

## **Discussions on visitors and non-visitors of classical and ethnic European music concerts**

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### *Orientation*

One of the key concerns in the fields of arts management and cultural policy is the question of uneven participation in the cultural provision, be it passive consumption such as seeing a theatre performance or live concert or more active participation, say, playing a music instrument. Statistics and research data show that such socio-demographic features as education, gender and place of residence do not match equally when it comes to people's consumption and participation in cultural activities. Evidence of this phenomenon can be traced throughout the decades.

While studies on existing audiences show constantly that the aim of cultural democracy – a classic tradition and aim in a number of European countries, particularly in Scandinavia (Duelund 2003) – has not quite been fulfilled, there are also some other statistical means of describing the situation. Studying the situation in the UK, Bonita Kolb (2001) has suggested that classic music concert attendance is likely to diminish among the younger generations as they are less motivated to be recruited as concert music audience compared to generations before. That is, young people's relative share of classic music audiences is likely to diminish in the future, if Kolb's findings prove right. As a result live classic music has a challenge to overcome if new generations are to be found in the concert halls.

While Kolb talks about the UK situation, I present some evidence in the Finnish situation, i.e., in a country that has been hailed for its classical music education system and seemingly endless high quality of performers but where issues of audience education are as relevant as in many other countries.

Education, in particular, is a key factor. Research has shown that the more education one has, the more likely one is to have interest in taking part in cultural offering or to have personal hobbies such as singing, dancing or painting. These findings tend to be universal at least in Europe and much further, as well. (Cultural statistics... 2007; Cantell 1998).

One key area of arts management research is related to audience studies of various cultural institutions. Indeed, Chong (2002) argues that alongside to a commitment to excellence and artistic integrity as well as a commitment to accountability and cost effectiveness the third key area of arts organisations is a commitment to accessibility and audience development. Baring this last point in mind this paper aims at contributing to the research on audience development. However, instead of presenting data of existing

audiences this research project concentrates on those people who, for whatever reason, do not find their way into concert halls, theatre venues etc.

This paper presents findings from a research project where the so-called non-participants have been taken into concerts to follow classical and ethnic music performances in Helsinki, Finland. Orientated in the classic Nordic cultural policy model to support people's access to cultural offering regardless of economical, social, educational or geographical background (e.g. Duellund 2003), I have chosen to study one of the key features of arts management, i.e., audience participation and development.

Thus, in certain terms, my study represents the field of action research. Here I am indebted particularly to two cases in this line of endeavour. Firstly, I draw from the ideas presented in research project conducted by Anita Kangas in the 1980s in the Province of Central Finland. What is important in her research agenda is the exploratory activation, or animation, of the residents in various communities. These people were, in effect, reached out and subjected to previously unexplored cultural programming and activities by organising unheard of events and structures to provide cultural activities. By providing new cultural stimulus into various communities in Central Finland, Kangas was able to explore the effects on people's cultural activities and interests. As a result of these activities Kangas (1988) shows in her exploratory research project that when culture was made accessible to people an increase in participation followed.

Secondly, and more directly, I draw from Bonita Kolb's research in London. She studied those university students who did not visit classical music concerts by taking groups of them to these concerts and interviewing them alongside these visits. Kolb's method is the underlining feature that has served as an inspiration to the approach adopted in this present study.

This article presents some of the research results and only touches upon the relevant research literature. The orientation here is therefore rather empirical in nature.

