

Psychology of Music

**The Effects of Introducing Unpredictability and Active
Participation in Live Classical Music Concerts on New Audiences**

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The Effects of Introducing Unpredictability and Active Participation in Live Classical Music
Concerts on New Audiences

During the 18th century, classical music concerts emerged as a distinct art form. Subsequently, new listening and behavioural norms developed, including concert attire, canonization of programmes, dimming of lights, listening attentively, applauding appropriately, and catered intermissions (Tröndle et al., 2025). In today's context, these behavioural disciplines have turned into "frozen" rituals that make classical concerts appear conservative and uninviting for younger audiences. According to survey sources between 1982 – 2008 from the USA and the UK, attendance at classical concerts, opera and ballet has declined by around 30% over the period (Sloboda & Ford, 2018). Sloboda and Ford (2018) attribute this decline due to an aging audience. Post COVID, young people have connected with classical music only through online mediums, which reduces exposure to live orchestras (Dobson, 2010). The difficulty here lies in understanding what attracts, engages and retains younger audiences into the concerts halls and how to implement it.

Introducing more informal and less elitist concerts allows young audiences to feel better welcomed and engaged, and resultantly attracts more younger concertgoers (Price, 2017). Many recent studies have found that introducing elements of unpredictability and active participation in classical music concerts can create feelings of enjoyment and inclusion (Dobson, 2010). Music psychologist, John Sloboda suggests that classical concerts are highly predictable, from the programme, order or pieces, and degree of performance freedom, leaving little for the element of unpredictability. Audiences value unpredictability in concerts, seeking elements of surprise and keep coming back for more. This is evident at pop concerts where song lists are unannounced, use of improvisation in jazz concerts, and the differing costumes and stage designs in operas and ballets. Similarly, active participation, where audiences become

involved in the performance, has shown positive results for high levels of engagement (Sloboda 2024).

However, the limitation of this research lies in studies predominantly conducted in Germany and the UK from higher education musical institutions, leaving the question for how audiences from other countries might respond to these elements of concert formats. A crucial gap is the lack of research on long-term young audience retention post study conclusions.

Aims

The aim of this research is to investigate how unpredictability and active participation in classical music concerts influence the likelihood of future attendance of new audiences. Since there is a gap in the research conducted in the Australian classical music scene, we will focus our study on new audiences in Australia. We will adopt a quantitative method to conduct a comparative study with results from the UK and Germany. Our findings are aimed to offer practical insights for improving young audience engagement with classical music in Australia.

Method

The research study will incorporate a quasi-experimental method to understand the effects of unpredictability and active participation on new audiences in classical concerts in Sydney, Australia. We will utilise already existing concert formats by the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) of their standard concerts, hybrid-genre concerts, and relaxed or accessibility-focused concerts. Naturally, these concert formats differ in their use of unpredictability and active participation and are an accessible, chamber-sized concert space suitable for new audiences.

The study will comprise of 100 young adult participants aged 18 – 30, comprising of 50 new audience members and 50 frequent concert attendees recruited through online platforms, universities and concert spaces. All participants will receive programme notes as supporting material to the unfamiliar music presented (Bennett & Ginsborg, 2017).

Ethical consideration will be implemented through prior consent forms, ability to withdraw at any point, and retaining all data as confidential and anonymous.

Each participant will attend three concerts:

1. ‘Schubert’s Fantasy & Octet’ – standard classical concert (14th – 30th May)
2. ‘Isles of Light’ – experimental concert featuring classical music and Kate Bush (13th – 23rd June).
3. ‘ACO Relaxed Performance: Bach & Pärt’ – relaxed/accessible-concert setting (19th May 2026).

Exit questionnaires relating to unpredictability and active participation will be given for all participants to answer. Comparisons will be drawn between experienced and new audiences to determine whether unpredictability and active participation influence their judgement for future attendance.

Questions:

1. I found the concert overall...
2. I found the musical performance...
3. I found the selection and order of pieces...
4. I found the level of unpredictability in the concert...
5. I found the pre-concert talk...
6. I found the concert programmes...
7. I found experiencing the musicians live...

8. I found the opportunity to participate...
9. I felt actively involved...
10. I felt comfortable as an audience member...
11. I found the concert atmosphere...
12. I found the accessibility of the concert...
13. I would consider a similar concert in the nearby future...

Scale: 1 = very poor/strongly disagree, 2 = poor/disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = good/agree, 5 = very good/strongly agree

Prospective Findings

This research study aims to discover whether different concert types varied by levels of unpredictability and active participation play a leading role in attracting, engaging, and retaining new audiences.

Furthermore, the research aims to compare these findings with already existing research on unpredictability and active participation conducted in Germany (Tröndle et al., 2025) at the Radialsystem venue, and the Pierre Boulez Saal. Similarly, comparisons will be made with research on unpredictability in concerts from the UK, and regarding active participation, studies conducted at the London Sinfonietta, Ensemble Modern Frankfurt and Asko Schonberg Ensemble Amsterdam (Sloboda, 2024).

Limitations of the study could include the degree of variability in concert styles and whether they have substantial impact. Current ACO concerts may have limited use of unpredictability and active participation, which limits the impact of this study. Past ACO concerts such as 'ACO Total Immersion' (2024) showed their highest form of unpredictability and active participation. This had audience members seated on stage, in-between the players, giving a sense of

excitement and active involvement. Further considerations could be why do these total immersion concerts do not exist anymore, and if they could engage young audiences, why do we not interact with these concert formats?

Our findings aim to offer guidance for arts organisations in Australia in designing and programming modern concert experiences to include more young audiences in the classical music scene.

