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You Call This Fun? Reactions of Young First-time Attendees to a Classical Concert

by

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Introduction

There is an increasing awareness among classical music organizations that the current audience is aging and there is a resulting need to develop the future audience for classical music concerts (Kotler and Scheff, 1997). Since research confirms that patrons of classical music have a high education level, university students are a prime future market segment. Unfortunately limited research has been conducted on the attitudes and preferences of this age group and how they may be attracted to attend. While classical music may be considered “timeless,” changes in education and technology have resulted in young consumers with very different needs and priorities than the current patrons of classical music. These different needs and priorities must be addressed if today’s young students are to be converted into the classical music audience of the future.

The traditional classical music concert was designed to appeal to the intellectual interests of a middle-class audience. Emotional behavior was discouraged as it was associated with the behavior of the lower-classes, a group not welcome in the concert hall (Levine, 1988). The music is presented without explanation or even introduction since it is assumed that an appreciation of classical music is part of the lifestyle of the middle-class audience (Bourdieu, 1996). The concert hall is kept free of visual distraction and the performers are dressed conservatively so as not to divert the attention of the audience. It is expected that the audience will sit in darkened silence respectfully watching mostly anonymous performers while keeping their attention focused solely on the music.

The popular music concerts which most young people have experienced are dramatically different. All aspects of the performance are designed to appeal to the emotions, from the lighting to how the performers are dressed. The audience is not expected to silently observe the performers. In fact, the audience and its reaction to the music is an indispensable part of the concert experience. That is

why live concerts continue to be important to young people even though the music is available on CDs (Frith, 1996).

The Research Study and Methodology

The research study was designed to provide information on how this young potential audience, raised on popular culture, can be attracted to attend classical concerts. Rather than rely on anecdotal or secondary information, primary research was conducted to determine how a classical music concert might be made more attractive to young people. The subjects of the research were students of the University of Westminster, a large university located in central London. The methodology consisted of taking non-attending students to a classical concert and then exploring their reactions to the event. The study consisted of three groups of students each attending a concert at London's Royal Festival Hall. Each group of five to seven students would attend a different type of concert and participate in a focus group prior to and again immediately after the concert.

The concerts included a traditional classical concert with music by Wagner, Dvorák, and Sibelius. This is the type of program which most people would consider a typical "highbrow" classical music concert. The second concert chosen was a "pops" classical concert. Pops concert programs are planned to be more entertaining and less "elitist" than traditional concerts. The third concert featured new compositions written for a science fiction film by the modern composer Michael Nyman. His music is very atmospheric and somewhat minimalist and often contains elements of dissonance and repetition. The focus groups held prior to attending the concert concentrated on determining the students' preconceptions of classical music, classical music patrons and the experience of attending a concert. The focus groups after the concert focused on what they liked best and least about the concert and how they felt the concert experience could be improved.

The focus groups were planned to be as informal as possible. Because students might be hesitant to give opinions in front of their peers, multiple participatory techniques were used to elicit information, including asking the students to write advertisements for a classical music concert and to draw a picture of the typical classical music patron. To put the students at ease, a young graduate student facilitated the focus groups. It was hoped that the students would speak more freely with someone close to their own age conducting the sessions.

The students were recruited from the University of Westminster's undergraduate business program. The targeted population were students aged 18-22 who had never attended a classical concert. It was quite difficult to recruit the students as the opportunity to attend a classical concert for free was not considered a sufficient incentive for participating. It was necessary to provide a cash incentive of £20 (\$32) before sufficient students could be recruited. The recruited group consisted of a fairly equal number of female and male students and included students from Anglo-Saxon, Afro-Caribbean and Asian ethnic backgrounds.

Focus Groups Prior to Concert

The focus groups prior to the concert explored the students' preference in social activities, preconceptions of concert audiences and the cost of attending. As a warm-up activity, the students were asked about their interest in art. While most expressed little interest in the visual arts, all had considerable interest in listening to live and recorded music. Their taste in music was rather broad and included rock, jazz, ethnic and world music. When asked their views on classical music, they expressed no interest and described it as nameless, background music.

While they did not view classical music entirely negatively, they did not consider it as an activity or art form that had any relevance to their lives. The students described themselves as people who were open to new experiences and therefore saw the concert as a welcome bit of adventure, but with the potential risk of having to endure a boring evening.

