

# Exploring classical music concert attendance: The effects of concert venue and familiarity on audience experience

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In: M. M. Marin, M. Knoche, & R. Parncutt (Eds.)

Proceedings of the First International Conference of Students of Systematic Musicology (SysMus08)  
Graz, Austria, 14-15 November 2008, <http://www.uni-graz.at/muwi3www/SysMus08/>

**Background.** There has been little empirical research investigating the experience of attending classical music concerts. Recent studies have addressed audience experience at concerts taking place within a specific chamber music festival (Pitts, 2005) or those performed within a conservatoire setting (Thompson, 2006). There is therefore considerable scope to investigate audience members' experiences of concerts performed by professional ensembles in large-scale concert venues.

**Aims.** The study aims to explore the factors that affect audience members' enjoyment of concert-going. In particular, the research aims to explore the roles that concert venues exert on audience experience, and concurrently aims to investigate the effects of familiarity on the enjoyment of a concert.

**Method.** Three hundred and thirty questionnaires were distributed to an audience of 560 people attending an English Chamber Orchestra concert at Cadogan Hall, London. 141 completed questionnaires were returned by post, representing 25% of the audience in attendance. The questionnaire elicited data on the audience members' responses to the concert venue, and obtained ratings for their familiarity with aspects of the concert situation. Ratings were also obtained for the audience members' enjoyment of each individual piece and for the concert overall. Qualitative data on the respondents' concert experience was obtained using free response questions.

**Results and conclusions.** The role of the concert venue was important in providing good acoustics, sight lines and physical comfort. The relatively small size of Cadogan Hall facilitated a valued sense of 'intimacy' through audience members' proximity to the performers, and for some promoted a feeling of shared experience with other audience members. The effects of familiarity on enjoyment of a performance are discussed. The immediacy and potential for spontaneity in live performance was a key factor in the respondents' enjoyment of concert attendance, with many valuing possible deviations from the 'perfection' of recorded versions of the works.

**Implications.** The study contributes to the growing body of empirical research investigating audience experience of live concerts, and holds implications for the practice of orchestras and concert venues in fostering and retaining audiences.

The experience of attending classical music concerts is frequently discussed in musicological discourse (e.g. Johnson, 2002; Cook, 1998; Said, 1991), but until recently there has been a dearth of empirical studies in the area. Musicological commentators typically generalise when writing about concert experience, often presenting a hypothetical symphony orchestra concert performed in a large concert hall as the norm of classical concert attendance. Some writers express discomfort with this aspect of musical life, either with the repertoire it performs (Cook, 1998) or with the nature of the performance space (and consequent rituals) with which it is associated (Small, 1998). Interestingly, the existing empirical studies

of audience behaviour and experience at classical concerts have not investigated concerts adhering to this norm. Pitts (2005) explores the experiences of audience members attending a well-established chamber music festival held in a small 'in the round' venue, finding an audience body both extremely familiar and loyal to the festival's performers and venue. Thompson (2006), meanwhile, used a student orchestral concert to explore the relationship between repertoire familiarity and enjoyment in concert attendance, as well as investigating the effects of formal musical training on concert experience.

This study aims to explore audience experience of a large-scale, professional

orchestral concert. The research seeks to comprehensively investigate the effect of familiarity on the enjoyment of a concert, including audience members' levels of familiarity with the repertoire performed, the concert's performers and the concert venue. The study aims to explore the effects a concert venue can exert on audience members' experience and enjoyment of a concert. It also aims, significantly, to contextualise this one particular concert within the respondents' wider experiences of concert-going, by attempting to discover why people attend classical concerts, and to assess its importance in their (cultural) lives.

