

Spring 4-27-2022

## Concert audience engagement: A select overview from the post-pandemic world

Payton Gehring  
paytong@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Gehring, Payton, "Concert audience engagement: A select overview from the post-pandemic world" (2022). *Honors Projects*. 781.  
<https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/781>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the lives of millions around the globe. The highly transmissible disease spread through every continent causing leaders to step in and enforce lockdowns and curfews. Globally, 6.2 million deaths have been reported as of April 14th, 2022 (CDC, 2022). This pandemic changed the way that people lived their day-to-day lives, specifically on a social realm. As social beings, humans adapted their forms of socialization accordingly. As lockdowns were set in place, the internet became a vital place of communication. A recent study showed that overall, 46% of Americans had increased their online use (Nguyen et al., 2020). The overall increase of online presence sparked an online movement in the musical arts.

Before the pandemic, the music world had already begun having more of a presence online. Streaming music on apps such as Apple Music and Spotify has made music readily available and also offered beginner artists a platform to publish their works. Live performances only began moving to online platforms in recent years, an example being Facebook Live and YouTube which allow performers and institutions to archive their performances for many to enjoy when done live streaming. However, there are a few platforms that were ahead of their time such as the Berlin Philharmonic Digital Concert Hall (Philharmoniker). This is a website where people can view live concerts as well as old ones. The archived section shows many old concerts and the live concert section informs people of upcoming live streams. As people were deprived of the “live” performance experience, more concerts, shows and performances began taking to online formats. Live music experiences have been known to cultivate a sense of excitement and community, and there was widespread concern: would moving concert events to online platforms provide that same sense of excitement and community?

This question is what has guided my research into audience engagement in the post pandemic world. Audience engagement is defined as: “audience members feeling like active participants in the performance” (Radbourne et al., 2009). As a performer myself, I find this topic to be extremely important. I am an undergraduate student graduating with a minor in vocal performance and I have performed before, during and after the pandemic and have always loved feeling a connection with the music I am performing as well as my audience. Engaging my audience members, feeling a connection with them and being a bridge to allow them to connect with music is one of the biggest honors of my life. With the many changes we had to make through this difficult time, has there been a drop in audience engagement or have we found new ways to spark that engagement and sense of community? In this selective overview, I have looked into many studies done on this topic before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to answer that question.

An article written in 2009, titled “The Audience Experience: Measuring Quality in the Performing Arts,” (Radbourne et al., 2009) was what sparked my interest in this topic. Jennifer Radbourne is an arts management researcher as well as a dean of the Arts and Education department at Deakin University in Australia. Katya Johanson is a lecturer in professional writing in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. Hilary Glow is also a professor at Deakin University, however, she is a part of the School of Management and Marketing. Tabitha White was involved with this project as a doctoral study on the impact of art on individuals. She had worked on many projects at Deakin University and had gotten to know the faculty well. This research consisted of volunteer surveys across orchestral platforms and seven focus groups. The research questions that guided their research were: How do audience members describe their experiences of attending arts performances? What is the relationship

between audience engagement and artistic quality? How do arts companies maximize the audience experience? How can this be interpreted in performing arts policy and funding? In their research, it was shown that there were four main categories when it came to audience engagement: knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement (Radbourne et al., 2009). Knowledge was noted as a critical part of the audience experience. Audience members who received knowledge prior to or during the performance felt much more engaged and connected to the performer. Many audience members expressed that “learning” was a huge part of the experience and had many positive connotations to the word. Risk was another very important factor in the study. If audience members do not feel included or “in the know” when the audience is laughing about a line or crying during an emotional moment, it is very uncomfortable. This shows that knowledge of the performance is extremely important to stay engaged. Risk was seen as an action taken by the audience member and/or the performer. Audience members who, for example, took the risk of sitting in the front row ended up having a very engaging experience as they went out of their comfort zone in hopes to enhance their overall experience. When a performer takes a risk and keeps the audience on their toes, it allows for a more engaged and focused audience waiting to see what happens next (Radbourne et al., 2009).

Authenticity was also deemed very important to the satisfaction of a performance. Audience members often look at authenticity with the performer and how “believable” and “real” they are able to come across as the audience’s emotional perception of a performance plays a huge factor in that satisfaction. Authenticity is typically associated with words such as reality, truth and believability. However, these words can mean different things to each member of the audience. Interpretations of a piece set by the performer can give mixed signals to audience members if not authentic, so this is extremely important to keep the audience to

performer communication line open and vulnerable (Radbourne et al., 2009). If a performer is supposed to be upset and emotional to help the audience understand their situation as it pertains to the story line, then it is of the utmost importance that the audience feels the emotion pouring out of the performer. Otherwise, the audience won't feel connected to the performer's emotion and the importance of that moment in the story will be lost. This leads into the last category of collective engagement. This could be from performer to performer, performer to audience member, or audience member to audience member (Radbourne et al., 2009). When performers are more engaged to each other and the story they are trying to portray, this was shown to have a positive influence on engagement of the audience. Another interesting finding was the importance of audience members to be equally engaged with each other as they are the show. Audience members who shared the same emotions during the same moments of a performance had very positive heightened experiences. An involvement of performer to audience member acknowledgement was also seen as a very positive thing to help keep audience members engaged. There were many other researchers also curious about audience engagement in live audiences before the pandemic.