Preference of Social Activities: Since attending classical concerts was not an activity in which these students participated, they were asked what they did like to do when they went out for the evening. The most frequently mentioned activities were visiting a pub or dance club. When discussing these choices they all mentioned "fun" as the essential ingredient for a successful night out; therefore the issue of what was "fun" was explored more fully. Fun was defined as interacting with people, laughing a lot, and being able to "let your hair down." It was considered especially important to have the opportunity to meet new people, especially members of the opposite sex. They all agreed that the opportunity to socialize had priority when choosing a social activity.

Preconceptions of Concert Attendees: To explore the students' preconceptions of who attends classical concerts, they were asked to profile a typical audience member. They all believed the audience to be older (but to the students, "older" was anyone over 35). They also thought audience members live in nice houses in the country or suburbs, dress well, are financially well-off and are middle- to upper-class. Despite these stereotypes, the students did not have a negative bias against the audience, with only one student using the term "pompous and stuffy." They described the audience as people who "have studied and appreciate music," or as "intellectuals with cultural backgrounds." In addition, students who were from an ethnic group described the audience as "white" and "European."

The students all believed the audience had access to some special knowledge that allowed them to find classical music enjoyable. There was general agreement among the students that to attend classical music concerts it was necessary to first acquire this special knowledge. Or as one student explained, "If you don't know about it, you might enjoy music that educated people would know was bad, and then you'd feel stupid." As they explained, with popular music you either like a song or not, but the individual's response is not judged to be right or wrong. Therefore they believed they could not feel at ease at a classical concert because they would not have the education necessary to understand and appreciate the music.

It is not surprising that the students should have this attitude. Since the turn of the century there has been an emphasis on the need to understand classical music before it can be appreciated. Almost all classical music appreciation books, both old and modern, stress this need, and that this education and self-improvement must be achieved through hard work and pain, not enjoyment. In a popular music appreciation book learning to enjoy classical music is compared to body building; no pain, no gain (Walsh, 1989). The author explains that popular music is popular with the young because it is easy. Now that the reader is older it is time to learn to enjoy “sophisticated” music, but if only he or she is willing to work at it. This theme in music appreciation books is not new. In a much older book the author explains that the composer had to work very hard to write the music, so we should expect to have to work hard to understand it (Scholes, 1942). Of course this emphasis on hard work and self-improvement does not seem to fit the needs of younger audience members, such as the students, who might be looking for relaxation, amusement and socialization (Blake, 1997).

Cost of Attending: The students assumed that a ticket for a classical concert would be as expensive as a ticket to a rock concert. They had no objection to high ticket prices for rock concerts because they felt they would get value for their money. When asked what they thought a ticket for the classical concert they were going to attend cost, the average estimate was £20 (\$32). The students expressed surprise when they were told that the student price was only £6 (\$9.60).

Focus Groups Following the Concert

The focus groups after the concert explored the students opinions of the music, the visual and ritual aspects of the concert and if they would again attend. The opinions varied between groups depending on what type of concert they attended.

The Music: As to the music, the opinions of the students who attended the traditional classical concert were very strong and varied, but on the whole positive. Most preferred the Sibelius piece because it was “interesting,” and “had a lot of starts and stops.” The students were surprised that they had previously heard and enjoyed comparable music used in films and on television and that such music would also be called classical. They had always automatically defined classical music as music they had not heard and would not like. General negative comments included that the concert took too long and all the music played sounded very similar. Also, they were all very uncomfortable that everyone in the audience seemed a generation or two older than themselves. They all stated that it made them feel as if they did not belong.

The pops classical concert was a Raymond Gubbay Production, a private company which produces around 200 classical concerts a year in the London area and makes a good profit doing so. This concert was unashamedly marketed as entertainment rather than as a means to self-improvement or enhanced music appreciation. The program consisted of 16 pieces of music ranging from standards such as Ravel’s *Bolero* to an Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Mascagni, two operatic arias, and a polka by J. Strauss, II.

The students' response to the music was highly enthusiastic. They loved Ravel's Bolero, which, of course, was new to almost all of them. The fact that they recognized some of the pieces from their use in movies added to their enjoyment. Like the group which attended the traditional concert, they expressed surprise that such music was considered to be classical music. Because it is used in the movies they thought it to be part of popular culture.

Both this group and the group attending the traditional concert found the audience "old." But because the students at the pops concert could identify the music more strongly as part of their own cultural experience, this group felt more comfortable with the age disparity. Music has an important function in forming identity and the use of movie themes allowed the students to relax and enjoy themselves and feel as those they belonged (Frith, 1987).

