

# **A Pilot Study: A Descriptive Study of the Musical Backgrounds of Orchestral Concert Attendees with an Emphasis on Past Participation in School Music Ensembles**

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## **Background**

Improving concert attendance is a concern for most classical music organizations, both for continued financial stability and for artistic fulfillment. According to a statistical report from the League of American Orchestras (2015), slightly more than a third of orchestras' total revenue comes from concert sales. Good concert attendance can also benefit orchestras in garnering other sources of funding, such as government funding and corporate sponsorship. Yet in recent years, concert attendance has decreased. The National Endowment for the Arts (2013) reported in its Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) that the percentage of US adults who attended at least one classical music performance in a year decreased from 9.3 percent in 2008 to 8.8 percent in 2012. These percentages are both lower than the 13.0 percent reported in 1982, the first year of reporting by the SPPA.

Concerns over this decreasing rate of classical concert attendance have prompted many studies on the various factors that affect concert attendance, one such being age. While the SPPA reports suggest that adults in the oldest age groups have the highest rates of classical concert attendance, Toma and Meads (2007) state that, in mid-sized cities, adults from ages 18 to 24 and from ages 35 to 49 have increased rates of concert attendance, with decreased rates of attendance for adults from ages 25 to 34. The NEA's (2015) General Social Survey (GSS) likewise found that overall rates of attendance at all arts events are the highest among individuals aged 18 to 24 and 35 to 44. These numbers from the GSS should be placed in context, however, as the GSS asked participants about all performing and visual arts, unlike the SPPA, which limited its survey to specific genres of theater, dance, and music. In addition to these numbers from the NEA, a study involving ticket buyers to a major symphony in Australia found that among both

subscribers and single-ticket buyers, approximately half began attending orchestral concerts regularly before age 35 (Boyle, 2007).

The effects of repertoire programming on concert attendance have also been studied. Boyle (2007) found that an orchestra's choice of repertoire was the most important motivating factor influencing attendance across all age groups. In a study with first-time concert attendees, Kolb (2000) found that most audience members who attended a traditional classical concert would like to attend the concert again to hear a specific piece of music. Pompe, Tamburri, and Munn (2013) found that when orchestras program more conventional repertoire—works that are frequently performed by other orchestras—attendance increases.

Data have also suggested that cultural and generational preferences for other types of music might affect classical concert attendance. Kolb (2002) found that the social elements of concert performances are a determining factor for attendance among non-White ethnic groups in the United States. In a different study on generational changes in attendance among audiences in both the United States and United Kingdom, Kolb (2001) suggested that the dominance of popular music from the United States in people's musical tastes in the years after the Second World War has affected classical concert attendance.

Understanding the factors that influence or predict future decisions to attend classical concerts is important. A positive correlation exists between previous exposure to classical music and enjoyment of classical music listening, whether that listening takes place in concerts or through recordings. Andreasen and Belk (1980) report that variables such as early interest in classical music, current playing of a musical instrument, and level of education within a person's family all have positive correlations with likelihood of symphony concert attendance.

Some studies have examined school-related experiences as a partial influence on concert attendance. Boyle (2007) found that, while not deemed significant, eight percent of current symphony subscribers who began attending concerts regularly before the age of seventeen cited school as the motivation to begin attending. Generally, the "school" as cited in this study referred to attending concerts as part of a school trip, but it could also include playing or

listening to classical music in class. An additional study conducted with university students who bought tickets to a symphony orchestra concert found parental influence and playing an instrument to be the two most dominant reasons for interest in attending classical concerts (Crawford, 2014).

As these aforementioned studies have suggested, early exposure can cultivate enjoyment of classical music among students and might lead to future concert attendance. Performances for youth are one of the most common examples of efforts that professional orchestras and other musical organizations have undertaken to connect with local schools and communities and to provide this early exposure. Kolb (2001) cited these youth concerts as a direct response to concerns related to decreased concert attendance. Studies have also found that partnerships between schools and orchestras both increase the likelihood that children will consider music as a profession, and in turn encourage students' participation in instrumental music lessons offered at schools (Abeles, 2004).