Another article was written before the pandemic in 2018, titled “engaging audiences: A case study from three music organizations in Philadelphia” (Teng, 2018). Jiaqi Teng submitted a thesis to the faculty of Drexel University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Arts Administration. This study looked into three music organizations in Philadelphia to understand what works towards audience engagement and what does not. Teng used volunteer based research and gathered data by interview and surveys. His research questions included: who is the audience for the music-based NPOs? Where do patrons or audiences come from? What marketing or general strategies do they use to engage the

community? Conclusions were based on comparing the internal factors of each group to see what worked and what did not. The three organizations were: Orchestra 2001 (O2001), the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia (COP) and the Bach Festival of Philadelphia (BFP). COP was deemed very successful as audience members were offered a much higher caliber of education and programming opportunities (Teng, 2018). Not only were people getting a very high level of performance from some of the city's best musicians, but they were also offered unique educational programs to further educate themselves in the world of classical music. The COP was also noted to be very good with community outreach and allow a diverse population to be involved with their programs (Teng, 2018). The BFP is a smaller, more local organization that tends to have a much older age range for audience members in attendance (Teng, 2018). They implemented a “pay what you wish” Wednesday-night series that brought out crowds who may be struggling financially but still want to be involved with the organization. It was recommended that more community outreach be done to try and get younger members of society to attend their performances. The O2001 is a more contemporary orchestra that takes contemporary music and turns them into an orchestral masterpiece (Teng, 2018). This organization has been recognized on the local and international level so their level of outreach has been praised. They often partner with nonprofits and other educational organizations around the world to bring music to those who may not have access to it all the time. They also have educational opportunities for younger generations as well. Over all three it was determined that community outreach and education is important to keep audiences diverse, engaged and make them want to return.

Another thesis studied the engagement of audiences when it came to online streaming and online performances. In 2018, Hang Thi Tuyet Nguyen submitted this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Music in the Graduate

College of the University of Iowa. The article was titled “Audiences' engagement with Twitter and Facebook Live during classical music performances: Community and connectivity through live listening experiences” (Nguyen, 2018). The 21st century is an era of increasing technological progress. There is much more available to the majority of the human race through technology, and things that may not be accessible to certain groups of people before are becoming much more accessible through technology advancements. An example would be the ability to attend live music performances online. Two platforms were studied, Twitter and Facebook. Twitter has a program called “Tweet Seats” while Facebook has a program known as “Facebook Live” (Nguyen, 2018). Tweet Seats users have a blocked off section in the venue of the performance as to not disturb other members of the audience who wish to not be on their phones. The Tweet Seats members have a specific hashtag that they use to tweet with their fellow Tweet Seats members and engage in discussion of the performance in real time. Cast and crew of the performance are also more than welcome to use the hashtag during the performance to discuss with the Tweet Seats members as well as point out specific moments to provoke thought and educate their listeners. Tweet Seats has lost popularity over the years, but it does still exist and have some users. Facebook Live is a platform on Facebook that allows a performance to be livestreamed. The performance is not often in real time, lagging a few seconds from the actual performance, and allows viewers to go back and listen to parts of a performance again as the live stream continues. There is no need to comment during the livestream, however, viewers are more than welcome to engage in conversation. Unlike Tweet Seats, Facebook Live has stayed very active with many users utilizing the platform every day. When interviewing many users from both platforms, there were a few differences between the two. The age range is one to note as users of Tweet Seats averaged a range from 20-40 years of age and Facebook Live

averaged an older range of 40-65 years of age (Nguyen, 2018). The time commitment from one platform to another is also different. Tweet Seats members have to agree to sit through the entire performance and contribute comments or “tweets” while the performance is occurring in real time. Facebook Live members have the option of leaving the live stream at any time and there is no comment requirement. Many Facebook Live members express that they enjoy multitasking from the comfort of their own home while listening/watching a performance. While there are a few differences in the two platforms and the audiences they reach, there are also a few similarities. Across both platforms, users expressed delight at how affordable and cost-effective these forms of attendance were (Nguyen, 2018). Neither platform charges money to participate in the programs. It was also expressed that this allowed for more people, who wouldn't otherwise attend a classical music concert, to be interested and tune into the concert as there is no financial risk. Another similarity that was expressed on both platforms was the sense of community (Nguyen, 2018). Audience members were able to engage with other members and have conversations about the pieces. This allowed for growth and education on the classical music topic or the show at hand. It is important to note that these platforms do still exist. Tweet Seats has gone down in numbers as live concerts were unavailable for a while, yet Facebook Live has stayed steady in numbers. With an ever growing technological world, it is thought that online concerts may be continuing and increasing in numbers in the near future.