### *Studying young adults*

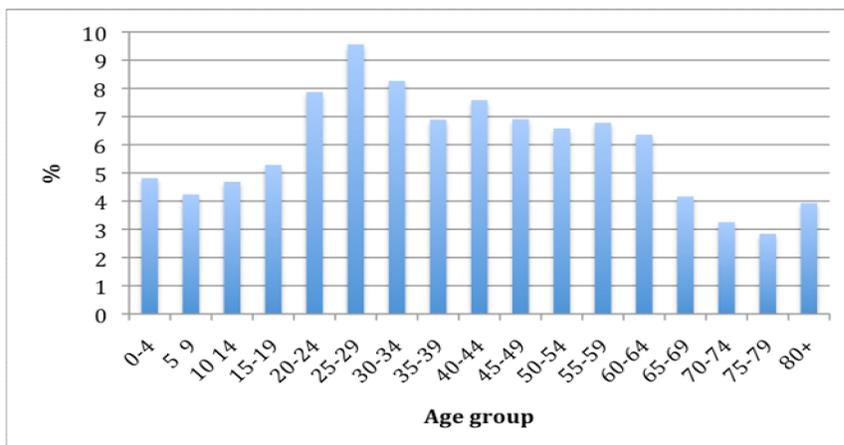
Why study young adults? The reason for choosing this group is that they constitute a large urban population who are underrepresented in arts attendance and can be the one who might not be recruited as active participants in the future, either, if Kolb's assumptions hold truth I have identified non-attendees and taken them in classical music concerts and ethnic music events organised by Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and Helsinki Festival. I have carried out focus group interviews before the concert, then immediately taken these people to the concerts and continued the night by interviewing them right after the concerts. The idea has been to study the situation before and right after the concerts in order to gain some knowledge of also the post-concert situation.

The main target group of this research project are the so-called urban and educated young adults, i.e., those who are in their 20s and early 30s and who are currently enrolled as university students or who have recently taken up full-time employment after graduation. That is, these people represent those socio-economic – and especially educational – groups who typically show high attendance at arts events and therefore would have the potential for interest in visiting arts activities but who, in their individual cases, for whatever

reason do not show interest in attending arts event. In other words, I have identified young adults who due to their background have the “right” socioeconomic profile to attend arts offering but as they have not selected so this study explores how they react when they are actually invited to arts events.

The reason for choosing young adults stems from the fact that they make the single largest age groups in Helsinki. Contrary to popular belief, the so-called baby boom generations, i.e., those born right after the Second World War and who are now in their late 50s and early 60s, do not constitute the largest share of population in Helsinki, or indeed, in the large university cities. Baby boom generation do feature strongly in Helsinki’s inhabitants but nevertheless those young adults who are in their 20s and 30s make a larger proportion of the population than the traditionally large age groups. In Helsinki’s population base of almost 570000 people in 2007, the age group who are 25 to 29 year-olds make 9,6 per cent of the Helsinki’s residents, or 54355 individuals. As against this, those who are between 55 to 59 years-of-age, i.e., those who belong to the traditional baby boom generations, represent 6,8 per cent of the population or 38540 individuals. (See table 1).

Table 1. Helsinki’s population by age range in 2007 (N=568 531). Source: Statistics Finland.



Young adults come to Helsinki to study and to work – and to enjoy urban life – and therefore their share of the population is relatively larger than in the country of Finland as a whole. From the point of view of arts organisations these young adults should be given special emphasis as they have many of the typical characteristics that the arts audiences have. These young adults are well educated, urban-savvy, outgoing and interested in various cultural events. Many of them do find their way into arts events, even classical music concerts, but a large fraction of them remain non-attendees, despite of their educational background (Cantell 1998).

Having identified this group I have concentrated in this study on those young adults who, for whatever reason, do not find their way into classical or ethnic music concerts even if their background would suggest that they could be potentially interested.

### *Studying non-attendees*

In this research project I am indebted to Bonita Kolb (1999) who in her exploratory research project studied non-attendee students in London, UK, by taking groups of students to various kinds of classical music concerts. My project follows similar trajectories. This research project is exploratory in a sense that it aims to lay ground for understanding the sorts of people who normally would not be found at arts events.

While Kolb talks about the UK situation, my study applies and tests her findings in the Finnish situation, i.e., in a country that has been hailed for its classical music education system and seemingly endless flow of high quality performers but where issues of audience education are as relevant as in many other countries. Despite great efforts at training classical musicians – both amateurs and professionals – audience education systems at various arts organisations are not quite as widespread in Finland as in many other countries. This is partly explained by the fact that funding bodies such as the ministry of culture or Finnish Arts Council have so far not emphasised the importance of audience education quite as much as, say, in the UK.

