Gretchen Lee

Student Generated Concerts: What Do They Show Us?

Penn State University

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Conductors of professional orchestras have reached out to families with children since Leopold Stokowski partnered with Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) and Leonard Bernstein produced a series of Young People’s Concerts (1958-1972). This tradition continues today as professional orchestras, including The Boston Symphony, The New York Philharmonic, and The Colorado Symphony Orchestra, continue to offer children’s concerts and other youth outreach events. Unfortunately, these efforts are largely failing, even though these youth concerts have been carefully designed to be both accessible and entertaining.

According to the *Social Impact of the Arts Project*, overall attendance at classical concerts, jazz concerts, and musical theater productions has sharply declined from 1982 until the conclusion of the project in 2008 (Stern, 2011). The *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau, confirms this decline. The most recent survey revealed that just 24 percent of U.S. adults age 18 and over attended a music, theater, or dance performance over the one-year period of the study ([www.nea.gov/SPPA](http://www.nea.gov/SPPA), 2011).

Over the past decade or so, there have been many research studies regarding effectively engaging adult audiences. A recent study examined the effect of program notes on audience members’ enjoyment, while a 2011 case study of the San Francisco Girls’ Chorus examined the role of marketing on attracting adult audiences and meeting their expectations (Harlow, Alfieri, Dalton, & Field, 2011; Margulis, 2010). Finnas (2001) investigated the differences between adult audiences’ perception of live performances versus video performances. While this research reveals some of the preferences of adult audiences, it cannot be assumed that adult preferences are children’s.
It has been observed that “classical music skews ‘old’ compared to other leisure-time activities such as attending movies, sporting events, and fooling around on the computer, which are all more likely to be engaged in by younger people” (Lee, 2003, p. 19). Many adult musicians and teachers have assumed that children do not attend concerts because “sustained and focused concentration, self-control, and stillness are generally not required” at other types of events and performances (Nicolucci, 2010, p.38). In addition, many leisure activities compete for childrens’ time and attention; however, it is possible that the experience of attending a concert does not fulfill children’s expectations of entertainment. What is it that youth audiences want to see in concerts and performances?

**Literature Review**

The majority of completed research studies were of adult participants only. The studies seemed to fall under three categories: the concert experiences of audience members, generational factors, and musical exposure.

**The Concert Experiences of Audience Members**

**Finnas, L. (2001).** While many studies indicate that live music performances positively affect listeners’ experiences, few studies have compared live performance to other modes of presentation. In the present study, Finnas refers to his own 1992 study, in which 6th and 7th graders listened to folk or classical music performed live, audio-visually, and aurally. Participants then used a series of rating scales to quantify their levels of enjoyment and emotional involvement of each performance. The live performances were rated as being the most enjoyable and emotionally evocative by most of the students.
In the 1992 study, Finnas concluded that live performance is more immediate, and creates a feeling of connection, or closeness, between the performer(s) and the audience. He was left with the question of whether visual stimuli, rather than aural stimuli, was significantly impacting the listeners’ experiences. Did factors such as the appearance and mannerisms of the performer(s), and/or visual images being shown during the performance significantly impact the audience’s experience?

In 2001, Finnas conducted a thorough literature review of all studies related to visual image, and drew conclusions based on the data from the previous studies. He concluded that “data seem to concur that seeing a performer live or audio-visually can enhance listeners’ affective experiences and preference due to visual impressions of the performers’ body language” (p. 73).

Kolb, B. (2001). Upon his examination of classical music concert attendance patterns, Kolb (2001) observed that a “close analysis of US data reveals that a striking change is taking place in attendance patterns that does not bode well for future attendance...attendance is decreasing among the young...as [they] age, they are not acquiring the attendance habit” (p. 1).

Orchestrual outreach programs seem to assume that accessibility and changes in people’s knowledge of classical music are responsible for the falling attendance rates. Outreach efforts have been largely ineffective, since attendance has only continued to deteriorate. Kolb suspected that the attendance problems had less to do with the music itself and more to do with the way the music was being performed.

Through interviewing first-time classical concert-goers, Kolb discovered that “they felt that both the set-up of the hall and the behaviour of the musicians demonstrated a lack of
interest in and connection with the audience...the opposite of a popular music concerts where the musician and audience respond actively and vocally to each other” (p. 22).