## Method

A questionnaire was devised for distribution at an English Chamber Orchestra concert taking place at Cadogan Hall, London, during January 2008. Cadogan Hall opened as a concert venue in 2004, and is an aesthetically striking converted church which seats c. 900 audience members (see <http://www.cadoganhall.com> for images of the venue). The hall's size was a crucial factor in the decision to use it for this study: it is large enough to hold orchestral concerts, but small enough to enable the distribution of questionnaires during the concert to a significant proportion of the audience. The venue is the home of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Proms Chamber Music Series, as well as hosting a full programme of other orchestral concerts, recitals, and jazz and world music concerts. The first half of this English Chamber Orchestra concert consisted of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella Suite* and Haydn's *Symphony No 84*. Following an interval, the second half comprised Haydn's *Trumpet Concerto* (soloist: Alison Balsom) and Shostakovich's *Piano Concerto No 1* (soloists: Igor Levit and Alison Balsom). The concert was conducted by Paul Watkins, making his debut as associate conductor of the orchestra.

Five hundred and sixty audience members attended the concert. The questionnaires were distributed during the interval by placing a questionnaire on every other occupied seat of the hall. Audience

members were also offered a questionnaire as they left the hall at the end of the concert. A stamped addressed envelope was attached to each questionnaire for its return by post. 330 questionnaires were distributed, and 141 completed questionnaires were received, representing 25% of the audience in attendance at the concert. This questionnaire study was the first stage of a larger piece of research; after the completed questionnaires were received, some respondents continued participation in the study – this involved a follow-up semi-structured interview and the creation of a record of their concert attendance over a longitudinal period of six months. This paper, however, presents only data from the questionnaire study.

The questionnaire required both qualitative and quantitative responses, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that affect the experience and enjoyment of classical concert attendance. The questionnaire elicited data on reasons for attendance, and on the audience members' responses to the concert venue. Rating scales (from 1 to 7) were included for levels of familiarity with the venue, the performers, and the repertoire performed; respondents were also asked to provide ratings for their enjoyment of each piece performed, and for the concert as a whole. Free-response questions addressed the audience members' general views on classical concert attendance ('In your opinion, what makes the experience of attending a classical concert enjoyable?'; 'How important is attending classical concerts in your life?'). The questionnaire also asked whether the respondent would like to change anything about the experience of attending classical music concerts. In addition, data on the frequency of respondents' live and recorded listening were obtained. This paper focuses on the questionnaire data relating to: respondents' decisions to attend the concert; the role that the concert venue exerts on experience of the concert; the effect of familiarity levels on enjoyment of the concert; respondents' views on the factors that affected their enjoyment of this concert, and their views on the factors that affect

their enjoyment of classical concerts in general.

## Results and Discussion

### Reasons for attendance

The questionnaire presented respondents with a list of eleven possible reasons for attending the concert. Many participants ticked more than one box for this question; the numbers and percentages of participants ticking each box are shown below in Table 1. The concert's programme was the most frequently cited reason for attendance. 40% of respondents indicated that hearing pieces which they liked and were familiar with was a primary reason for attendance; this was closely followed by 39% who indicated that a main reason was to hear at least one of the performers for the first time. Interestingly, while 27% indicated they were attending socially with friends, the concert was not viewed by respondents as a means of socialising with people that they did not already know: only 2% indicated that they were attending the concert to meet new people. Reasons provided in the 'other' category included being provided with free tickets, being taken as a guest, going to hear a specific soloist, or taking children to experience the concert.

Tick-box option	No	%
The programme appeals to me	102	72
To hear pieces I know and like	56	40
To hear these performer(s) for the first time	53	39
I like this venue	52	38
I have heard these performers before	43	30
Attending socially with other people	38	27
To relax	36	25
To hear something new	29	20
To visit this venue for the first time	28	19
Other	25	18
To meet new people	2	1

**Table 1.** Number and percentage of responses to each option of Question 4 – 'What were your main reasons for attending this concert?'

### Role of the concert venue

The respondents were asked what appealed to them about Cadogan Hall as a concert

venue: the most frequently provided response was the auditorium's acoustics (included in 52% of responses). This was followed by the ambiance or atmosphere of the venue (38%); with respondents commenting that the venue was 'not intimidating' [Q99], and that they 'liked the 'feel' of the place' [Q60]. The ambiance of the hall was frequently related to the venue's relatively small size (especially in comparison to other London venues in which orchestra concerts regularly take place) and the sense of 'intimacy' that the respondents felt this engendered (25% commented on the small size of the hall or a sense of intimacy; these two features were often linked in their responses). Many valued the good sightlines and greater proximity to the musicians and the stage which a smaller hall allowed. For some respondents, these factors increased their engagement and sense of involvement in the concert, helping them to feel 'part of the event' [Q55].

