

## Research Report

### ***Between the 'Experimental' and the 'Accessible': Investigating the Audience Experience of Contemporary Classical Music***

*Gina Emerson, April 2020*

#### **Introduction**

For this large-scale study of contemporary classical music (CCM) audiences, I surveyed audience members at twelve concerts across the Ulysses Network between April 2017 and September 2018, following a pilot study in February 2017 (see Table 1 attached). This resulted in a main sample of 1428 respondents and a smaller sample of 670 respondents from three classical music concerts. The project aimed to provide insights on audience demographics, tastes and experiences relevant both to music sociology and to practitioners. This short report summarises key results from the dissertation.

#### **Demographics and Motivations to Attend**

- Average age of sample: 48 years (Median: 47.5, Range: 18-92 years)  
*Youngest concert in the sample: 'Alexander Schubert: Control' at Ultima, Average age: 33 years*  
*Oldest concert in the sample: 'Film Music War Requiem' at Snape Maltings Average age: 61 years*
- CCM audience members are **highly educated and very culturally engaged**: just over half of respondents have a Master's degree, over a third attend more than 21 live music events a year
- 84.3% had attended at CCM concert before ('CCM reattendees'), **small group of first-time attendees who had never previously attended a concert of new music (217 of these 'CCM newcomers')**

- Some diversity in musical expertise: non-musicians comprise the single largest group (38.1%), 19.7% are CCM professionals

*Most 'expert' concert: 'Arditti 3: Horizon' (Darmstadt)*

*Least 'expert' concert: 'Tales from Estonia' (Flagey)*

- Musical expertise emerged as a significant predictor of frequency of CCM concert attendance (regression model): **the higher the level of musical education someone has, the more CCM concerts they attend**. Musical education was a bigger factor than level of education in general.
- Intrinsic motivations to attend (e.g. to experience something new, to hear a particular piece/performer) are more common than extrinsic motivations (e.g. to spend time with friends/family) across the sample
- CCM newcomers: wanting to 'experience something new' important to them, also more socially motivated than CCM reattendees
- Qualitative comments on motivation: wanting to keep 'up to date' with musical life, interest from amateur music-making, situational aspects

## **Musical Tastes and Perceptions of CCM**

- **Classical music** was the most frequently chosen listening genre overall

*Classical music was even the most frequently chosen genre in very CCM-focused contexts e.g. 'Grisey/Posadas' (IRCAM), 'Songs of Wars I Have Seen' (Time of Music), 'Landscape Series #1' (Gaudeamus) and 'Und links das Meer' (IEMA)*

- Who listens to CCM regularly? CCM professionals are the only group that really do, beyond this **it appears that attending CCM concerts is the primary way people interact with this music (rather listening to recordings)**
- Older respondents listen to 'highbrow' combinations of genres (classical, jazz and world music) whereas under 35s are more omnivorous, mix CCM more readily with pop genres

- Within CCM, **orchestral music is the medium that most respondents reported taking an interest in.** Over 55s are more interested in 'classical' forms (chamber and orchestral music, opera), under 35s show more of an interest in electronic pieces and mixed media works
- For the word association task, 'What do you associate with the term "contemporary classical music"?', **'Experimental' the most frequently chosen term, followed by 'Inspiring' and 'Unpredictable'**
- Newcomers to CCM chose the words 'Difficult', 'Strange', 'Different', 'Boring' and 'Unpredictable' more frequently than reattendees, with a trend towards newcomers preferring 'Difficult' (more negative) and reattendees 'Challenging' (more positive)
- 'Elitist' was more frequently chosen by music professionals and by younger respondents (esp. 18-24 year-olds)
- 201 individual words and short phrases were collected for the open-ended 'Any other associations?' question (**Table 2 attached**)

### **Experiences in the Concert Hall**

- Mostly **very positive experiences were reported across the concerts**, possible that there was a bias towards giving positive responses (common in audience research)
- **CCM newcomers...**
  - Felt significantly less communicated with than reattendees (mean rating: 3.4 out of 5)
  - Felt significantly less informed about the music than reattendees (mean rating: 3.67 out of 5)
  - Gave positive responses to the music but chose the terms 'Strange' and 'Difficult to listen to' more frequently when responding to the music performed (piece adjective task)
  - Were likely to go to another CCM concert (mean rating: 3.6 out of 5), but significantly less so than those who had been to a CCM event before - **important to work on closing this gap in willingness to reattend?**

