but there was young people there – people who I thought were quite obviously music students, or people of a younger age that were probably musicians themselves, and were trying to engage themselves that way, and learn. So it seemed like it was a learning experience as well as people who were very much enjoying it." (Dan, FG3) "I am no expert, so maybe as audience, I just need to pay attention and enjoy it – that's fair enough." (Asako, FG3) "I did look around once or twice, and I did see some people kind of like, looking off, and some people were like, really intense, which was quite nice to see – made me feel a bit guilty that I couldn't maintain that level of intensity!" (Amelia, FG3)

jazz improvisation, for example, was taken as an indication of greater knowledge and engagement, while at the opera, Phil (FG2) attempted to adjust his audience viewing to the sense of spectacle that he imagined others might be enjoying, and indeed were, according to one questionnaire respondent's contrasting description of watching Verdi's Aida and "being totally absorbed and emotionally involved with the music and the story telling" (AQ71).

Observing the rest of the audience involved matching expectations against evidence, as the chamber music group noted some younger audience members amongst the more elderly population that they had been expecting, and at the opera, Alison found the people to be "more relaxed" than the "really posh people [...] and a bit pretentious" that she had anticipated. The source of these expectations was not always clear, though both Phil (FG2) and Asako (FG3) made reference to seeing classical music or opera on television, where the formal dress and cultured accents typical of such presentations have previously been shown to link classical music with privilege in the minds of adolescent listeners (Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2009). Table 7 shows how the new attenders also made comparisons with other, more familiar arts events, in particular with the narrative form of theatre and the different kind of attention needed for live music listening.

The "liveness" of the performance had been a source of enjoyment for Amelia (FG3), while for others this had emphasised their lack of understanding (Akasuki, FG3, Table 5), or confirmed their preference for listening to classical music as background to another activity: "not so much like, I'm sitting and watching, and this is my only thing that's going on – I do like it – I

Table 7. Audience exchange theme (iii): comparisons with other art forms.

Event	Group interview quotes
Jay Phelps Sextet jazz gig	"I suppose if you go to the theatre it's kind of – it's narrative, isn't it, and characters and conflict, and gripping, and like, a really good theatre performance, you go in and you're taken on this journey and it goes all the way through. Whereas this is kind of – because they each have their moment to do something, there's kind of stopping and starting." (Antony, FG1)
"Theatre's not always fantastic. I mean, some of it's good, some of it's bad. Um, tonight's was better than some bad theatre I've been to. *[laughter]* It's a different sort of – I'd definitely align this more with a classical music concert, very similar in many respects, just the kind of music that you might not know very well." (Malcolm, FG1)
Nabucco opera	"I mean, the musicals I've seen have always had like an intensity of emotion – I've always felt like I've really engaged with some of the characters, and you kind of get that intensity. Where, with this, I didn't. So I don't know why – I couldn't work out if it's a piece of music which I really enjoyed, and really liked the sound of it, or whether it was a bit of theatre. 'Cos it was almost like a choir, but dressed up, I guess. Which made it interesting to look at, but it was kind of different." (Alice, FG2)
"I was impressed by the singing, yeah, I thought the singing was amazing. And if I was listening to it as a recording – the singing on its own – I would have liked it a lot better, I think. The acting, like you said, let it down, the actual spectacle wasn't what I was expecting. I don't know if I was expecting a bit more – I don't know, more dramatic like *Carmen* or something? You know, all the bright colours, and the swaying about and stuff, but it was just a bit dull and a bit – I want to say dramatic, but it wasn't dramatic. It should have been dramatic but it wasn't." (Jane, FG2)
Chamber music concert	"If I don't want to use my head to sort of figure out all the meanings of what's going on in a play, the best thing is to go to listen to some music." (Duminda, FG3)
"They're actually real people, right in front of you playing instruments, so it's quite strange in a way, you don't get that connection when you're just sat in a seat [in the cinema]." (Amelia, FG3)
"I like film, um, and I'd always prefer a musical over, say, seeing classical music, because I can engage more with the story if there's a character, rather than music that's trying to evoke a certain emotion ..." (Dan, FG3)

like to chill and read a book to classical music, but not so much as that's everything" (Dan, FG3). Again, the contrast with the listening experience of more frequent audience members is striking, and shows the difficulties that arts organisations face in accommodating the needs of all of their potential listeners.

The audience exchange focus groups highlighted the distinctiveness of first experiences of arts events, and showed how these were sometimes uncomfortably situated outside the continuum of infrequent/frequent attendance, contributing to an alienation from the art form rather than a first step to increased engagement. Some of the regular attenders in the questionnaire and interview responses had shown an awareness of these difficulties of joining a new audience, as they compared their own experience to those of an imagined new attender:

> It can be absolutely exhilarating to watch a live theatrical performance – a good production can take you through an entire range of emotions, often in minutes. As a shared experience this experience is often enhanced. But, if it's your first event, and you know it's going to be a complex play, then it can be worth familiarising yourself with the plot so that you don't feel "left out" when others around you are reacting to what goes on. (AQ65)