A number of respondents reported a sense of shared experience with other audience members in the hall; one, for example, reported that 'emotions were the same everywhere' during the performances [Q104]. Some attributed this directly to the size and layout of the hall, particularly in the way that 'the venue is quite small with a low gallery, which promotes a sense of connection with the other audience members' [Q29]. Others were aware of both a collective audience attentiveness during the performances, and of the audience's enthusiastic response following each performance, particularly those of the soloists:

there was a real 'buzz' generated by the audience response to the soloists, which we shared [Q93]

the quality of expertise by the artistes was felt across the hall and they characteristically responded in their support [Q88]

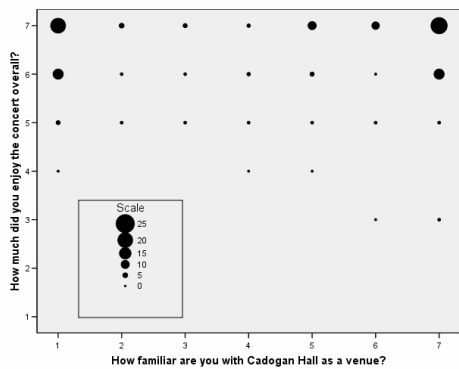
Apart from the effects of its size, other physical factors of the venue also played a strong role in the respondents' views on the hall: 29% found the location of the hall an appealing factor, especially because of its close proximity to both a tube and rail station. 21% commented positively on the aesthetics of the building, particularly

appreciating the 'quality of its conversion' [Q83], and its 'combination of old building with modern amenities' [Q111]. The level of comfort attainable in a recently renovated building was also cited as an appealing factor; comments on the comfort of the seats were particularly frequent.

**The effects of familiarity on enjoyment of the concert**

Rating scales ranging from 1-7 were used in the questionnaire to gather data on the respondents' familiarity levels with the venue, familiarity with each piece performed, and familiarity with the conductor, orchestra and each soloist. The respondents were also asked to rate their enjoyment of each piece in the programme, and their enjoyment of the concert overall. In all cases, a rating of 1 equalled 'not at all', and 7 equalled 'very much so'. A rating of 4 was not explicitly stressed as a mid-point.

**Venue familiarity.** The mean rating for venue familiarity was 4.14 (SD = 2.48), while the mean rating for enjoyment of the concert as a whole was 6.31 (SD = 0.94). As the scatter plot below shows, the relationship between familiarity with Cadogan Hall and the overall enjoyment rating for the concert was not linear. The



**Figure 1.** Scatter plot of venue familiarity against overall enjoyment of the concert. The size of dot reflects the number of cases falling on that point.

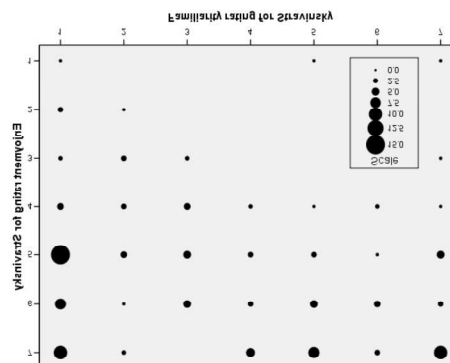
highest concentration of enjoyment scores of 6 and 7 fell at either end of the venue familiarity spectrum, on those who were visiting the venue for the first time and those who had visited on many previous occasions.

**Repertoire familiarity.** Table 2 below provides mean familiarity and enjoyment ratings for each piece performed. Whilst the Haydn Trumpet Concerto held the highest mean ratings for both familiarity and enjoyment, the second highest mean enjoyment rating was for the Shostakovich Piano Concerto, which held the second lowest mean familiarity rating.