- **CCM professionals were significantly less satisfied** with their concert experiences than non-musicians and amateur musicians, often very critical of works
- Linking perceptions of CCM and experience: choosing the perception words 'Boring', 'Strange', 'Elitist' and 'Difficult' was significantly associated with lower levels of satisfaction at concerts - **having more negative views of CCM in general influences actual experiences in the concert hall**
- Full thesis reports case studies of individual programmes at the 'Nuove Voci' (Divertimento Ensemble), 'Arditti 3: Horizon' (Darmstadt) and 'Tales of Estonia' (Flagey) concerts
- **Works with significant extramusical elements were received most positively or most intensely** across all 33 works in the survey
- When receiving audiovisual pieces, **respondents tended to weigh up individual aspects of the work** rather than seeing it as a whole (film more interesting than the music/impacts the reception of the music). Full thesis reports case studies at the 'Film Music War Requiem' (Snape Maltings), 'Songs of Wars I Have Seen' (Time of Music) and 'Landscape Series #1' (Gaudeamus).
- Full thesis reports a detailed case study of *Control* by Alexander Schubert, a participatory installation presented over two days at Ultima in 2018

### **Institution-Audience Relationships**

- Overall, the vast majority of respondents had already attended an event at the institution in question, only 19.4% were visiting that institution for the first time
- Around a third of attendees at the 'Control' installation (Ultima) and the 'Nuove Voci' amateur choir event (Divertimento Ensemble) were going to an event by that institution for the first time - **power of alternative formats in terms of audience development**
- **84 respondents** were first-time attendees **both at the institution they attended and at a CCM concert**. The 'Nuove Voci' concert in Milan attracted the highest proportion of these newcomers (15.4%). The 'Opus XXI

Closing Concert' and 'Tales from Estonia' events follow, with such newcomers making up 10% of respondents at those concerts.

- **Musical expertise by institution type:** non-musicians and amateurs were more prevalent at the venues in the Network (e.g. Flagey or Snape Maltings). As would be expected, CCM professionals and other music professionals dominate in the academy contexts. Festivals and ensembles attract a mixed audience in terms of musical expertise.
- **Communication from institutions:** Hearing about events from the main organising institution's website or email newsletter was most common
- Interestingly, the more old-fashioned mode of 'word of mouth' still ranked very highly
- Under 35s are much more likely to hear about events through social media than older respondents, over 55s rely more on traditional forms of media (TV, radio and newspapers, as well as print media such as flyers and posters)

### **Comparisons with the classical music sample**

- Three classical concerts were surveyed, at the Estonian National Opera House (organised by and featuring the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir), Snape Maltings and Flagey
- Average age of the classical respondents: 56.8 years (Median: 60.0, Range: 18-95 years), significantly older than the CCM sample.
- The top three associations with the term 'contemporary classical music' among classical audiences were 'Challenging', 'Experimental' and 'Unpredictable'
- Classical audiences demonstrated a lack of familiarity with living composers, especially younger ones or those of different nationality. They largely reported being **unlikely to attend concerts with contemporary composers on the programme** (based on ratings of named local and international composers).
- 20<sup>th</sup> century composers (Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Cage) represented much

less of a barrier to attendance, though in some instances, familiarity with these figures was also low (e.g. 42.0% of the Flagey/Brussels Philharmonic respondents were not familiar with John Cage, over a third were not familiar with Arnold Schoenberg)

- **The CCM respondents were significantly more positive (mean rating: 3.74) about the future direction of classical music than the classical sample (mean rating: 3.54).**
- Classical audiences remain an important potential audience base for CCM but **organising institutions who might wish to pull classical attendees over to CCM have some work to do.** Audiences for different genres at a single institution can be quite isolated from one another and barriers of negative associations and unfamiliarity need to be overcome. **20<sup>th</sup> century music could be used as a way in to newer repertoire.**

<b>Concert Name</b>	<b>Institution(s)</b>	<b>Year Surveyed</b>
<i>'Ensemble Schallfeld'</i>	Impuls	2017 (Pilot Study)
<i>'Through the Twilight'</i>	EPCC with Estonian Music Days 2017	2017
<i>'A Film Music War Requiem'</i>	Snape Maltings	2017
<i>'Grisey/Posadas'</i>	IRCAM, as part of Manifeste 2017	2017
<i>'Opus XXI Closing Concert'</i>	Opus XXI with the Bregenz Festival 2017	2017
<i>'Landscape Series #1'</i>	Gaudeamus	2017
<i>'Und links das Meer'</i>	International Ensemble Modern Akademie with the Cresc Biennale festival 2017	2017
<i>'Tales from Estonia'</i>	Flagey	2018
<i>'Nuove Voci di Divertimento Ensemble'</i>	Divertimento Ensemble	2018
<i>'Songs of War I Have Seen'</i>	Time of Music	2018
<i>'Arditti 3: Horizon'</i>	Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music	2018
<i>'Académie Voix Nouvelles: Compositeurs I'</i>	Royaumont Foundation	2018
<i>'Alexander Schubert: Control'</i>	Ultima	2018