The themes of preparedness and shared experience are both evident here as a proposed source of engagement, though the audience exchange discussions show them to be as much a barrier as a way into participation. Also evident is a sense that full engagement takes place not just within the duration of the event itself, but through preparation and, as another interviewee suggested, through conversation afterwards: "[when] someone else talks about something enthusiastically [...] it might change your opinion of something you'd glossed over" (Colin). Several of the focus group members showed themselves to be reaching out to these sources of shared enthusiasm, but others displayed some resistance, mirroring the responses of those regular attenders who had either "given up prophesising – I've had my fingers burnt too many times" (Marion), or declared themselves to be "not a salesperson for the arts" (Mark). Connections between experienced arts attenders and their newer counterparts have been shown to be a valuable route to engagement (Murray, Blakemore, Graham, Gross, & Walmsley, 2014), but the assumption that either group is keen to invest in this process should not be made too readily: there were few evangelists for the arts amongst our respondents, but rather a collective concern that "people would lose a lot of pleasure or enrichment to their lives" (Marion) if dwindling audiences were to cause a decline in arts provision.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, motivations for and experiences of attending arts events have been shown to involve an intertwining of practical decisions on the one hand, relating to availability, accessibility and artistic preferences, and philosophical perspectives on the other, concerning the place and value of the arts in individual lives, local community and wider society. Underpinning these are psychological frameworks, in which individuals position themselves – or are positioned by external factors – on continuums of participation: from occasional to frequent attender, and from casual (transactional) to immersive (committed) audience member. Questions of identity and belonging are addressed as newcomers encounter an apparently close knit community of regular audience members; while those regulars themselves negotiate the norms of attendance, sometimes reacting against what they perceive to be the "ideal" audience member, describing their own habits as more eclectic and distinctive than those of someone assumed to attend frequently, predictably and sociably. Understanding how other people are listening, watching and interpreting arts events remains an area for further research and a potential tool for audience development: participants in the audience exchanges commented on the usefulness of hearing other people's responses to the performance, and other studies of post-performance discussions have shown similarly how the opportunity to reflect and talk with others can increase audience engagement (Dobson & Sloboda, 2014).

A striking feature of many of the responses – and one which is in contrast to the aims of the AHRC Cultural Value project – is the reluctance of regular attenders to claim a wider social benefit to their arts engagement: while highly valued in their own lives, the arts are perceived to be a matter of cultural choice, not obligation. This may be a result of the particular way in which we asked "how would you describe the experience of going to this type of event to someone who has never attended one before?", which only some respondents

interpreted as an advocacy question. It may also be due to the range of audiences represented in the survey, including audiences for cinema, comedy and pop music who are perhaps more comfortable with the notion of individual taste and market forces (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005), compared to those for classical music, say, where there is an honourable tradition of arguing the value of the genre in the face of its apparently declining status (Johnson, 2002; Kramer, 2007). These arguments may have intellectual value, but they are some way removed from the experience of the arts attenders in this study – though Hesmondhalgh (2013) rightly cautions against allowing study of the "everyday" in music to overshadow the profound moments of arts engagement (Gabrielsson, 2010). Placing the peripheral benefits of arts participation too prominently in advocatory discourse risks diluting the emphasis on specific musical, dramatic and artistic encounters (Allin, 2015), and qualitative research has a role to play in ensuring that audience experience in all its facets is understood by the people who make arts funding and policy decisions, as well as those who attend and support the arts.

From this study it is evident that the experiences of new audience members are distinctive from those of the established listeners around them, and that the journey from one to the other is by no means straightforward. Arts attenders might all be engaged in a similar search for performance quality (Sauter, 2002), but their responsiveness to the other factors which underpin audience development and marketing – including venue, accessibility, preference and social experience – is variable and unpredictable. Seeing any arts event too much from one end of the transaction/commitment continuum could blind both researchers and arts organisations to the varied experiences within an audience, and particularly to the strategies which might help to extend audiences beyond those who already have an established relationship with an event or venue. One instance of this was reported in a study of a contemporary art gallery, in which curators were eager to educate their visitors about new works, while those visitors were content to have an emotional response to what they saw – "understanding" was being seen as equivalent to "engagement", by the curators but not the audience members (Sifakakis, 2007). Future research needs to tackle more directly the assumptions made by new audience members about their established counterparts and by arts organisations about their contribution to the lives of their audiences. Measures of the impact of the arts on audiences are becoming more sophisticated (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2013 as these questions become more important to both arts organisations and academics. Qualitative, small-scale research of the kind reported here needs to sit alongside the nationwide reviews and their analyses (e.g. Bunting et al., 2008) that often dominate advocacy and policy discussion, in order that the nuanced experiences of audience members can shed light on contemporary trends, risks and opportunities in arts engagement. Larger scale studies tracing the longitudinal experiences of audience members would also be worthwhile, to explore the continuums of engagement identified here and to see how they are affected by cumulative arts experiences as well as external pressures on attendance choices and decisions. These complementary disciplinary and methodological approaches – often presented separately but with much to offer to one another (Baker, 2000) – will then come closer to a situated understanding of how the arts are experienced in public, collective settings, and so forming stronger connections between the arts as understood by researchers, arts marketers and audiences.

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