I have taken groups of young adults, those who are studying at universities and those who are recent university graduates, to classical music and ethnic music concerts. These young adults say that they do not visit cultural events bar movies that seems to be very common among this age group.

This study has been realised together with Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and Helsinki Festival who provided opportunities to enter concerts they have arranged. These organisations promised coffee and snacks during the focus group interviews, free entrance to the concerts, and 20 euros as a token for the trouble taken by these participants.

Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra (HPO) is the oldest professional symphony orchestra in Finland, and indeed, in the Nordic countries, established in 1882. The orchestra is known by its close connection to Jean Sibelius whose many major works were premiered by HPO in the period between 1883-1923. It is currently one of the leading orchestras in a country of strong symphony music traditions.

Helsinki Festival (HF) was established in 1968 though its roots date back to 1951. In the year 2008 there were more than 260 000 visitors to this festival making it the single largest festival in terms of audience numbers in Finland. The aim of the festival is to make art accessible to all and there have been concerted efforts to make this reality by, for example, opening up a large part of the programme free of charge. This goes especially with the open-air events and exhibitions organised. On the other hand, where tickets are needed the prices are kept at relatively low level compared to many international festivals.

With the case of HPO and HF substantial subsidy from the government and the local municipality enable these organisations to provide events at relatively low prices compared to international counterparts. However, even this subsidy does not even out the audience base and research shows that the visitors are unevenly spread when it comes to socio-economic background, age, education and place of residence.

### *Time management*

Lack of time – real or perceived – is the attribute how non-attendees argue their reason for not attending live concerts. This explanation can be uncovered by taking a look at time-management issues that the respondents discuss at great length and where real reasons are to be found. On the other hand, by referring to the time problem non-attendees also attempt to avoid expressing the “real” reasons such as lack of interest, lack of knowledge, lack of energy etc. Discussing time, therefore, includes a multitude of issues.

Problems in having enough time, in committing one’s calendar in advance, in balancing work and leisure, in avoiding last-minute changes and rush – all these issues contribute to the perception that there is not enough time thus making it practically impossible to book tickets in advance or to have a sudden spontaneous urge to experience, say, a theatre performance or concert of some sort.

Digging into the interview material will highlight a number of time-related issues that need to be uncovered. Rather straightforwardly those interviewed argue that one of the key issues is that they lack time to take part in arts activities. This has to be studied at its face value. It seems that students and those in the working life encounter constant issues in terms of controlling their timetables. Life is packed with meetings, deadlines, things to do to such a degree that interviewees feel that they do not quite have a control over their own time. They are continuously under various time pressures and life presents itself as a series of deadlines and time-management challenges.

This leads at least into three conclusions. Firstly, people simply do not have enough time for anything other than work, studies and immediate personal and family maintenance issues. Full stop. Life is just too busy and stressful. This argument goes as well as for those families with children and for those single urban dwellers who fill their calendars with a variety of issues thus making their time-management very problematic.

Secondly, they have the illusion that they do not have time due to their lack of organising skills. This is what at least some openly admit. Even if their life-situation would not always be that busy, they cannot quite organise their lives. That is, they are not even able to think that there would be a possibility to pre-plan much of their leisure time. On the other hand, they would not even want to do any pre-planning due to the stress that this would bring about.

Thirdly, as their days dedicated to work and study are already fully booked – or so they feel at least – they cannot in their right minds think of fulfilling their calendars with any extra booking to see, say, a theatre performance or experience a concert. This appears way too complicated and stressful and does not present leisure time in such a positive light as they would like to experience it.

To sum up the previous, the argument of the non-attendees goes then that if working life is controlled by constant time pressures, there should be a clear-cut difference when it comes to free time which should be relieved of similar pressures altogether. Due to these time pressures the idea as to how one should spend leisure time is such that at least that part of life should be free of any calendar bookings, pre-planning or other such like issues that are too familiar with work and studies. Thus, ideally leisure time should consist of spontaneous decisions made at the last minute at the spur of the moment. This would give

relief and distance – and a break – from the daily dominance of the calendar. Spontaneity, immediacy and freedom are the key elements in this thinking.