It used to be the case that a live performance had far better sound quality than what recording technology could reproduce, but those days have long since ended. Kolb concluded that “the reason to attend a concert must be that the concert experience provides more than the opportunity to listen to live music in a sterile environment” (p. 32).

**Margulis (2010).** Including program notes for classical music concerts has been a standard practice for several decades, but does it enhance the audience members’ experience? Margulis conducted a study in which 16 people without musical training listened to Beethoven excerpts prefaced by one of the following: dramatic description, structural description, or no description. Results revealed that description had a significant negative effect on the listeners’ enjoyment. Margulis conducted a second experiment with 11 new participants. The participants listened to the excerpts under the same conditions as the first experiment, but were not asked to rate their enjoyment until a later stage of the experiment. Similar results were obtained, suggesting that “prefacing an excerpt with a text description reduces enjoyment of the music” (p. 285).

**Generational Factors**

**National Endowment for the Arts (2009).** According to a study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, attendance at arts events is declining. The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (the country’s largest periodic study of adult arts participation) most recently revealed patterns related to age bracket that significantly affected attendance at art, music, and dance events. In 2008, only 20.9 percent of American adults attended a classical
music concert, and only 17.4 percent attended jazz music performance. The survey results indicated that “adults born in 1955 or earlier are more likely than younger Americans to be ‘cultural omnivores,’ people who attend a variety of arts events, in different art forms and setting (p.13).

However, the concept of what constitutes arts participation is changing. SPPA data from 2008 showed that “41 percent of adults attended arts activities, created art, or engaged with art via electronic media” (p. 35). The rapid evolution of technology over the past few decades has presented “a recurring challenge to NEA researchers as they attempt to gauge the expansive role of those technologies in driving arts participation patterns” (p. 35).

Flowers & Murphy (2001). This study explored the ways in which music education may affect music participation and appreciation later in life. A group of 45 adults over age 65 were interviewed about their music experiences when they were young. Questions pertained to music listening habits, favorite types of music, school music experiences, and advice to the music teachers of today.

Forty-seven percent of the participants reported that they liked to just listen to music without any competing activities. Listening to music at home on the radio or television was mentioned most frequently. Eleven percent mentioned attending concerts, and only three of the 45 participants said that they could not recall ever having gone to a concert. In general, the participants liked to listen to the types of music that had been popular in their youth, such as classical, Big Band, jazz, musical theater, and religious music. When asked the reasons for their musical preferences, most participants said something about how the music made them feel, or that they liked the familiarity of their favorite genre, having grown up with it.
Lastly, the participants were asked what kind of advice they would give to today’s music teachers, keeping in mind the goal of providing students with the knowledge and skills that they could carry into adulthood. The participants’ recommendations fell into three general categories: listening and music appreciation, music performance and reading skills, and activities to stimulate students’ musical interests. “Regardless of instructional focus, the highest number of overall responses (44%) showed concern for developing lessons that would interest children, finding ways of motivating them, and making sure to encourage them during the music learning process” (p. 29).

**Musical Exposure**

Peery, J. & Peery, I. (1986). Does childhood exposure to classical music have any bearing on musical preference? To investigate this question, Peery & Peery conducted a study in which 45 preschool children were to rate their enjoyment of 12 instrumental pieces. Six of the pieces were classical, and the others were popular songs. The rating scale consisted of varying degrees of sad and happy smiley faces. During the pretest, all of the children rated all of the pieces on the positive side of the spectrum. Over the next 10 months, one class (experimental group) was exposed to classical music through listening, singing, and movement activities in weekly, 45-min. music classes. The other class (control group) had no exposure to classical music during their music classes.

A posttest was given to all of the children at the end of the 10 month period. The children who had been exposed to classical music maintained their liking for those pieces, whereas the liking for classical pieces declined in the control group. Both groups maintained their high ratings for the popular pieces. The researchers concluded that “repetition, modeling, and social reinforcement can influence musical preference” (p. 24).
Methodology

Background

I teach strings in an area where many children are financially able to take private lessons, and a large number of inexpensive or free concerts are offered by the local university; yet, my students rarely attend performances in which they themselves are not playing. The purpose of the present study was to examine the structure and content of a completely student-generated concert. Over an eight week period, students were tasked with creating, preparing, and performing a concert program that appeals to students like themselves.

