The Dilemma of Empty Halls

Joanna Lauer

Cedarville University, Cedarville

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Abstract
Today, live classical concert attendance is low, a fact which threatens the careers of professional musicians. This paper examines recent statistics of classical concert attendance, theories as to why attendance rates are low, marketing methods for target audiences, and finally, recommendations to solve the dilemma of empty concert halls. To encourage concert attendance, classical music must be tastefully marketed to present-day audiences through the experience of technically excellent, musical, and interesting live performances. Ultimately, the relationship between art and its audience (the consumer) reveals that the key to the dilemma is the audience.

Keywords
music, future, attendance, modern, generation z, program notes, relationship, live performance, art, marketing, audience, concert, classical, education, musicality, technicality

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The Dilemma of Empty Halls

Joanna Lauer
Cedarville University

It all began when Thomas Edison invented the phonograph. People flocked to the invention, which kept improving until it could finally communicate the sound of music. Since that day, musicians have recorded their music and reached countless hearts and minds with beauty and art. Although great benefits emerged from recorded music, a major problem arose: empty seats in the concert hall. Audiences for live performances diminished and are still diminishing, partly because live attendance is an inconvenient way to consume classical music and partly because they do not know what they are missing.\(^1\) To encourage concert attendance, classical music must be tastefully marketed to present-day audiences, through the experience of technically excellent, musical, and interesting live performances.

To make this change effectively, the context of the culture and its circumstances must be understood. Arts attendance in the United States has declined, according to the National Endowment for the Arts 2012 participation survey. From 2002 to 2012, arts attendance in general decreased from 39.4% of U.S. adults to 33.4%,\(^2\) which means that in 2012, three out of ten U.S. adults visited an art museum or a type of performing arts event once. For only ten years, a five percent drop is a statistically significant number that casts a shadow on the future of live classical music.

One problem is that classical music is often inaccessible and unintelligible (meaning hard to enjoy and hard to understand respectively) to the average person, which explains why concert attendance and its cultural status has declined throughout the past one hundred years. Creation of modern era music has pursued novelty to an extreme end, a journey good for musical progress but problematic for

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\(^1\) Asia, 484.

\(^2\) “How a Nation Engages with Art,” 12.
concert hall attendance. One example is from Milton Babbitt (1916-2011), a professor of music and mathematics at Princeton University and an avid proponent of creating art for art’s sake. In his article “Who Cares If You Listen?” a defense of modern music against the protests of the crowds, Babbitt says, “Why should a layman be other than bored and puzzled by what he is unable to understand, music or anything else?” The only way, he says, for composers of such music to survive is to live as a university professor. Other composers of modern, experimental, and postmodern music in the last century have shared this view, and indeed, believed that if an audience enjoyed their piece on first hearing, their piece was not good music. For instance, David Del Tredici, a classical composer born in 1937, was forced to defend the initial success of his piece Final Alice (premiered in 1976) against his colleagues, “For my generation, it is considered vulgar to have an audience really, really like a piece on a first hearing.” Their music was created for art, novelty, and progress, not necessarily an audience, which is why its creation gradually emptied the concert halls. Other scholars, such as Dean Simonton, also conclude that the inaccessibility or unintelligibility of modern classical music is the primary reason for the decline.

In art philosophy, a common and pervasive idea exists that classical music and art is slowly dying. Simonton relates, “Martindale (2009) asserts that serious art is doomed to die. Caught in a dialectic grinder between novelty and intelligibility, the artistic tradition is inexorably propelled toward unintelligible originality.” This idea, he says, dates back more than two thousand years ago to philosophers in the Roman Empire in accordance with the idea of the decline of Western Civilization. But novelty and intelligibility in composition must be combined with thought for the audience. Thought for audience in musical composition plays a part in keeping the concert halls full and keeping the tradition of classical music alive and thriving.

It is interesting to observe that classical music and fine art used to be part of popular conversation in the United States, but now its absence shows the low status it has reached, particularly in popular American culture. In the 1950s and 1960s, Daniel Asia recalls high art being part of the general cultural conversation, heard on the radio, seen on television, and

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3 Babbitt, 156.
4 Rockwell, n.p.
5 Simonton, “The Decline and Fall of Musical Art,” 210-213.
read in Time, Life, and other popular magazines. Now, Asia says, “high art is simply not part of the conversation, public or private.” An icy gap has grown between popular American culture and fine art; icy because of the respective informal and formal atmosphere of each. Popular American culture often views fine art as elitist, snobby, and stand-offish, while fine art in turn often views popular American culture as uneducated and crude, unable to appreciate the finer things of life. Thus, the cold, distantly polite gap ensues between popular American culture and fine art, creating a silence that prevents positive, symbiotic relationships.