These points have been expressed, for example, as follows:

*Having the work calendar fully booked and even the leisure time planned in advance, that gets to me, it distresses me, there is never enough leisure time.*

*I want to have an illusion that I can choose anytime where to go, that my leisure time has room for flexibility. And in the end I find myself on the couch watching television.*

Some interviewees openly admit that if they manage to have some time off and spend leisure time the end result is more often than not that one's home and the couch have tremendous pulling power and they end up going nowhere from home. The home, the couch and often the television make an irresistible triangle that is hard to beat. What happens then, when everything falls into place, the evening presents itself with plenty of opportunities, no commitments and spontaneity can be exercised to the full? Anticlimax. The end result more often than not will be that one finds him or herself on the sofa having browsed through endless array of television channels without any particular idea in mind as to what to watch. This does serve a purpose as it presents a break from everyday activities when television acts as venue for escapism, admittedly a much needed and often used method at home.

The pulling power of home – especially television and couch – is great and home-based entertainment opportunities by way of DVDs, the internet, computer games and such like are real competing factors to the non-attendees. However, even if they do admit that live events can have certain unique features not provided by home entertainment, live events are not unique enough to attract them away from the comfort of their own homes.

These findings confirm finding how people experience time and how time issues influence live entertainment attendance as presented and discussed Boudier-Pailler (2008) in the French situation. Lack of personal organisation capability is one determinant in affecting people's decisions not even to try to follow live events.

Indeed, the Helsinki data shows, that while non-attendees face major questions related to personal skills in managing one's own time both at work and at leisure they could even appreciate if they were one way or another encouraged or even coached to organise themselves.

*I'd like to have a season ticket - that would be wonderful. I just somebody bought me one. Not that I'd put my own money in it right now...*

Clearly some non-attendees would appreciate having a personal time-management trained who would guide and help them in controlling their own work and leisure time. Thus the reason of not visiting concerts can be traced down to the fact that these people never manage to make a booking or to simply go to concert venues. The question is therefore, not necessarily of active dislike toward this kind of leisure time activity but the simple

inability to organise oneself to such a degree that one would be able to commit oneself to a certain time-slot.

### *Social aspects*

Non-attendees tend to be passive in selecting their leisure time activities in such a way that they rely heavily on their friends' suggestions and invitations. They seldom take the initiative to come up with any own ideas as to what to do, but trust that certain opinion leaders in the immediate circle of friends are the ones showing the way. This goes for mundane cafeteria visits or movie events as well as for those events that require somewhat more arrangements and ideas out of the ordinary. Indeed, even if non-attendees might have some reservations against certain things they might not want to do – such as going to classical music concerts – more important than the activity itself can be socialising aspects provided by the company of friends. Then, after all, even classical music concert or a ballet might be an option – given that this is experienced together with good company.

Leisure time, if not spent at one's own home, is time spent socialising with friends. Going somewhere alone is absolutely out of bounds. Going to a pub, movies or elsewhere always take place with friends and is therefore time dedicated to socialising.

When discussing if classical music concerts would present a way of making an impact on the opposite sex the socialising aspect provided by these concerts seemed to be not the first choice.

*Question: Would you consider taking your potential girl/boyfriend to a classical music concert for a date?*

*- Absolutely not!*

*- Why not, with a boyfriend, but not with a brand new partner... I don't really know why, but with a new acquaintance, it wouldn't be the first thing for me to do...*

Indeed, the milieu that classical music concert halls provide (like Finlandia Hall in Helsinki) seem to be rather distant if not actively discouraging. This also goes for the proper behaviour expected and for the audience that finds its way there. Some non-attendees had an image in mind that the audience would be middle-aged or older, conservative and dull with whom they would not have anything in common. Quite the contrary, these people might even deter them from taking part in these concerts.