Research questions were as follows: How do students describe their past experiences (both positive and negative) as an audience member? How are student-generated concerts structured, in terms of length and content, and how much variation is there from student to student? In what ways, if any, is extra-musical material incorporated into the event?

Participants

The participants in this study were students from my studio who agreed to take part in this project. I extended the invitation to participate to all 20 of my students. Out of the 20 students, six responded that they would like to participate.

These five students range in age from 9-16, and have been studying with me between two and seven years. A brief description of each participant, from youngest to oldest, follows:

1. Fern is nine years old, in fourth grade, and has been taking fiddle lessons with me for two years. She also takes Suzuki violin lessons with another teacher, and has for the past five years. She attends a private school that does not have a string program. Her parents do not participate in formal music making, but are music enthusiasts. Fern’s younger brother also takes violin lessons.
2. Lena is 11 years old, in sixth grade. I have been teaching her primarily classical violin for four years. She attends public school and plays in both her school orchestra and the local youth orchestra. Her parents are accomplished musicians. Lena also plays the piano, and has passed several levels of piano performance and music theory exams through the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM). The ABRSM has designed a rigorous series of exams for all instruments, requiring thorough preparation and considerable technical skill from each student. Lena’s older sister is an accomplished pianist, and also plays the flute at an advanced level.

3. Allie is 12 years old, in seventh grade, and has been taking violin lessons with me through the local Suzuki program for three years. Allie had already taken two years of Suzuki lessons with another teacher prior to studying with me. She attends public school and plays in her school orchestra. Her parents do not participate in formal music making. Allie’s younger sister also takes Suzuki violin lessons.

4. Simon is 13 years old, in eighth grade. He has been taking primarily classical violin lessons with me for three years. He attends public school and plays in both his school orchestra and the local youth orchestra. Simon’s parents are both professional musicians. His younger brother takes cello lessons.

5. Penelope is 13 years old, in eighth grade. She has been taking primarily classical violin lessons with me for seven years. She attends public school and plays in her school orchestra as well as in the local youth orchestra. Penelope is also an accomplished classical guitarist, and has taken lessons for ten years. Penelope’s parents do not participate in formal music making, but her younger brother and sister take violin lessons with me.
6. Sophie is 16 years old, in tenth grade. She has been taking primarily classical viola lessons with me through the local Suzuki program for seven years. Sophie started playing the viola in school prior to taking lessons with me. She attends public school and plays in her school orchestra as well as the select string group at her school. Sophie’s parents and older sister do not participate in formal music making.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of 3 months during weekly lessons and limited outside-of-lesson time. Sources of data were student interviews, field notes, and audio/video clips from student performances.

Interviews. Participants were interviewed three times during the study. The data from the interviews were coded and assigned to categories, or themes. These data were then triangulated for validity, using researcher field notes/journal, audio/video clips from the students’ concerts, and peer review from two colleagues who have never worked with my students.

The first interview focused on general thoughts and experiences related to concert attendance, such as positive and negative experiences as an audience member, general likes and dislikes, opinion on the ideal length of a concert, observations about the audience (behavior, demographics, other), and their opinions regarding how other children their age might be more interested in attending a concert.

The second interview was about each participant’s concert planning process. Questions were related to the process of choosing the music, reasons for structuring the concert in the way he or she did, and any special planning efforts the participant wanted to tell me about.
The third interview took place after the concert, and asked the participant to comment on what he or she liked/disliked about his or her concert, thoughts on the audience’s enjoyment and engagement, and any other observations he or she felt were important.

**Field notes.** I took field notes at each participant’s concert. My notes included information such as location, audience size and demographic, general atmosphere, musical content, sequence of events, concert length, whether there were any materials used (such as programs, etc.), and any non-musical aspects of the performance (talking done by the performer, audience participation and/or interaction, reception, etc.).

**Video clips from participants’ performances.** Video recordings were taken by each participant’s parents, which were then either uploaded to a private link on YouTube or burned onto a DVD. By revisiting each concert via video recording, I was able to refresh my memory of concert details and check the accuracy of my field notes.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

Because my colleagues at the Suzuki program already know my students, and/or teach my students in another class, I asked three colleagues from outside my workplace to also code my data to enhance the validity of my analysis. These teachers read the interview transcriptions and other collected data, coded and looked for themes. As my students’ teacher, it was possible that I may have made assumptions about what they meant by a particular comment, for example. Fresh eyes was essential for double checking the codes, categories, and themes I had assigned to various pieces of data.