The difference in societal values between the generations is seen today: the National Endowment for the Arts 2012 survey shows that there is more participation from older audiences at classical concerts than younger audiences. The relationship between age and attendance is linear: as age increases so does attendance, as age decreases so does overall attendance. One explanation for the gray heads of the audience could be that tastes in music mature with time, resulting in greater appreciation for and enjoyment of classical music. Another could be that the older generation lived in a society that valued classical music higher than it does today. The act of listening to classical music requires greater brain cell usage than the average popular entertainment. Classical concerts require patient and attentive listening, something popular American culture is not used to. Simon Peña-Fernández says that not only Gen Z, but other generations are now eager to receive news information and entertainment through TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. While providing a positive experience for the consumer, social media platforms offer distractions with bright colors, short videos, and engaging content. Such information, as well as ads on social media, seek the consumer’s attention in a way that classical music does not. The average American attending a classical concert requires patience and mental activity, and due to the nature of popular entertainment, listening to classical music and receiving such information can be boring for them. Unless the future is prepared for and younger generations appealed to, classical music risks losing its audience.

How then can classical music appeal to younger audiences? Through tasteful marketing. Classical music can be especially packaged for and

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7 Asia, 484.
9 Peña-Fernández, 2.
marketed to present-day audiences: those interested and not interested in live, classical music. In business terms, tasteful marketing can be effectively accomplished by marketing to targeted audiences. First, there are two dimensions when considering classical music’s audience: age and interest. The age of audiences considered in this paper are Gen X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and Gen Z (1997-2021). For each generation there is some, little, or no interest. To give an example of what these interests could be classified as, “some interest” could mean the audience is willing to pay for a live classical concert but lacks the knowledge to find and buy a ticket to attend. “Little interest” could mean that the audience is only willing to attend a live classical concert if invited and paid for by a friend. “No interest” could mean that the audience has not thought about attending a classical concert. To draw each of these audiences into the concert hall, a targeted marketing plan would need to be developed with parallel categories that define and rate the audience’s interest, to address their specific needs. But that is not the purpose of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to persuade the reader of the problem and present a solution, not to detail all the specifics of that solution.

Multiple factors affect marketing decisions, such as considering the alternative entertainment provided to the average American. Between 2002 and 2012, the decline of classical concert attendance is especially seen in Gen X, but not greatly in Millennials and Gen Z. Although overall arts attendance rates remained relatively steady between 2008 and 2012, a significant drop in classical concert attendance occurred in adults aged 35-54, dating these individuals’ birthdates as 1958-1977—roughly the same as Gen X. Ironically, movie attendance for the same age group increased by 8% in the same four years, but the correlation between these two statistics cannot be proven. At any rate, knowing and understanding shifts between demographic audiences helps inform marketing decisions.

One of the most important elements in marketing classical music is education, for education provides the consumer with the context and information to enjoy and appreciate classical music, and enjoyment of classical music will lead to increased live concert attendance, the goal of marketing. The NEA 2012 survey records that 19% of U.S. adults at

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10 Dimock, n.p.
12 “How a Nation Engages with Art,” 23.
some point in their life engaged in learning about music appreciation, while 14% took an actual class on music appreciation. While 14% is not an insignificant number, it still leaves 86% of the U.S. population without specific knowledge on how to listen to and enjoy classical performances. The best remedy to this lack of knowledge is education: lighting the candle of curiosity in a fellow human by telling them about a subject and how it fits in the world of their existence, leaving them eager to explore it on their own. Sometimes that may be more and sometimes less. As William Butler Yeats says, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Additional support comes from Babbitt when speaking of his serial music:

Although in many fundamental respects this music is “new,” it often also represents a vast extension of the methods of other musics, derived from a considered and extensive knowledge of their dynamic principles… Compositions so rooted necessarily ask comparable knowledge and experience from the listener.

On a less extreme but parallel scale, audiences would benefit from learning relevant information about the music they are listening to in order to increase their enjoyment.

The education of present-day audiences can and must be supplemented by various methods inside and outside the concert hall. Outside the concert hall, friends who follow the old proverb “honesty is the best policy” may also propel casual or disinterested listeners along the road from boredom to enjoyment by honestly preparing them for their experience. Many new audiences may be startled by realizing that classical music is quite different than the popular music that they are used to hearing and may not enjoy their experience. The consumer segmentation study uncovers that up to 40% of the audience may have never entered a concert hall before:

A serious examination of the large base of potential classical consumers reveals that for many, if not most, a relationship with the orchestra is contingent on an external social stimulus — an invitation. Across the 15 markets, 16 percent of potential classical consumers

13 “How a Nation Engages with Art,” 41.
15 Babbitt, 155-156.
self-identify as “Initiators” — people who instinctively organize cultural outings for their friends, but 52 percent identify themselves as “Responders” — people who are much more likely to attend cultural outings if someone else invites them. … On average, 40 percent of those who’ve ever attended a concert by their local orchestra did not (and have never) purchased a ticket.16

A distinct educational opportunity opens to the 40% of classical concert attenders invited by friends. If a first-time concert attender is told that classical music, like any other worthwhile occupation, will take time to learn and enjoy, they will be prepared for the experience and not turned away if, at first, it is boring to them. This can be communicated by regular concert attenders who bring guests with them. To be made aware of the problem before the problem is encountered strengthens an audience’s belief in the solution given by the same source, and encourages them in their journey of learning how to listen to and enjoy classical music.