UNPREDICTABILITY & ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN CLASSICAL CONCERTS

During the 19th century, classical music concerts emerged as a distinct art form. Subsequently, new listening and behavioural norms developed, including concert attire, concentration of programs, dimming of lights, limiting drinks, applauding appropriately, and seated intermissions (Chisold, et al., 2025). In today's context, these behavioural descriptors have turned into "norms" much that risk classical concert's appeal, convenience and learning for young audiences. According to survey sources between 1987 - 2008 from the USA and the UK, attendance at classical concerts, opera and ballet has declined by around 30% over the period (Schubels & Bond, 2018). This is predominantly due to an aging audience (Schubels & Bond, 2018). Post COVID-19, young people have connected with classical music only through online mediums, which reduces exposure to live-concerts (Laloux, 2019). The difficulty here lies in understanding what aspects, engages and retains younger audiences into the concert's halls and how to implement it.

Introducing more informal and less strict concert's dressy young audiences to feel better welcomed and engaged, and researchy findings more younger concertgoers (Price, 2017). Many recent studies have found that meaningful elements of unpredictability and active participation in classical music concerts can create feelings of enjoyment and inclusion (Laloux, 2019). Music psychologist, John Schubels suggests that classical concert are largely profitless, from the programme, order or pieces, and degree of performance freedom leaving little for the element of unpredictability. Audiences value unpredictability in concert's social elements of surprises and keep coming back for more. This is often an experience where song lists are announced, use of improvisation in jazz concert, and the differing costumes and stage design in opera and ballet. Similarly, active participation, where audiences are become involved in the performance, has shown positive results for high school students (Schubels, 2024).

However, the limitations of this research lies in studies predominantly conducted in Germany and the UK from higher education musical institutions. Learning quantum for new audiences from other countries might respond to these elements of concert forms. A critical gap in the lack of research on long-term young audience retention post such experience.

Aim
The aim of this research is to investigate how unpredictability and active participation in classical music experience influence the likelihood of future attendance of new audiences. Since there is a gap in the research conducted in the Australian classical music scene, we will focus our study on new audiences in Australia. We will adopt a quantitative method to conduct a comparative study with results from the UK and Germany. Our findings are aimed to offer practical insights for engaging young audience experiences with classical music in Australia.



Method
The research study will incorporate a quasi-experimental method to understand the effects of unpredictability and active participation on new audiences in classical concerts in Sydney, Australia. We will adopt already existing concert formats by the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) of their standard concert, hybrid genre concert, and relaxed or accessibility-focused concert. Notably, these concert formats differ in their use of unpredictability and active participation and are an accessible, chamber-sized concert space suitable for new audiences.
The study will comprise of 100 young adult participants aged 18 - 30, comprising of 50 new audience members and 50 frequent concert attendees recruited through online platforms, surveys and concert sites. All participants will receive program notes as supporting material to the musical music, presented (Bourne & Cusack, 2017).
Ethical considerations will be implemented through prior consent forms, ability to withdraw at any point, and retaining of data in confidential and anonymous.

Data questionnaire will be implemented through prior consent forms, ability to withdraw at any point, and retaining of data in confidential and anonymous.
Each participant will attend three concerts:
1. Schubert's Fantasy & Overture - standard classical concert (19th - 30th May)
2. [Name of title] - experimental concert featuring classical music and live bands (17th - 28th June)
3. ACO Relaxed Performance: Bach & Beethoven - relaxed-accessible concert setting (17th - 28th June)
Data questionnaires relating to unpredictability and active participation will be given for all participants to answer. Comparisons will be drawn between experienced and new audiences to determine whether unpredictability and active participation influence their enjoyment for future unpredictability.

- Question**
1. I found the concert overall
 2. I found the musical performance
 3. I found the selection and order of pieces
 4. I found the level of unpredictability in the concert
 5. I found the post-concert talk
 6. I found the concert program
 7. I found experiencing the musician live
 8. I found the opportunity to participate
 9. I felt actively involved
 10. I felt comfortable as an audience member
 11. I found the concert atmosphere
 12. I found the accessibility of the concert
- Scale: 1 = "very poor/strongly disagree", 2 = "poor/disagree", 3 = "neutral", 4 = "good/agree", 5 = "very good/strongly agree"



DISCUSSION LIMITS
This research study aims to discover whether different concert types varied by levels of unpredictability and active participation play a leading role in attracting, engaging, and retaining new audiences.
Furthermore, the research aims to compare these findings with already existing research on unpredictability and active participation conducted in Germany (Friedler et al., 2025) at the Sydney Opera House and the Prince Consort Hall. Similarly, comparisons will be made with research on unpredictability in concert from the UK, and regarding active participation, studies conducted at the London Sinfonietta, Ensemble Modern, Frankfurt and also Stockholm Ensemble Amadeus (Schubels, 2024).
Limitations of the study would include the degree of variability in concert styles and schedules they have substantial impact. Current ACO concerts may have limited use of unpredictability and active participation, limits the impact of this study. Post ACO concerts such as ACO Local Immersion (2024) showed their highest form of unpredictability and active participation. This had audience members seated on stage, in between the players provide a sense of excitement and active involvement. Further considerations could be why do these hybrid immersion concerts do not exist anymore, and if they could engage young audiences, why do we not interact with these concert formats?

Our findings aim to offer guidance for arts organisations in Australia in designing and programming modern concert experiences to include more young audiences in the classical music scene.



Other concert examples in the UK/Europe.

BLIND DATE
What makes us different?
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment
Mendelssohn | The Night Shift
Vivaldi | The Night Shift
Presented by the Sydney Opera House

Vivaldi's 18th Century Virtuosity, including the early 'Pavane' and the huge Adagio Final. Standard tickets start from £12.20 (including all fees)

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