Through the data analysis process, I formed a better understanding of the participants’ likes, dislikes, and expectations related to concerts. This information may be helpful to other
music instructors, and may prompt further studies about students’ concert preferences, as well as other topics related to students’ experiences as audience members.

**Student Perceptions of Musical Performances**

While each participant reported unique concert attendance experiences, there were many instances in which participants expressed similar thoughts and feelings, which I then categorized. After grouping and regrouping the categories, I arrived at a manageable amount.

In each “concert experience” interview, I began by asking the participant to describe a concert he or she went to and did not enjoy, and then to describe a concert that was his or her favorite. Questions about general likes and dislikes about concerts followed, along with questions about audience demographics. I also asked the participants for their ideas on how to make concerts more fun and engaging, particularly for younger audiences.

**General Likes and Dislikes**

According to Lena, concerts are often “really long, and they can get kind of boring.” This sentiment was echoed by all of the other participants except for 16 year old Sophie, the oldest participant. She admitted that most kids her age would feel bored at a long concert, but that she herself would not. Overall, when asked about their preferred concert length, the participants gave answers ranging from 30 minutes to one hour, preferably with breaks.

Other dislikes included very long or slow pieces, and concerts scheduled late at night, at times when kids are already tired. Simon and Sophie both mentioned that they get very annoyed when audience members do things such as talk or cough loudly, or text during concerts. “People are just really loud and irritating and quite rude to the players,” Simon summarized.
Penelope, age 13, said that she feels bored when performers “just stand and play...and you’re just sitting there the whole time, and you’re just watching.” The youngest participant, Fern, touched on performer-audience interaction and audience participation as being important factors in enjoyment. “Kids would like concerts where you actually get to do something, like clap or sing along. I like when they tell a story about the song, or something that connects about it...I like concerts where you sing along and dance and stuff, because the audience gets involved, and people enjoy it a little bit more, I think,” she reported.

In the course of the first round of interviews, all of the participants pointed out that exciting music and high-quality performances were important factors in audience enjoyment. Two of the participants also mentioned that a variety of instruments, styles, and players made concerts much more interesting. Another universal topic: food. Concerts have to involve food somehow; every participant mentioned this. Reasons ranged from, “If there’s a bunch of food afterwards, people might be more glad to go” (Allie), to “You have to have little snacks and stuff [at concerts],” (Fern), to “People would be horrified at the thought that there are no cookies!” (Simon). Fern and Lena both thought that there should be food both at intermission and at the end of the concert. All of the participants agreed that food must be provided so that “friends and family can stick around and chat while eating,” (Sophie).

**Audience Demographic**

When asked about who they usually saw in the audience at concerts they had attended, the participants all said that the attendees were “mostly old people” (Lena). Age 60 is apparently the threshold of old age, at least according to four of the participants in this study. The remaining two participants suggested, “grandparent age,” (Penelope, Allie).
Why are there usually so many people in the audience over the age of 60? Simon, Sophie, Lena, and Penelope thought that “maybe they grew up with [classical music] a little bit more,” and that “they didn’t have, like, what’s really popular today, like pop, and rock, and rap, that kind of thing...they grew up with it and have learned to enjoy it” (Simon). Allie thought that perhaps the older people in the audience were the grandparents or older relatives of the performers, while Fern suggested that there were not many young people in the audience because “the adults, if they had children, they don’t think they’ll like it or something...maybe the parents tell the kids that they’ll probably get bored.”

**Classical Music Appreciation**

“I don’t know anyone who hunts down the internet for concerts at [local venue] and is like, ‘Oh, this orchestra’s coming. Let’s go!’” said Sophie. Later in the interview, she added that “When [kids her age] don’t play orchestral types of instruments, they don’t have an appreciation of the music because they don’t understand it. And that’s why most people my age don’t appreciate [classical music].” Simon, Lena, and Penelope commented similarly.

Allie said that she was not aware of when and where concerts were happening. Information about local concerts was never posted or mentioned at school, and her parents never pass along any of the email announcements that she sends. Allie said that if she knew about a concert, attended, and “really, really, liked it, then I’d probably come back.” Fern reiterated that if the performers “get the audience to sing along and stuff, and dance and clap,” that more kids would be interested in concerts.