*I find Finlandia Hall somehow shallow, like I myself would much rather sit at a third-class restaurant, or rock club, because you can feel more relaxed there than at Finlandia Hall, and somehow, as a student, you feel you are kind of showing off at Finlandia...*

*For example you can cry in a theatre or cinema but if I started to cry over there in the Finlandia Hall that would feel a little strange.*

*The concert in itself is very unsocial as an event. There you just sit still, don't talk or anything. It sort of cries for an opportunity to discuss afterwards as to what happen, how the concert was, what kind of feelings it aroused. You just don't talk there, well, neither do you talk in the movies.*

Movies compete here as well, even if the respondent admits that watching a movies is not necessarily that different from sitting in a concert or a theatre. However, the perception is that these arts forms are somewhat more rigid in the code of conduct expected and therefore they do not provide as much fun.

### *Search for experiences*

Non-attendees look for experiences in their leisure time. As they are not familiar with classical music concert traditions and even less with ethnic music ones, they think that these arts forms do not have anything whatsoever to offer to them. Or even more so, these kinds of events would provide most boring way of spending time. Getting bored while supposedly spending a good night out is one of the last things these people would like to do.

*I'd like to be excited waiting for the concert, eagerly interested that it would touch my feelings. The worst scenario is that it turns out to be a dull and boring event that can not have any impact on me. Be it positive or negative, happy or sad as long as my feelings are touched.*

*Hard to say, but at least I expect to get bored sooner or later during the concert.*

Therefore, when these people decide to go out – which in itself can be an ordeal – they want to guarantee that they will end up spending something that for them represents quality time. Here their choices are relatively conservative, they want to make sure that the experiences on offer will please and entertain them. Most likely entertainment option alongside of going to a bar is to go to the cinema. Here Hollywood blockbusters have a great pulling power as they provide a mixture of action, excitement, love and violence in such a carefully packaged mode that is easy to consume and where there are no worries of getting bored. Classical or ethnic music concerts, on the other hand, do not represent to the non-attendees anything like Hollywood.

It could be argued along the lines of Hannigan (1998) that these people are ready to consume “riskless risks” in their leisure time. That is, selecting sort of entertainment options that they are already familiar with and where they can guarantee a degree of satisfaction in all cases. Even if a Hollywood film does not turn out to be the best one, it nevertheless offers enough excitement to avoid boredom. This search for experiences that are consumed within relatively conservative parameters, often negotiated through large commercial enterprises, is something that catches the imagination of the non-attendees. Classical music concerts fall out of place in this scenario.

### *Assumption of special knowledge*

Non-attendees expect that typical visitors have plenty of special knowledge of classical music and that more or less all audience members play or have played actively a music instrument themselves. In addition, visitors are thought to have taught themselves a substantial knowledge of the history, key repertoire and performers of classical music and are therefore better placed to appreciate the programme on offer. Indeed, non-attendees see that it is almost a pre-requisite to have amassed knowledge and personal experience of plying an instrument before one can even understand and to like such music. These arguments are also familiar with Kolb's (1999) London data.

When asked if similar kinds of "requirements" are necessary when talking about popular music the answer is no, i.e., one can just listen and enjoy pop music without much thinking of it. This, on the contrary, seems not to be the case when discussing the case of classical music. When asked why this is so, non-attendees cannot give any specific answer, as "it is just that way." However, the interviews showed that similar kind of reception with classical music in principal could be envisaged but the tradition of "serious" music holds a sort of package thus discouraging even attempts to open one's ears to listen to music that is considered as demanding.

Ethnic music, on the other hand, seems to fall somewhere in between these two extremes. As ethnic music is less clear-cut in terms of its definition and practices than classical music, it appears rather distant and out-of-bounds for the non-attendees. Therefore, some voices are raised to argue for great knowledge expectations before this kind of music can be appreciated. On the other hand, there is room for understanding that this kind of music genre can very well be received like popular music without emphasising prior education in this specific field.