During the height of the pandemic, an article was written in 2020 titled “Audience engagement with community music performances: Emotional contagion in audiences of a ‘pro-am’ orchestra in suburban Sydney” (Garrido & Macritchie, 2020). Sandra Garrido is a pianist, violinist and researcher. She has a background in both Psychology and Music and completed her PhD at the University of New South Wales. Jennifer Macritchie is also a researcher with

background in music, cognitive science, development of motor skills in instrumental performance and health/wellbeing. She completed her PhD at the University of Glasgow with the Science and Music Research group. In this study, Garrido and his colleagues hypothesized that social bonding between audience members would show a relationship between emotional contagion and emotional resonance (Garrido & Macritchie, 2020). This means that audience members who felt more connected to their fellow members would be more influenced by their emotional responses to the performance. After the performance had ended, the volunteers took a questionnaire. It was shown that the members who attended a “pre-show talk” felt more connected to the music, performance and audience as a whole which supported the hypothesis (Garrido & Macritchie, 2020). The pre-show talk was held to give audience members an overview of what to expect from the performance and to educate them on the storyline behind it. However, not many attend this pre-talk show unless fairly familiar with classical music and the show itself. It was suggested that more educational steps be taken to encourage audience members who were not as aware of the classical music world to attend and understand such shows (Garrido & Macritchie, 2020). All in all, audience members felt much more connected to the performer and others once steps towards education were taken before plunging into the performance. In a post pandemic world, many changes were made within the music world, specifically concert platforms and performances, sparking the interest of other researchers to see how these changes affected audience engagement.

After some lockdowns and curfews were lifted, research on this topic continued. In the study performed by Fraser and her colleagues, faculty of the Fine Arts and Music at the University of Melbourne and Fraser with a Master’s in applied psychology, the engagement of an audience from a technological standpoint was studied. The article was written in 2021 and

titled, "Music Has No Borders": An exploratory study of audience engagement with YouTube music broadcasts during COVID-19 lockdown, 2020" (Fraser et al., 2021). There were 10 videos selected and researched for the purpose of this study. Fraser and her colleagues watched these videos and used the comment sections, number of participants, and viewer demographics to provide data. A thematic analysis was used to organize the data as well as code it to protect viewers on the internet. Line by line coding allowed comments to be analyzed and find common themes. The thematic similarities and differences were then analyzed and compared. The videos chosen included: a large scale community choir (2), a remix of a North African instrumental created in lockdown (2), South African song and dance, a North American and East Asian orchestra collaboration, a World fusion music collaboration-charity raising effort, an Asia Minor informal orchestra, a West African/Arabic trio, and West African/Western classical duo (Fraser et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way many people lived their lives, including how they enjoyed/experienced music performances. Up until this point, there were very few options for online concert attendance. However, from April 2020 to October 2020, many virtual concert experiences were studied to interpret how audiences felt engaged with the performers (Fraser et al., 2021). Prior to this study, John Durham Peters' book *Speaking into the air*, suggested that live concerts were the only way to feel connected with a performer and the music being performed, however this was found to be quite different (Fraser et al., 2021). Audiences for several types of ensembles (choral, orchestral, multicultural) felt as though they were able to connect with the performance and still feel engaged. While it is still said that online concert attendance is not "as good" as a live experience, it was proven that performers are still able to engage and reach their audiences on an emotional, educational and personal level.

The studies mentioned above give a look into audience engagement in the live music industry and the direction that a post pandemic world may be taking it. Research on audience engagement has been taking place for many years such as Radbourne et al. in 2009. The four areas studied were: risk, knowledge, authenticity and collective engagement (Radbourne et al., 2009). It was shown that if an audience member feels connected to a performance in these areas, they are more likely to return and have a pleasant experience. However, this study was done in the pre-pandemic world. Is it possible that these feelings can be reciprocated in a post pandemic world where many live performance experiences have been changed or altered to accommodate the health risk of their guests? Another study discussed was done by Teng in 2018. This audience engagement research followed the members of three separate orchestras in Philadelphia (Teng, 2018). It was shown that in all three cases, audience members felt more engaged with more educational opportunities to learn more about the composers of selected pieces as well as the history/meaning behind the seasonal programs. This supports the research article from 2009 (Radbourne et al., 2009). with the topic of knowledge being an important part of audience engagement. As this is a successful implementation to allow more audience engagement, perhaps if more conservatories, orchestras, music groups, etc. also opened up more educational opportunities, numbers would increase and audience engagement would spike for those groups as well.