**The Process of Planning**
The planning interviews were the shortest of the three for each participant. The participants were under the impression that as long as a date, time, and location were secured, there was not much else to plan. With the exception of Lena, the pieces, order, and instrumentation were chosen a day or two before the concert. Again, except for Lena, whose planning interview took place two weeks before her concert, planning interviews were conducted the day before each participant’s concert.

**Event details.** There were only two types of concert locations chosen: home, or place of worship. Allie, Simon, and Lena had their concerts in their homes. According to Allie, she chose home as her concert location so that it would not be “as nervewracking to play this time, because there won’t be that many people.” Simon claimed that “there was really nowhere else to do it,” and Lena wanted to have it at home so she could “invite [her] friends over.”

Sophie, Penelope, and Fern held their concerts at their places of worship. Familiarity played a part in this choice. Sophie said she wanted to have the concert at her church because she had been going there for as long as she could remember, while Penelope chose church because she has been going there for Suzuki lessons for seven years and feels comfortable there, and “downstairs is a good place for a reception.”

Fern’s place of worship was her third choice of location. She had wanted to have it at a reception hall at a local park, then realized that it would be a difficult place to drive to in the middle of winter. Fern then wanted to have her concert at her school’s multipurpose room, but “it was busy,” since it is used for many community events. Fern then decided on her place of worship, and provided me with a detailed description of how to get there, as well as the building layout, making a point of explaining that “there’s a big social room with a little kitchen on the side. That’s where the snacks go.”
Fern and Penelope chose to connect their concerts with charity events. Fern’s class at school was doing a project called “Pennies for Peace,” which raises money to build schools in countries that have been ravaged by war. Penelope was involved in an all-school fundraiser for kids with cancer, and “thought it would be a cool idea to have a concert and collect donations,” rather than collecting money door to door.

**Musical Choices**

The participants each had their own rationale for the music they chose and the order in which the pieces were performed. Unsurprisingly, all of the participants chose pieces that they enjoyed playing. Simon chose pieces that he “had already played and enjoyed.” Lena and Sophie chose to include all of the pieces they had worked on that year, even if they were not particular favorites.

Allie, Penelope, and Fern decided to include friends and siblings in their performances. Allie reported that she, her sister, and her friend jointly decided on songs that “are fun to play, and that we all like,” rather than Allie making all of the decisions herself. Penelope chose all of the music herself, asked her friend to play with her on two of the pieces, and “didn’t give [brother] a choice, just said ‘You’re playing x with me!’” Penelope also asked her sister to play, but she did not want to participate.

Fern had a different idea altogether. She told me that she had tunes in mind that she wanted to play with certain people, but then she “wanted to play every song with everybody! And that got kind of complicated.” She settled on the following tentative plan: “Maybe I’ll just play a song, and people join in as I go through.....that’s what the other people, the soloists are going to do. They play a song, and maybe on the second time through, other people can come in.”
Regarding order, all of the participants except for Allie and Fern expressed concern about choosing the beginning and ending pieces. Sophie wanted to start with “something that I’m confident with,” and end with a lively piece that had a “grand finale” type of ending. Penelope and Lena gave similar responses. Simon chose to end with a slow piece because he did not want to “put them to sleep at the beginning!” Allie, her friend, and sister alternated playing solos, duets, and group pieces, and simply decided the order on the spot. Fern asked everyone who wanted to play a solo to put their name and song on a list she handed out, and used that as the order of pieces and performers.

**Concert Descriptions**

The following table summarizes the location, length, musical content, and order of events for each concert. Concerts are listed in the order in which they occurred. For the purpose of visual simplification, the notes in the column regarding concert structure have been condensed.