### *Marketing and purchasing tickets*

The best remedy against the sofa's pulling power apart from spending time with friends seem to be provided by the cinema. It is very easy to go to a cinema complex and choose, say, among 14 different movies a suitable one. Booking tickets seem not to be complicated, tickets are almost always available and if one cannot get into a performance at 7 pm, there is another one starting within two hours or at least the next day. Or the next week. This is a very suitable and agreeable arrangement to the non-attendees with time pressures. And this is exactly the opposite how they see classical music and many other arts entertainment operate that seem, according to the interviewees, to require pre-booked tickets well in advance.

*I have a feeling that tickets have to be reserved well in advance, that going to concerts have to be planned carefully and that you just cannot walk in. That one has to invest a lot of energy and preparation in order to go to a concert.*

Indeed, theatre and classical music events are considered to require a great deal of pre-planning in order to secure entrance on a selected day. It seems, that often non-attendees (and also active visiting people) seem to confuse concerts given by big international stars, who sell out huge venues within hours or less, to the more mundane performances by

theatres and orchestras. The perception, however, remains that purchasing tickets is difficult and that at the last minute one would not have any chance to get tickets.

If non-attendees see ticket purchasing difficult, marketing opens up another discussion. Those who are not yet converted find marketing not at all interesting, partly even discouraging. A typical advertisement might have a black-and-white picture of a soloist or conductor or ancient composer and the text might read: Bach – Beethoven – Sibelius. This format does not communicate to the non-attendees at all and they might be read symbolically and factually as obituaries as one interviewee put it.

*Question: Have you paid attention to the advertisements of classical music concerts?*

- *Rather neutral*
- *They are kind of cold, not waking any kind of interest. They are made so plain, a little apologetic, sorry for being here, period.*
- *Obituaries!*
- *It seems to me that they are not made to wake the interest of people who don't attend concerts.*

Applying Bourdieu's (1994, 386-387) notions, it can also be argued that the field of classical music effectively dispossesses certain potential consumers but not seeking after them. The marketing campaigns are aimed at those who have amassed enough cultural and social capital to read these campaigns in a right way. Those who are not as yet converted feel either alienated or neutral, i.e., they do not pay any attention to the marketing of symphony orchestras.

### *Conclusions*

Future of classical music audiences as well as classical cultural policy argument of cultural democracy and audience education motivate studies on the audience base of symphony concerts. This study turns the perception upside down by studying non-attendees in Helsinki, Finland. Selected group represents educated and urban young adults who could – at least in theory as judged by their background – find their way into concerts but who do not, for various reasons, choose to do so.

It seems that classical music field has a task in hand to convince those young adults who have all the means to join in the concert venues to listen to classical and ethnic music. Those interviewed in this research project are young, well educated and urban who, in principle, should easily find their way into concerts.

Non-attendees highlight that they have issues with their personal time management and want to keep their leisure time spontaneous. Taking part in classical music event is opposite to this idea, at least in their perception. It is also anti-social as against their wish to spend free time socialising with their friends. In addition, the social milieu provided by concert audiences is not something where these people would like to spend time. There also remain issues with perceptions of ticket purchase and marketing. It should be added, that often concerts are considered to cost a lot of money and interviewees were systematically surprised that they could enter these event by paying only half of the ticket

prices compared to the cinema tickets (given that they were students and could get student discounts).

Bonita Kolb's (2001) argument that classical music might lose part of its audience base in the long run seems to find relevance in this study with the Helsinki case. It would, however, be important to test this issue further with more quantitative data as there are some arguments against this observation. For example, journalist John Parker (2008) argues in magazine *Intelligent Life*, published by *The Economist*, that instead of "dumbing down" people are "wising up". The reason for this, says Parker, is that on average younger generation has much higher education than previously and education is a key determining factor why people become interested in the arts, even the so called "high arts". In his opinion, educated people are prepared to "test" themselves with more challenging entertainment and this includes classical music. I have collected some audience surveys with Helsinki Festival and will test these arguments in the forthcoming studies when this qualitative data presented here and the quantitative data can be studied in tandem.

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