Additional ways of promoting the education of classical music outside the concert hall could be personal ways, formal ways, or both. Personal ways could include word of mouth and sharing personal interest with the people in one’s sphere of influence. More formal ways include organizing community ensembles, presentations at schools, festivals, art centers and museums. An idea that implements both personal and formal is to create a YouTube channel with interesting music videos of classical performances that detail the context and interesting facts about the piece in the description box.

In order to tastefully market classical music to modern audiences, the target audience must be considered, their specific challenges understood, then appropriately addressed. Enjoyable educational opportunities must be provided by those bringing guests to classical concerts to prepare those guests for the music they will hear, as well as by other personal or formal ways. The next step in marketing is to keep the audience coming back to the concert hall, and one method is through engaging program notes.

Engaging program notes are an excellent way to connect an audience with the heart and reason behind the music, whether from the composer

directly or from another mediator. According to Diana Blom and her fellow authors, “The program note is a collaborative tool between program note writer/composer and the listener, sharing larger artistic issues and enabling additional insights.” She describes the program note as exhibiting the relationship between performer and program note writer, the composer and listener. This “generates dialogue between performer, listener and composer, communicates the composer’s intention through the performer to the listener, and encourages the listener to empathize with the composer’s intentions.” Blom concludes that this process could help the audience as they explore, interpret, and enjoy music, positioning listeners as active participants in the creative process.\(^\text{17}\) There is no one way to write program notes, and different pieces require different categories of content. However, program notes that educate and assist readers’ understanding of the music, in whatever fashion, are valuable. A consumer segmentation study of classical music shows statistics of how effective this opportunity could be:

Overall, just 10 percent of potential classical consumers think of themselves as “critical listeners” (self-defined), while 78 percent consider themselves “casual listeners” and 11 percent say that they are “uninterested listeners.” Thus, the vast majority of potential customers for orchestras are casually involved with the art form.\(^\text{18}\)

Therefore, if almost 90% of classical audiences are casually involved, there is ample opportunity for education and elaboration of their experience leading them to greater interest in, enjoyment of, and appreciation for classical music.

Engaging and relevant program notes must connect the audience with the context of a piece, whether it be the composer’s intentions or creation process, or another consumer’s interpretation of and love for the piece. This creates interest in the mind of a consumer. Creating interest in and cultivating enjoyment of classical music both inside and outside the concert hall is the goal of marketing; a method which will reap long-term and lasting benefits for the industry, art, and tradition of classical music.

While interest in classical music is being stirred, the internet presents an obstacle. The internet offers countless free recordings and videos of nearly every classical piece of music written, and has become the most

\(^{17}\) Blom, et al., n.p.

\(^{18}\) “Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study,” 8.
convenient way to consume classical music. Why would someone pay for a more inconvenient way to consume classical music—attending a live performance? In 2017, 21% of Americans used electronic media to consume classical music specifically,\(^{19}\) compared to 42% who attended live music performances of all kinds.\(^{20}\) This statistic could be interpreted at least two ways, one being that half or more Americans who attend live classical music performances also listen via the internet, the other that the percentage of Americans who attend live classical music performances could be raised by a maximum of 21% (totaling 63%), assuming they all do not currently attend live performances. In other words, there is potential to persuade 21% of Americans who consume classical music via the internet, to attend live performances. Regardless of which interpretation best fits, recorded classical music has shaped the culture of classical music consumption, and plays an important contextual role for understanding the twenty-first century audience. The answer to the problem of consumption of classical music via recording, is to sell the experience of attending a live, classical performance.

To fully understand the experience of a live performance of classical music, the technique and musicality of the musician must be considered. Technicality is a set of fine motor skills musicians develop to acutely control the notes they play. When practiced intentionally for hours, good technique offers the performer the control and confidence needed to overcome performance anxiety and nerves, resulting in an excellent performance. In addition, good technique provides a solid platform from which musicality can bring music to life. Especially in modern music, technique can affect the interpretation of the music itself. Babbitt, when speaking of his new and efficient language of serial music, says, “This increase in efficiency necessarily reduces the ‘redundancy’ of the language, and as a result the intelligible communication of the work demands increased accuracy from the transmitter (the performer) and activity from the receiver (the listener).”\(^{21}\) Composers of serial music would therefore stress the importance of exact accuracy to their performers in order to communicate the music correctly. While technique is an extremely important aspect of good performances, musicality is equally, if not more, important.