Table 1

*Structure and Content of Participants’ Concerts*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Length (Musical Portion)</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Mus. Content</th>
<th>Add'l Performers</th>
<th>Audience size (approx.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allie</td>
<td>afternoon</td>
<td>home</td>
<td>25 min.</td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• vln solos</td>
<td>• sister</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Q&amp;A</td>
<td>• vln duets</td>
<td>• friend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• guest perf.</td>
<td>• group piece</td>
<td>• guests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reception</td>
<td>• guest perf. (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fern</td>
<td>early eve.</td>
<td>worship</td>
<td>2 hrs.</td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• fiddle solos</td>
<td>• friends</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• food break</td>
<td>• duets</td>
<td>• local mus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• fiddle tunes</td>
<td>• guests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• jam session; aud. participates</td>
<td>• guest perf. (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>afternoon</td>
<td>home</td>
<td>45 min.</td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• vln w/pno</td>
<td>• father (pno)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• food break</td>
<td>• guest perf. (4)</td>
<td>• mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• guest perf.</td>
<td>• vln duet</td>
<td>• friends</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• music</td>
<td></td>
<td>• teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• thank aud.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>afternoon</td>
<td>worship</td>
<td>20 min.</td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• vla duets</td>
<td>• pno acc.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• thank aud.</td>
<td>• vla w/pno</td>
<td>• teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reception</td>
<td>• vla folk mus.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>afternoon</td>
<td>home</td>
<td>30 min.</td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• vln w/pno</td>
<td>• mom (pno)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>early eve.</td>
<td>worship</td>
<td>45 min.</td>
<td>• music</td>
<td>• gtr solos</td>
<td>• friend (pno)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• thank aud.</td>
<td>• vln w/pno</td>
<td>• brother (vln)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• reception</td>
<td>• vln solo</td>
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<td>• vln duet</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• vln w/pno</td>
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Student Reflections

Each participant was interviewed after his or her concert, shortly after the reception was underway. Guiding questions for this round of interviews focused on the participant’s feelings about his or her concert, audience feedback, anything learned through the planning process, and possible changes for future concerts.

Overall, the participants’ reactions to the concert experience were positive. All of the participants except for Allie and Fern were initially focused on themselves and their playing when asked how they felt about the concert they had just performed. Simon, Lena, Sophie, and Penelope all mentioned mistakes they had made, but said that they felt their playing had gone well despite some glitches. Sophie summed it up by saying, “Obviously, I didn’t play everything perfectly. I learned that even if things don’t always go as well as you wanted them to, you can still be satisfied with yourself, because at least you had the means and the guts to play.”

Allie and Fern responded differently to this question. Rather than commenting on their own playing, they spoke about aspects of the event itself. Allie thought she and her sister and friend “could have done a bit more planning...a lot of the time, we forgot to tell [audience] what songs we were playing, so they didn’t know. And maybe we would practice a bit more before it, so that we would know exactly how we were going to do it, so they didn’t have to keep waiting for us to start.” Fern said of her concert, “I thought it went pretty well, the food, and the donation baskets out, and the music...I saw a lot of smiles, and everyone was dancing and bouncing.” Instead of using their own playing as the benchmark for a successful concert, Allie and Fern seemed to be more concerned about the audience’s enjoyment.
The participants unanimously agreed that they would plan more carefully in the future. “I would probably give myself more time to learn the music,” said Simon. Sophie and Allie gave similar comments, while Fern said that she would try to arrange the performances in a different order to create more variety. Lena said that she “had a few notes [about the music] that I was planning to say, but then I forgot to say them,” while Penelope thought that she “probably should have talked more instead of just playing straight through,” and that planning what to say ahead of time would have been helpful.

Allie, Lena, and Fern were all satisfied with the guest performance segment of their concerts. Allie was not planning to have additional guest performers, but thought of it on the spot. “I liked it when I got you, [other teacher], and [spouse] to play. I think it worked,” Allie reported. Lena and Fern had planned to have guest performers, but did not know who was going to perform or what the guests were going to play until the day of the concert. However, neither of them were bothered by this, and they both said that they would handle guest performers the same way in the future. “I just really wanted for people to share, and everything. It didn’t go exactly as I thought it would, but it went pretty well,” said Fern.

**Researcher Reflections**

The information gleaned from the interviews and performances throughout the course of this study seem to support Kolb’s assertion that concerts need to offer more than an opportunity to listen to music in a pristine setting (2001). During the first round of interviews, several of the participants commented that sitting passively for long periods of time was boring, even if the music was enjoyable. Two of the concerts, Fern’s and Lena’s, contained “planned but unplanned” aspects, and Allie’s concert had some spur-of-the-moment additions from the
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audience. This provided the audience with a chance to participate in the performance, through playing, singing, or dancing. The flexibility shown by both the performers and the audiences in these situations seems to support Kolb’s notion that perhaps audiences no longer want to simply sit and listen (2001).

