

Enhancing Audience Engagement: Informal Music Learning During Classical Concerts

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Abstract : The Bearman Study of Audience Engagement examined the potential for real-time music education during online symphony orchestra concerts. It follows on the promising results of a preliminary study of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education during live concerts, funded by the National Science Foundation with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. For the Bearman Study, audience groups were recruited to attend two previously recorded concerts of the National Orchestral Institute (NOI) in 2020 or the Utah Symphony in 2021. They used a smartphone app called EnCue to present real-time program notes about the music being performed. Short notes along with visual information (photos and score fragments) were designed to provide historical, cultural, biographical, and theoretical information at specific moments in the music where that information would be most pertinent, generally spaced 2-3 minutes apart to avoid distraction. The music performed included Dvorak Symphony No. 8 and Mahler Symphony No. 5 at NOI, and Mendelssohn Scottish Symphony and Richard Strauss Metamorphosen with the Utah Symphony, all standard repertoire for symphony orchestras. During each phase of the study (2020 and 2021), participants were randomly assigned to use the app to view program notes during the first concert or to use the app during the second concert. A total of 139 participants (67 in 2020 and 72 in 2021) completed three online questionnaires, one before attending the first concert, one immediately after the concert, and the third immediately after the second concert. Questionnaires assessed demographic background, expertise in music, engagement during the concert, learning of content about the composers and the symphonies, and interest in the future use of the app. In both phases of the study, participants demonstrated that they learned content presented on the app, evidenced by the fact that their multiple-choice test scores were significantly higher when they used the app than when they did not. In addition, most participants indicated that using the app enriched their experience of the concert. Overall, they were very positive about their experience using the app for real-time learning and they expressed interest in using it in the future at both live and streaming concerts. Results confirmed that informal real-time learning during concerts is possible and can generate enhanced engagement and interest in classical music.

Keywords : audience engagement, informal education, music technology, real-time learning

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