Researchers have devoted additional attention to the long-term effects of school performance classes, studying both how music students continue to perform, as well as attend concerts later in life. Myers (2007) noted that, at least as far back as the 1930s, music educators have been concerned that students often end involvement with music upon graduation. He also described research trends beginning in the 1970s, which, instead of focusing on musical involvement later in life, moved in other directions, and thus "exacerbated the divide between school music and community and lifelong relevance" (p.52).

Additional research has been completed on high school and university students who participate in school music programs so as to describe the students' perceptions and expectations of participating in music after graduation. Mantie and Tucker (2008) interviewed Canadian band students who were either approaching high school graduation or had recently graduated. The two conclusions from these interviews were that these students did not view their participation in school music related to music that is made outside of school, and that the students do not see later participation in music as a goal of the school music program. While this

study focused on continued participation as a player, the authors' conclusions still expressed the necessity of finding examples where classical music taught in school has led to later participation in music, in any form.

Some researchers have found positive relationships between current classical audiences and prior private study. Bowles's (1991) study involving interest in adult music education found that 92% of subjects who were interested in taking further music classes as adults also attended classical concerts. Of these same positive respondents, 63% had studied piano privately, 22% had studied voice, 17% had played woodwinds, and 15% had played strings.

Additional studies with adults who have remained involved in classical music have suggested that performing in school groups had a positive influence on later involvement. Pitts (2012) found that performance in secondary school, performing in a school choir, or performing in a school instrumental ensemble, were three of the four most commonly cited influences among a sample of British adults who had remained involved in music into adulthood. Pitts also found that repertoire and experiences from performing in ensembles were recalled much more vividly later in life than classes that would fall into general music or music appreciation categories in American schools.

In addition, Pitts (2012) found that past performance was a motivation for current concert attendance among younger classical concert attendees. Whereas older concertgoers had been exposed to classical music early in childhood and developed listening patterns earlier in life, respondents under 40 often expressed that listening was a substitute for lapsed performing skills or missed opportunities in their education. This contrast between generations suggests that former members of school music programs who desire such a substitute could comprise a larger share of classical concertgoers as the years progress.

Despite these many studies related to classical music audiences and their backgrounds, few studies have described how much of classical concert attendees' early exposure to classical music as provided in school programs as compared to avenues outside of school. The purpose of this study was to gather information about the musical background of current orchestral concert

attendees, and to determine if these attendees perceive influences or relationships between their experiences in school music programs and choices to attend classical concerts. The current designed served as a pilot test to determine reliability for a larger study to be completed in the future.

## **Method**

Twenty-three participants gathered at a series of three concerts presented over three consecutive nights by a regional professional orchestra in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Interested concert attendees were either given a card with a web address for an online survey or were e-mailed a link to the survey. Data collection lasted a total of one month.

The online survey consisted of four yes/no questions and between seven and 12 open-ended questions. Questions were based on participants' responses about their past participation in certain types of curricular and extracurricular musical ensembles. Responses were analyzed using phenomenology as a framework, by highlighting significant statements in the answers to open-ended questions. Significant statements across the survey were then synthesized into clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013), which in turn were developed into themes. These themes were further synthesized to create a textural description of what participants experienced, as well as a structural description of the context or setting that influenced the phenomenon.

To determine content validity, questions were submitted to a panel of three professors of music education from major universities, two in the United States and one in the United Kingdom. Questions were edited based on panel members' suggestions. To determine interrater reliability, which was a primary goal of this study, the researcher and an external auditor compared their aforementioned themes, which were developed based on Creswell's (2013) suggested procedures of phenomenological data analysis. Based upon three suggested calculations for inter-rater reliability in phenomenology (Marques & McCall, 2005), agreement rates between the researcher and auditor were 68.75%, 65.71%, and 64.93%. These rates fell within accepted ranges as solidification instruments.

## Results

Two different shared experiences were identified: one among all concertgoers, and a second among concertgoers who identified themselves as having participated in school-related music ensembles. The shared experience of becoming a classical concertgoer often began with an introduction from family, friends, or teachers, often in a one-on-one relationship. One participant recalled a parent playing classical piano at home: “My favorite number my mother played was Rachmaninov Prelude in C-Sharp.... I was fascinated by the complexity of all the notes on the sheet of music and her ability to make sense of it all and turn it into this amazing, emotional piece!” Another who was introduced to classical music later in life notes that, “It wasn’t until I was an adult that I met some people with the local symphony and began attending concerts.” More than one participant attended their first classical concerts at the invitation of their private teachers, with one remembering looking at the teacher’s music afterwards.