Social Aspects of Participants’ Concerts

The participants were generally consistent in creating concerts that adhered to their preferences. All of the concerts were less than an hour in length (which the participants said they preferred), except for Fern’s concert. However, she had said in her first interview that concerts could be long provided that there is a variety of performers, audience participation, and breaks, all of which her concert included. In the first interview, Penelope had said that she disliked concerts in which the performer stands there and plays without interacting with the audience, and yet, she did exactly that in her concert. Perhaps she has not seen enough examples of performer-audience interaction.

It should be noted that although Simon, Lena, Sophie, and Penelope participants said that would probably announce each piece and tell the audience something about it, none of them did. It is unclear whether this was accidental or intentional. Lena said she meant to announce program notes but forgot, but Simon, Sophie, and Penelope did not have a reason. It is possible that their omission of program notes could be connected to Margulis’ finding that program notes do not enhance the audience’s experience, although none of the participants verbalized this (2010).

Simon, Lena, Sophie, and Penelope all thought that the reason they liked classical music more than other kids their age was because they had grown up listening to it. This supports the results of the Peery & Peery (1986) study, in which kids with more exposure to classical music
rated it higher on an enjoyment scale. Interestingly, the aforementioned participants shared the belief that more kids their age would be interested in classical music if more of them played instruments. This belief struck me as odd, given that the school district that these participants attend has won a “Best Communities for Music Education in America” award nine times in the past 12 years and has thriving school orchestra programs.

Allie and Fern, on the other hand, do not actually like classical more than their peers; Allie has never listened to classical music beyond the pieces that she plays, and Fern is primarily interested in fiddling and folk traditions. Allie and Fern indicated that the social aspects of music making are important to them. Allie and Fern were both fairly egalitarian in the way they structured their concerts, emphasizing both choice and participation: Allie decided that no one had to play a piece if they did not want to, and Fern made it a point to give everyone a chance to participate in the music in some way. Lena, too, provided an opportunity for audience members to actively participate, and emphasized the need for a variety of musical performances.

Regardless of the amount of social interaction within the musical portion of each concert, all of the participants included food, which naturally creates an opportunity to socialize. However, Sophie was the only participant to mention the social aspect of providing refreshments. The other participants said either that food would entice more people to attend, or that people would expect there to be food. Perhaps these participants were speaking from their own experience attending concerts; that is, food entices them and/or they expect food.

**Rationale for Musical Choices Made**

I found it interesting that the participants chose their concert material based on what they wanted to play, rather than choosing music that they thought the audience would want to hear.
Allie mentioned that she, her sister, and her friend chose the pieces they performed because they were fun to play, and all three girls liked the pieces. Simon chose pieces that he “had previously played and enjoyed,” as did Penelope, while Lena and Sophie played all of the pieces they had played since the beginning of the school year, possibly because playing recent pieces would make concert preparation easier.

Fern was unique in that she made some of her choices out of concern for audience participation. She had initially chosen specific tunes to play with certain people. Ultimately, Fern decided that this idea was too complicated to execute because she didn’t want to exclude anyone; this led to her “I’ll play a song, and other people can join in as I go through,” plan. That none of the participants chose music based on what they thought the audience would want to listen to was an interesting finding.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is possible that the participants’ musical choices are related to their self-focus in the reflection interviews. Lena, Simon, Sophie, and Penelope were focused on themselves and their own playing almost exclusively in the third round of interviews. While Allie’s initial response pertained to concert planning, she later referred to mistakes she had made in a solo piece she had performed. Fern responded that she thought the music had gone well, but did not specifically refer to herself in this comment. This difference may be due to the fact that Fern’s concert was comprised of fiddle and folk music rather than classical music. Fiddle and folk performances tend to be less formal and more participatory. For example, Old Time, Bluegrass, and Celtic performances often begin or end with a jam, contra dance, or ceili (the Irish version of a contra dance). A study of student-generated concerts that cover a wider variety of musical traditions may be an interesting research topic in the future.
In my own teaching, my plan to use the information from this study is twofold. Firstly, I plan to share this information with my performing groups; hopefully, this will lead us to modify some aspects of our performance practice to more effectively reach young, local audiences. Secondly, I feel that this information can help me to plan concerts in which my students perform more enthusiastically. This may increase attendance at my students’ own concerts as well. Given the declining state of concert attendance in America today, there is no time like the present to make some changes and see where it leads us, both as performers, and as audience members.
References