Piece	Familiarity rating		Enjoyment rating	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Stravinsky	3.47	(2.28)	5.39	(1.49)
Hadyn Symphony	2.93	(1.91)	5.18	(1.36)
Haydn Concerto	5.13	(2.03)	6.46	(0.88)
Shostakovich	3.02	(2.25)	6.19	(1.30)

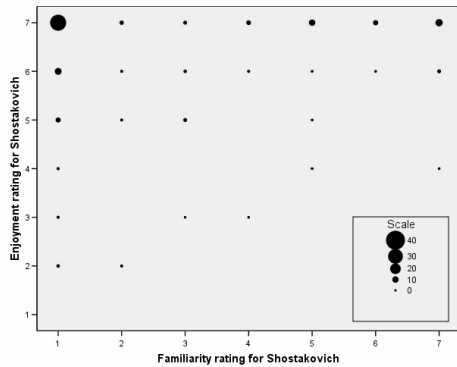
**Table 2.** Mean ratings of familiarity and enjoyment for each piece performed

Examining scatter plots for enjoyment rating against familiarity rating of each piece showed that the relationship between familiarity and enjoyment for all of the pieces performed was non-linear. High enjoyment ratings were either concentrated at one end of the familiarity scale or the other, or were present at both ends. This trend was noticeable for the Stravinsky (see Figure 2), although a partial linear relationship is also observable: as familiarity ratings increase from 1 to 4, so do the lowest enjoyment ratings, indicating that for some listeners who did not know the work well, enjoyment did correlate positively with familiarity.



**Figure 2.** Scatter plot of enjoyment against familiarity for Stravinsky *Pulcinella Suite*

A different pattern was observable for the Shostakovich Piano Concerto, where a high concentration of respondents did not know the work at all, but gave it the highest possible enjoyment rating. In contrast, the highest concentration of ratings for the Haydn Trumpet Concerto fell on both 7 for familiarity and 7 for enjoyment.

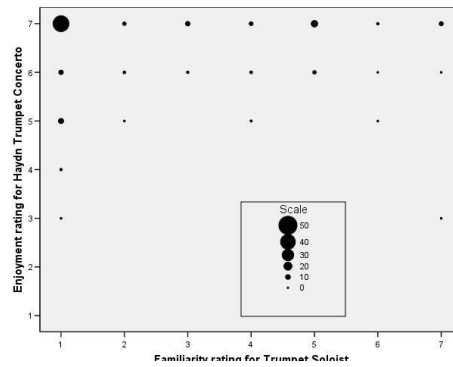


**Figure 3.** Scatter plot of enjoyment against familiarity for Shostakovich *Piano Concerto No. 1*

The non-linear relationships between familiarity and enjoyment correspond with Thompson’s (2006) findings. As in Thompson’s study, the data suggests that large concentrations of people who enjoy the performance very much either do not know the work at all, or know it very well. Indeed, when asked to explain their enjoyment rating for the concert as a whole, some participants did mention enjoyment of the ‘surprise’ of discovering new works and more than one wrote of the enjoyment in ‘learning something new’ [Q37]:

Quality of performers exceeding my expectations (I didn't know any of them but was very impressed by the performers and will certainly keep an eye open to see them again / buy their recordings). Surprise factors: I had no idea that Stravinsky composed in that style – I learned something new! Some more surprise – the unusual combination of piano and trumpet – works well and enjoyed it very much. [Q110]

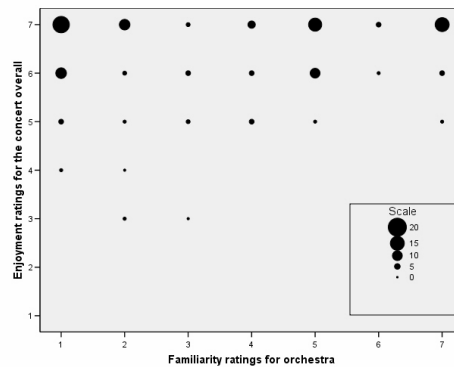
**Performer familiarity.** With 39 per cent of respondents attending the concert ‘to hear these performer(s) for the first time’, and 30 per cent attending because they had ‘heard these performer(s) before’, there was a predictable balance between



**Figure 4.** Scatter plot of familiarity rating for trumpet soloist against enjoyment rating for Haydn Trumpet Concerto

the performers. For the soloists, however, the largest concentration of enjoyment ratings of 7 fell on the lowest familiarity rating (see e.g. Figure 4 below).