This initial or early attendance at classical concerts provoked positive visual and sonic experiences for participants. One participant wrote, “I had no idea that sound and the volume could be achieved with simple instruments,” while another remembered “being swept away in the voices and the majestic sets and costumes.” These positive experiences led participants to increase the depth and breadth of their appreciation of the genre. Multiple participants stated that a reason they currently attend classical concerts is to discover new pieces with which they were not familiar, while another shared his enjoyment of comparing the performances of a local university orchestra with those of a professional one.

Participants shared these experiences while growing up in homes in which a variety of musical styles were heard. While 11 of the 23 participants mentioned classical music being played in their homes growing up, participants also mentioned listening to such diverse styles as rock, soul, country, and old gospel hymns. Community organizations—notably church choirs—provided additional opportunities for participants to experience classical music.

Among participants who participated in school music ensembles, the shared perceptions of connections with their performing pasts included memories of preparing challenging repertoire in

school. One participant stated: “I loved the challenges presented by exacting music directors. I loved preparing for the programs and the performances.” Another cited a high school orchestra director as the sole person who was influential in introducing them to classical music. Multiple participants mentioned Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony and Handel’s Messiah as pieces they performed in school and to which they still listen today. Participants also shared memories of more extrinsic benefits, such as teamwork or making friends. One recalled that her school orchestra was “good to work with peers and socially supportive,” and another stated that “teamwork and watching the conductor [were] a must” in school band.

Of additional note was the frequent mention of private teachers and their influence. Twelve of the 23 participants mentioned a private teacher, and the majority of memories of private teachers were positive. Both participants with experiences playing in school music ensembles and those with no such experience mentioned private teachers. One recalled how her piano teacher “had an eccentric and dramatic personality,” and told stories about the pieces she assigned. As was previously stated, some of the private teachers whom participants mentioned were responsible for their students’ earliest concert attendance.

## **Discussion**

A general takeaway illuminated by these data is the importance of one-on-one relationships in the shared formative experiences of classical concert patrons. While orchestras or music educators cannot affect people’s family backgrounds, it may be that they can try to create other positive interpersonal relationships, besides those with family, that involve classical music. Participants also mentioned friends as avenues of introduction to classical concert attendance, which supports Kolb’s (2002) earlier finding of the importance of the social atmosphere at concerts. With this in mind, orchestra administrators might explore ways to make concerts events to which attendees can easily invite their friends.

Private teachers were, along with family, the most frequently mentioned relationship in participants’ musical experiences. Their frequent mention could be attributed to their existence in two separate “worlds” of music education: the one that takes place in schools and the other

that takes place outside of schools. Furthermore, private lessons create one-on-one relationships by their very nature. These relationships are harder to create in an atmosphere like a large ensemble rehearsal. School music programs should be further encouraged to support and grow private lesson programs. Doing so not only benefits performing ensembles, but also fosters one-on-one relationships such as those that the participants shared from their experiences becoming classical concert patrons.

It is notable that participants cited specific works that they performed in school ensembles to which they still listen today. Given the importance of these memories among the classical music patrons of today as represented in this study, school ensemble conductors should select music not only for its pedagogical value, but also for its aesthetic value to listeners.

Notably missing from this study was demographic information. The larger study with which this study is associated has been altered to include questions about age, gender, and ethnic background. Additional information about the shared experiences of concert attendees from different generations could support or contradict Pitts's (2012) findings about differences in motivation for classical music listening between these groups.

Regardless of the findings of the associated study, additional studies involving younger concertgoers should be conducted simply out of concern for accuracy of data. Younger concert attendees would have fresher and perhaps more substantial memories of their experiences in school music programs. Furthermore, younger concert attendees would have participated in school music programs that more closely resemble those in existence today. Suggested changes resulting from studies involving this age group would thus be easier to implement and more applicable for the next generation of future classical music patrons.



## Keywords

Musical backgrounds, orchestra, concert attendance, music participation

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