The students expressed satisfaction that the evening was kept exciting by moving quickly from one short piece of music to another. They felt that ten minutes was as long as anyone could be expected to listen to a single piece of music. Two of the male students said they were surprised that they enjoyed the opera singing. Their prior opinion of opera was so negative that they would not have agreed to come to the concert if they had been informed that they were going to be subjected to opera singing.

The performance at the Michael Nyman concert of music from the movie Gattaca resulted in very strong opinions; mostly negative. The students found the music repetitive and boring and stated that it made no sense to listen to the music without the movie. They found themselves wondering what would be happening on screen and thought the experience could have been improved by providing more information on the movie and/or Michael Nyman.

Opinions on the Visual Aspects of the Concert: After the traditional concert, the students made many comments regarding the boring clothing worn by the orchestra. Overall, they thought the orchestra members looked nice, but as if they were going to a funeral. Except for the soloist, whom they all agreed was well dressed. They had no objection to the uniformity of the clothes but thought the musicians should dress more stylish with at least a bit of color included.

All the students observed that the stage was unnecessarily visually boring (Boring was a word used often in the discussion). They believed this lack of visual stimulation was one cause of the time passing so slowly. The students also made a surprising number of comments regarding the uncomfortable seating. They suggested that the seats should be more cushioned and recline slightly, as in cinemas. As one student commented, "I wanted to sit back and relax but could not because of the seating." They described the ushers, although polite and friendly, as too old and "past it," and that this gave the impression that only old people should be attending.

What the students did not realize is that attending a classical concert is more than just a form of entertainment, it is a way for the

audience to participate in a form of social ritual. For traditional audience members, western classical music is seen as an affirmation of the values of the middle-class life which includes self-control and hard work (Small, 1987). The fact that the music is by composers who lived long ago and often had to triumph over difficulty, shows that such self-controlled behavior remains important over time. The music, therefore, provides a proof of the stability of middle-class values in a rapidly changing world. This is not a new viewpoint. A music appreciation book written in 1940, explains that the greatest lesson we can learn from Beethoven's life and music, is that no matter how emotional he became, he never lost control and always continued to work (Bruxner, 1940).

In contrast, the students who attended the pops classical concert thoroughly enjoyed the visual aspects. The orchestra and chorus were dressed in vivid clothing and the staging included lasers, flags and the use of colored spot lighting. The only negative comment was that the lighting and lasers could have been more sophisticated. When it was suggested to the students that such elaborate effects might distract from the music, they were sincerely confused. Attending popular music concerts has conditioned the students to expect an intricate and technologically sophisticated visual experience and the attempt to include them in a classical concert made the students feel as if they belonged at the concert and that the experience was designed to please them. This mixing of elements of popular and high culture at the pops concert is incompatible at the traditional classical concert where the music is to be performed in a manner which specifically is devoid of any wider social meaning or connection (Hirschkop, 1989).

Opinions on the Rituals of the Concert: While most students had no objection to dressing formally, and some even enjoy dressing up for a special occasion, the students at the traditional concert were pleasantly surprised that it was permissible for the audience to dress casually. They thought that formal attire was required for such concerts.

But a negative aspect of the traditional concert was, in the students' view, the very unprofessional and disorderly manner in which the orchestra members came on to the stage. They believed it displayed the orchestras' lack of respect for the audience. Or as one student expressed it, "if they don't care enough to make a good image, how do I know they care enough to play good music."

They found the lack of communication between the musicians, conductor and audience confusing. A long discussion was held as why so much of what was happening and what was being played was kept "secret." As there were no directions as to when the music was to start or conclude, they had to anxiously rely on watching the behavior of other people. They had no idea what piece of music was being played as only a few students noticed that programs were being sold and none purchased one.

In the pops concert, the students felt very strongly that the musicians were performing their best for them. They remarked favorably that the musicians seemed young, like themselves, and this made them see them as individuals. In fact they wanted to know more about the lives of the performers.

The students at the Michael Nyman concert found that behavior of Nyman confusing. They knew he must be important because of the applause that he received, but they found his lack of acknowledgement or response to the applause troubling. They discussed whether it was due to either shyness or rudeness.

Possibility of Future Attendance: When those who attended the traditional concert were asked if they would attend again, most thought they might, but only to hear a specific, “interesting,” piece of music. (Only one student stated she would never return because the evening was just as boring as she had anticipated.) Interesting was described as not too long and with lots of action. But the students thought a major barrier to their future attendance would be finding a companion with whom to attend. Asking parents or close friends was thought a good idea by most. They all stated that they would definitely not ask a new date to attend because it was too risky. Everyone agreed with the statement made by one student, “If they weren’t into classical music, you could really turn someone off.”