\(^{19}\) “U.S. Patterns of Arts Participation: A Full Report from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” 57.


\(^{21}\) Babbitt, 154-155.
Musicality can be defined as the interpretation of music by the performer who communicates human emotions through the practice of music. Musicality is congruent with personality and thoughts of the performer who interprets the piece. Often, if a piece is performed with technical brilliance but little to no musicality, it fails to capture the attention and move the listener. Music students today have the potential to achieve dazzling heights of technicality but often fail or forget in the process to communicate the treasure the music holds. There is a lack of musical interpretation; living and internalizing the music is becoming secondary to technique. Asia says that technique is greatly superior today than ever before, but the “heart, and thus empathy, is missing in both the performer and the listener, and thus the true nature of the musical experience matters much less.”

To counteract the technical focus mindset, performers must remember that technique is the solid platform from which musicality can bring music to life. Both are essential, but without musicality performances will sound flat and dull. Electric communication and experience of emotion occur through the hand in hand effort of musicality and technicality. Musical, live performances are experiences people return to because of what the performances offer and the performers themselves who offer it.

This “true nature of the musical experience,” this receiving communication of emotions through music, decreases when transformed into a recording. Recordings of music have disseminated music farther than Thomas Edison ever could have imagined. But recording and distribution come with consequences, making music more accessible but less special. The ability to record music may also have lent itself to focusing on technicality versus musicality, due to the microphones’ sensitivity to slight technical mistakes, and the absence of adrenaline that comes with a live audience. For the performer or the audience, recording-recorded music cannot measure up to experiencing a live performance. Mastery of technique is a solid platform from which to transmit the essence of music to an audience, enabling them to experience it fully, without distraction. The combination of technique and musicality, when balanced well, makes music interesting, along with insightful, contextual, and relevant program notes. This full, live experience must be capitalized when marketing to a potential audience, for when done well, a live performance communicates a treasure that cannot be fully realized in a recording.

22 Asia, 483.
Fortunately, there are many people, organizations, and professional orchestras today who accomplish this marketing goal. In Cleveland, Ohio, the Cleveland Orchestra offers a wonderful introduction to orchestral music through a series of outdoor concerts in the annual Blossom Music Festival, including everything from classical staples to movie soundtracks. Another example is the conductor Gustavo Dudamel, with his endless energy and enthusiasm for promoting the tradition of classical music. He created the Dudamel Foundation in 2012 to “expand access to music and the arts for young people by providing tools and opportunities to shape their creative futures,”23 which by raising up young musicians he invests in the future. On the other hand, John Mackey, composer of Wine Dark Sea for symphonic band, takes much time and thought to develop his music, whether composing on commission or otherwise. A glimpse of his composing philosophy reveals:

If you’re an architect and you are going to make a building, you don’t start by picking out a really cool lamp. What you do is you ask, ‘What’s the purpose of this building? How big does it need to be? What’s it made of?’ and then you make the building. The last thing you do is pick out the furniture. The notes are the furniture.24

In planning his compositions, Mackey considers the purpose of his music, the greater picture, and his audience. Jennifer Higdon is another good example, who, by composing her blue cathedral, wrote a piece that both commemorates the death of her brother and provides a beautiful image for her audience to ponder. Men and women like these encourage audiences not to consume recorded music only, but to attend live performances and experience the artform in its original intent, to its original extent.

Del Tredici said, “But why are we writing music except to move people and to be expressive? To have what has moved us move somebody else?”25 In all its forms, art is a conversation, and if no audience or receiver exists, then the purpose of art vanishes. The ultra-modern stigma of “art for art’s sake” and “who cares if you listen?” rejects art as a conversation between composer and consumer and discourages

23 Dudamel, n.p.
24 Lyons, n.p.
relationships between not only the composer and consumer but the composer/composer and the consumer/consumer. No art form can thrive under such living conditions. Therefore, music must be tastefully marketed to present-day audiences through the experience of technically excellent, musical, and interesting live performances.

Obviously, classical music will not be gone tomorrow, for orchestras are still hiring, music colleges and conservatories are still occupied, and children are still learning musical instruments. However, unless steps are taken by this generation to preserve the beautiful experience of live classical performances, it will, like everything else, fade and die. Del Tredici believed that if an audience can understand and enjoy one facet of classical music, they develop a rounder perspective and learn to enjoy other facets of classical music as well: “Right now, audiences just reject contemporary music. But if they start to like one thing, then they begin to have perspective. That will make a difference; it always has in the past. The sleeping giant is the audience.”

Instill the enthusiasm, and wake the giant.

26 Rockwell, n.p.
Bibliography