A scatter plot of familiarity ratings for the orchestra against enjoyment ratings for the concert as a whole again shows an essentially non-linear association, with large concentrations of enjoyment ratings of 7 spread along the familiarity scale.



**Figure 5.** Scatter plot of familiarity ratings for orchestra against enjoyment ratings for the concert overall

**What affects the enjoyment rating of the concert overall?**

The relationships between familiarity and enjoyment of concert attendance are evidently both complex and non-linear. But how did the enjoyment ratings of each individual piece affect respondents’ enjoyment ratings of the concert overall? Examining scatter plots for the enjoyment

ratings of each piece against *overall enjoyment* shows that the associations between these are both linear and positive. Using Spearman's rho, the enjoyment ratings of all four pieces were correlated positively and significantly with *overall enjoyment*. The correlations ranged from .403 (Haydn Trumpet Concerto) to .632 (Stravinsky *Pulcinella Suite*); all were significant at the .0005 level.

A simultaneous entry linear regression model with *overall enjoyment* as the dependent variable and the enjoyment ratings for the four individual pieces as independent variables explains 55% of the variability in overall enjoyment (adjusted  $R^2 = .553$ ,  $p < .0005$ ). The standardised coefficients ( $\beta$ ) in the table below show that enjoyment of the Stravinsky *Pulcinella Suite* exerted the greatest explanatory 'pull' on *overall enjoyment*.

Predictor variables	$\beta$	p
<b>Enjoyment of Stravinsky</b>	<b>.407</b>	<b>p &lt; .0005</b>
<b>Enjoyment of Haydn Symphony</b>	<b>.215</b>	<b>p = .001</b>
<b>Enjoyment of Haydn Concerto</b>	<b>.229</b>	<b>p &lt; .0005</b>
<b>Enjoyment of Shostakovich</b>	<b>.253</b>	<b>p &lt; .0005</b>
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>		<b>.553</b>
		<b>p &lt; .0005</b>

**Table 3.** Multiple regression (simultaneous entry) providing standardised regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for the effects of the enjoyment of the four individual pieces on *overall enjoyment*

This finding is of particular interest since the mean enjoyment rating for the Stravinsky was the third lowest of the four pieces (see Table 2 above). This could be the result of a strong primacy effect; or it may be because the work showcased the orchestra's playing (the mean enjoyment rating for the Haydn Symphony – the only other orchestra-only piece in the programme – was the lowest, with many respondents reporting not enjoying the work and/or the orchestra's performance of this piece). Since the Stravinsky was the opening piece of the concert, the novelty of seeing the new associate conductor perform for the first time with orchestra may also

have played a role. Whatever the cause of the increased explanatory power of enjoyment of the Stravinsky on overall enjoyment, in this case it was a greater force than those at work in the Haydn Trumpet Concerto, which held the highest mean ratings for both familiarity and enjoyment.

When the respondents were asked to explain their overall enjoyment rating, the qualitative responses supported the emphasis on enjoyment of the individual pieces as discussed above. 41% of responses to this question included the quality of the performances (particularly those of the soloists, but also those by the orchestra; this was not a variable that the questionnaire sought to measure quantitatively), and 39% of responses included enjoyment of the music or programme.

However, the regression model still does not account for 45% of the variance in overall enjoyment. From the qualitative responses, the next most frequently cited factor affecting overall enjoyment was the concert venue. Many respondents mentioned positive aspects of the venue in their answers, writing of the 'lovely' surroundings or setting. For a few, however, the concert venue impacted negatively on their overall enjoyment, predominantly because the layout of the building requires one to climb many narrow stairs in order to reach the auditorium.