The students who attended the pops classical concert definitely stated that they wanted to attend another concert. But they were concerned that they would not know how to find when and where one was being held. The current advertising for classical concerts seems to go unnoticed, as they expressed surprise when informed that there were many advertisements for such concerts. They suggested that advertisements be placed in the university student newspaper, perhaps with a discount coupon.

Unfortunately, the students who attending the Michael Nyman concert came away from the experience with a very negative impression of classical music. They would not attend themselves or recommend such a concert to a friend.

Suggestions for Improving Concerts

When all three groups of students were asked for suggestions for improving the experience of concert attendance, a number of issues were raised. Although they thought young people might enjoy the “uniqueness,” of classical music, they thought it necessary to first improve the physical environment in which the concert is held. Suggestions on how this could be done included using lighting to focus on individual players during the performance. They also suggested that the stage should be made more visually appealing using graphics, color and lighting. They believed these changes would enhance, not distract, from the experience of listening to the music.

The current choices for refreshments were considered inadequate by all the students. They described the existing choice as either an expensive meal or a bag of chips and suggested a light snack in a medium price range perhaps themed to the music program. The students did not feel that they should be under an obligation to buy a program to find out what was being played and that a free leaflet of the evening’s music should be made available to everyone. One student suggested that if this was too expensive, the program might be printed on the ticket. They considered it quite obvious that the conductor should greet the audience and announce the music. They

thought such communication would not only be helpful, but would also make the concert more personal.

Some students despaired of making the concert hall attractive and suggested alternative venues such as a planetarium or public parks. They believed having concerts in venues where socialization was easier would be attractive to students. Public parks (not stately homes which they associated with old people) were thought a particularly good idea because the music could be heard by people passing by who then might be attracted to attend. Only one student seemed vaguely aware that such concerts were already being produced.

The students understood that the changes they recommended might face resistance from current audience members. One student suggested a segmentation approach with classical music concerts presented differently for different market segments. As one student pointed out, the same film can be shown in different types of cinemas to different types of audiences; why, therefore, do all concerts have to be the same.

The students felt a major barrier to attendance is the idea that to properly enjoy classical music you need to have extensive knowledge of music. The students felt that the advertisements showing an older, formally dressed audience reinforced this image and suggested that the image should “lighten up.” For this reason they thought that the adverts should be made more visually appealing by having jazzy graphics, humorous drawings and photos of a young, ethnically diverse audience.

Conclusion

Because of their initial reluctance to attend the concert, it was surprising to find that many of the students were willing to attend again. Such attendance would not replace their other leisure time activities, but would be an occasional part of their entertainment agenda. The students found the classical music enjoyable, but do not view the experience of listening to it with deference. They expect to be entertained and to enjoy all aspects of the concert, not just the music. They believe the experience of attending a classical concert should be unique and not be entirely casual or “popular,” but feel the ambience and setting of the concert must be improved.

For these young students, the old high culture versus popular culture boundary has been breached. They still have an interest in high culture such as classical music, but they also insist on being entertained. They do not look to the classical music organization for a ritual to provide meaning to their lives because they construct their own meaning. Because their experience of life is far broader than that of previous generations, they no longer look to a single social class, religion, or nationality for cultural meaning or entertainment. Young consumers living in this multimedia, cross-cultural environment will want concerts which feature music combined with other art forms and which use modern staging techniques.

As a result classical music organizations must target specially designed concert events to specific market segments. They must listen to what young consumers want and design concerts that provide multiple benefits to meet multiple consumer needs. To survive, these organizations must open their doors and invite everyone to attend their concerts, even if the standard of cultural appreciation and knowledge of every audience member is not all the organization might wish for. But they must do more than open the doors, they must attract, welcome, advise and provide for their audience. Only then will the younger members of the public attend and the audience size increase.

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Biography

Dr. Bonita M. Kolb is currently MBA Program Director at Long Island University and also lectures at the University of Westminster in London. She has conducted research with such music organizations as the BBC Proms, Wigmore Hall, and the Philharmonia Orchestra. Her book *Marketing Cultural Organizations: New Strategies for Attracting Audiences to Classical Music, Dance, Museums, Theatre, and Opera*, published by Oak Tree Press in Dublin, is currently available in Europe and is soon to be released in the U.S.