The study done by Nguyen is what sets the tone for the upcoming shift in the music pandemic world. Technology has been an ever growing market and place for socialization since before the pandemic, and in 2018, Nguyen looked into audience engagement in the online realm(Nguyen, 2018). Following the platforms Facebook and Twitter, there were two online entertainment events that struck interest: Facebook Live and Tweet Seats. In Nguyen's original

hypothesis, it was thought that the audience would not feel as engaged to the performance as a live performance experience would (Nguyen, 2018). However, this was not the case. The audience members of both platforms felt engaged in the performance and were able to experience perks such as communication with other audience members, educational opportunities while listening, and experience different perspectives on the performance from their fellow viewers. This research provides much insight to the possible future of music performances. It allows for a widespread community and gives access to those who may be unable to attend in person.

The music world was much different before the pandemic and we had to adapt as the pandemic came into the world. The year the pandemic went global a study was done by Garrido and Macritchie. This was when performances were still live, before lockdowns and curfews were enforced. As seen in the research done in 2009 (Radbourne et al., 2009), collective engagement with other audience members as well as the performers is extremely important. Garrido and Macritchie found that once again educational opportunities allowing audience members to gain a better understanding of the performance and the meaning behind it allowed them to feel much more engaged with each other as well as the performers (Garrido & Macritchie, 2020).

Educational opportunities are once again seen as extremely important to the audience experience, so more progress should be sought after in this territory.

The final study that was looked into was done in 2021 (Fraser et al., 2021). This is a study taken in the post pandemic world. Once again, this study covered an online platform. Similarly to the research done by Nguyen (Nguyen, 2018), it was thought that the online audience members would not feel as engaged as live performance members. However, this was not the case. Online members were given many communication opportunities between other

audience members that allowed them to feel connected to each other as well as the performance at hand (Fraser et al., 2021). As there has been much positive feedback with live streamed and online performances, this could open the door for many performance possibilities.

As the world changes, so must the way that humans live their day to day lives. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, live performance opportunities were taken for granted, a luxury we didn't know we had until it was gone. Once lockdowns and curfews were set into place, live performances weren't possible. Keeping an audience engaged in a live setting has many factors, there was no telling how a switch to only online performances was going to be taken by the public. Thankfully, the music community welcomed this new "norm" with open arms and even allowed for much growth by performers and audience members alike. Audience engagement was effective on these online platforms and gave humans the joy of music once again. While the COVID-19 pandemic is entering its decline season, the music community has only grown stronger.

## References

Berliner Philharmoniker. *The digital concert hall of the Berliner Philharmoniker*. Digital concert hall. [https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en?utm\\_medium=paid\\_ad&utm\\_campaign=us\\_gsa](https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en?utm_medium=paid_ad&utm_campaign=us_gsa)

CDC. (2022). *COVID data tracker*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/>

Fraser, T., Crooke, A. H. D., & Davidson, J. W. (2021). "Music Has No Borders": An exploratory study of audience engagement with YouTube music broadcasts during COVID-19 lockdown, 2020. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.643893>

Garrido, S., & Macritchie, J. (2020). Audience engagement with community music performances: Emotional contagion in audiences of a 'pro-am' orchestra in suburban Sydney. *Musicae Scientiae*, 24(2), 155-167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864918783027>

Nguyen, H. T. T. (2018). *Audiences' engagement with Twitter and Facebook Live during classical music performances: Community and connectivity through live listening experiences*. PhD, University of Iowa. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/audiences-engagement-with-twitter-facebook-live/docview/2184811627/se-2?accountid=26417>

Nguyen, M. H., Gruber, J., Fuchs, J., Marler, W., Hunsaker, A., & Hargittai, E. (2020). Changes in digital communication during the COVID-19 global pandemic: implications for digital

inequality and future research. *Social Media + Society*, 1-6.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948255>

Radbourne, J., Johanson, K., Glow, H., & White, T. (2009). The audience experience: measuring quality in the performing arts. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 11(3), 16–29.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064995>

Teng, J. (2018). *Engaging audiences: A case study from three music organizations in philadelphia*. Master's Thesis, Drexel University. [https://www-proquest-](https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/dissertations-theses/engaging-audiences-case-study-three-music/docview/2031589672/se-2?accountid=26417)

[com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/dissertations-theses/engaging-audiences-case-study-three-music/docview/2031589672/se-2?accountid=26417](https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/dissertations-theses/engaging-audiences-case-study-three-music/docview/2031589672/se-2?accountid=26417)