Familiarity or unfamiliarity with an aspect of the concert were also frequently provided as factors that had affected the audience members' overall enjoyment. In many cases, enjoyment stemmed from a combination of the two:

Talented performers, varied programme, with mixture of loved and familiar with new and interesting. [Q99]

It's always good to hear music being performed live, you come because you know some of the programme, but it's always good to hear something new. [Q49]

### The importance of live performance

The questionnaire also asked respondents to explain what made the experience of attending classical concerts in general an

enjoyable experience (see Table 4). Inevitably, instead of focusing on the specifics of the concert they had just attended, responses to this question were more reflective. In particular, 28% commented on their preference for hearing live music, either because of the sound quality, or because of the immediacy of the experience and the potential for spontaneity in performance. This was frequently compared positively to listening to recordings, often because the live experience also included a corresponding visual experience, making the experience more 'real' and fully '3-D' [Q98].

### Conclusions and implications

Whilst this study has only addressed the experience of attending one particular concert at a specific concert venue, the data showed that Cadogan Hall played a considerable role in shaping audience members' experience of the concert, particularly in the sense of 'intimacy' and shared experience that its small size engendered. The relationships between familiarity and enjoyment will be explored in more detail in the spoken paper, but at this stage it is clear that in all three areas for which familiarity scores were obtained (concert venue, repertoire and performers), the largest concentrations of high enjoyment scores fell at the extreme ends of the familiarity scales. Evidently the distinctiveness of a new experience can result in enjoyment ratings equally high as those given by respondents who exhibit a great liking and loyalty to a particular aspect of the concert experience (e.g. a piece of repertoire, or a particular performer; cf. Pitts and Spencer, 2007). Perhaps those who fall in-between these two extremes are more omnivorous in their attendance at cultural events (Peterson and Kern, 1996), and whilst possessing some familiarity with aspects of the concert situation, are more likely compare their experience (possibly negatively) with other interpretations or performances they have experienced, or even with performances of other musical genres.

Live music is what matters most in music appreciation. To hear live sound, well-played in a good acoustic setting...ah! [Q117]

Seeing the musicians live is obviously interesting in a people-watching sense but also makes it more 'real'. If you listen at home you have nothing to look at. Sound is best live. [Q23]

It's the live – this night only – magic happening just for you by real people. And you can see the way the instruments interact. [Q67]

Not hearing something clearly edited and too 'perfect'. [Q96]

Hearing unfamiliar pieces which sound uninteresting on radio, but come to life at a live concert. Watching star performers, hearing new interpretations. [Q92]

**Table 4.** Sample responses from Question 19: 'In your opinion, what makes the experience of attending a classical concert enjoyable?'

Whilst similar to Thompson's (2006) explanation that increased repertoire familiarity may result in negative comparison between the present performance and one or more interpretations internalized from listening to recordings, the above suggestion does account for the large concentrations of audience members who rated 7 for both familiarity and enjoyment. It is possible that an extreme familiarity and liking for particular piece or performer would make the listener more responsive to a fresh interpretation heard in live performance. Lastly, it is also plausible that the concert venue may again play a role here: Cadogan Hall's good sightlines and small scale mean that the audience members receive strong visual cues while hearing the music, which according Cone (1974: 138), are indispensable in helping the listener to '[accept] every event just as it comes and [resist] the temptations to fight each one by comparing it with a private version.'

In terms of the applicability of this data to the practice of concert organisations, the findings of this study are inevitably

determined to an extent by the choice of the concert; it may be, for example, that the varied programme of the concert attracted a type of listener that particularly likes to hear a mix of familiar and unfamiliar music. However, the combination of rarer works with those which are frequently heard in live performance was particularly popular with the respondents, as was the comfort of the venue, and the relaxed yet attentive attitude of the audience.

**Acknowledgements.** I would like to thank Lisa McFall, Cadogan Hall and the English Chamber Orchestra for allowing the study to run at their concert. For their help distributing questionnaires at the concert I also thank Amanda Bishop, Elspeth Brooke, Kate Camiller, Howard Dobson and Jennifer Koral.

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