**Table 1.** Details of the Twelve Surveyed Concerts and the Pilot Survey Concert

Category	No. of Quotations	Quotations
1. Engaging	21	<i>interesting (14), stimulating (4), lively, captivating, fascinating</i>
2. Positive/ Enjoyable	17	<i>beautiful (2), relaxing (2), enjoyable, humorous, entertaining, fun, funny, tremendous, good, [sometimes] fantastic, lovely, life-affirming, joy, pleasure</i>
3. Newness/The Unexpected	17	<i>adventurous/adventure (3), curiosity/curious (2), refreshing, new beginnings, fresh, creation, discovery, unusual, unfamiliar, unknown, hidden</i> <b>Phrases:</b> 'Innovative creation', 'New aesthetic solutions', 'Fresh air'
4. Rethinks/ Provokes	15	<b>Words:</b> <i>authentic, eye-opening, ear-wiping, paradigm-shifting, destabilising, risk-taking, insubordinate, critical, radical, democratic, unrest</i> <b>Phrases:</b> 'Questions the mode of the perception of reality', 'Provoking new thoughts and awe', 'Rethinking boundaries/pushing boundaries', 'As it is'
5. Complex/ Intellectual	12	<i>cognitive, cerebral, profound, dense, rigorous, concentrated, complex, academic, material, serious, puritan, research</i>
6. CCM's Position or Style	12	<b>Words:</b> <i>20th century, underrepresented, post-identity, inward-looking, Gesamtkunstwerk, minimalism</i> <b>Phrases:</b> 'Twentieth century, spectrum of new music to me: contemporary classical <-> experimental (they are not the same sub-genre)', 'Crossover with electronic music', 'Accepted by a certain public', 'There is no contemporary classical music', 'Classical music by living composers', 'Considered in conflict with 'New Music'
7. It varies/It depends	11	<b>Words:</b> <i>hit-and-miss, variable quality, varying</i> <b>Phrases:</b> 'Well, 'CCM' is too wide term, it could be almost anything, in good and in bad, Everything depends on the work (...). I cannot generalise. For contemporary music is diverse!', 'Depends on composer, there is no 'current' style', 'Good, when it's good. Bad, when it's bad.' 'There's good and bad (music)', 'Variable quality. Some excellent, some awful.', 'It depends' (3)
8. Musical Features	10	<b>Words:</b> <i>non-melodic (2), dissonance/discord (2), loud, atonal</i> <b>Phrases:</b> 'Too close to improvisation', 'Mistakes in music', 'Without a clear form', 'Dissonant cacophony'
9. Emotional Terms	10	<i>moving/emotive (2), powerful (2), intense, touching, melancholic, tension, distressing, impressive</i>
10. Diverse	10	<b>Words:</b> <i>multidimensional, heterogenous, diversity or diverse (3), varied, contrasts, pluristylistic,</i> <b>Phrases:</b> 'Crossing board', 'A bit of everything'

**Table 2.** Free-form responses to the question 'What do you associate with the term 'contemporary classical music?', organised by thematic category. All words/phrases were mentioned once unless otherwise noted.

Category	No. of Quotations	Quotations
11. Spiritual/ spacey	9	<b>Words:</b> cosmic, spiritual, purifying <b>Phrases:</b> 'A new way of spirituality', 'Guided by the spirit and the heart', 'Lost in space', 'Religious meditative soundworlds', 'Enlarging the soul', 'Primal energy'
12. Pointless/ Strange	9	<i>weird (2), pretentious (3), artificial [at times], stupid, meaningless/without point, irrelevant</i>
13. Music of Today/the Future	9	<i>'Participating in current society', 'Intellectual music of today', 'Related to the current time', 'Capturing something of the current time', 'Ideally: critical reflection on the present', 'Of recent time', 'Reflecting our postmodern predicament', 'Extreme, like the time in which it is created', 'The future'</i>
14. Atmospheric	9	<i>evocative, visual, atmospheric, intimate, delicate, discreet, tender, elegant, poetic</i>
15. Educational/ Valuable	7	<b>Words:</b> educational, valuable, necessary, informative <b>Phrases:</b> 'Of vital importance', 'Brain- and soul-food', 'Learn music ideas'
16. Freeing/Open	6	<b>Words:</b> free, freeing, openness, unconfined, developing <b>Phrases:</b> 'Open to my judgement'
17. Difficult (to understand)	6	<b>Words:</b> incomprehensible, exhausting, [sometimes] tiring <b>Phrases:</b> 'Sometimes difficult but worth it', 'Only understandable with an introduction'
18. Personal Identification	4	<b>Words:</b> life <b>Phrases:</b> 'My life!', 'Makes me deeply happy', 'I love it'
19. Live Experience	3	<b>Words:</b> live <b>Phrases:</b> 'Can only be heard in a concert hall', 'To be seen and heard live'
20. Repetition	2	<i>repetition, circularity</i>
21. Unemotional	2	<b>Words:</b> non-emotional <b>Phrases:</b> 'Normally doesn't create emotions in my mind and heart'

Table 2. cont.