

The Invention of Silence: On the Shift in Listening Behavior and Public Taste in the Nineteenth Century

Sven Oliver Müller

Thanks so much for inviting me. I consider it a sign of trust to ask a historian to speak about music. But then music is a means of communication in society: between musicians and listeners, between event organizers and consumers, between radio hosts and school choirs. Musical practices are attractive features and groups tend to utilize them. So music obviously works as a medium for building community. It modulates societal relations. To put it another way: music is perhaps the most social of the arts, and therefore an ideal field for uniting social, cultural and music history. As attendees of my talk, you are now, for a time, members of my audience. My focus will be on audience behavior at concerts and operas in the nineteenth century. I hope I have aroused your curiosity. Of course, the pitfalls and potentials of my talk are also self-evident.

The questions that interest me here sound quite simple: What or who is “the audience”? How does the audience behave in a concert hall or opera house? How did this behavior change over the course of the nineteenth century? And above all, why should historians concern themselves with music? Is this just a craze or is it an actual method? Not only in historical scholarship is a new “turn” announced every few years. After a “linguistic turn”, we have apparently just experienced an “iconic turn” or a “visual turn”. Quite rightly we may assume that music also has an important effect on modulating communities. Does this mean it is time to proclaim a “musical turn” in the field of history? Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything of the sort here. For when it comes to form, music is better investigated by musicologists trained to do so. Which means, I must disappoint you right off: music is “only” of interest here as a component of audience reception at operas and concerts. Music is just one element alongside the visuals and effects on stage, and the audience’s self-presentations in the auditorium.

Despite this limitation, I regard my deliberations as a plea of sorts: historical scholarship has much to discover, particularly in musical culture. Considering its great social importance, surprisingly little attention has so far been paid to it. And the findings of musicology are more satisfying only on the surface. For too long, it has concentrated on questions related to aesthetics and the history of musical works. Albeit over the past two decades, research perspectives have broadened considerably, and many recent findings are groundbreaking.

Nevertheless, for ages now, we have known a great deal more about musical scores, styles and the music of dead composers—that is, great male (mostly German or Italian) composers—than we have about the social and political impact of music. Which is why I favor a more interdisciplinary approach. It should help us to avoid seeing music as a culturally autonomous phenomenon and ignoring the historical dimension of works of art. A collaboration between historical scholarship and musicology may, in fact, aid the investigation of musical performances as socially relevant practices.

To reveal the historical status of the audience in society, a change of perspective is necessary: away from the study of musical works—towards the impact of music; and away from the score—towards the social practice of performances. According to my line of thought, the reception of music is of interest from a historical perspective because a group in society takes shape through and for it. Hence, it is the very mechanisms of communicating music that generate social reality. Subsequent to the rise of constructivist approaches, it seems indisputable that the significance of music is not immutable but at all times also produced by the audience itself. This does not mean that we have to accept this stance unchallenged or agree with the Swedish musicologist Ola Stockfelt that: “The listener, and only the listener, is the composer of the music.” To be sure the same pieces of music have triggered different actions in different listeners at different concerts.

“It is never about those up on stage doing a good job of entertaining those down below. Music only works if communication is mutual.” This statement by the Italian pianist Maurizio Pollini describes exactly what this talk is about: whether interaction with publicly performed music creates bonds in the audience and makes it perceive itself as a community, allowing it to enjoy the pleasures of the evening and assert its own interests. How do members of an audience use musical performances to communicate with one another, have fun or act strategically?

To answer these questions, I will speak about elite audiences and cultural transfers in the nineteenth century. Musical performances set new standards within societies and between countries in Europe. Despite political and economic conflicts, cultural exchange was achieved. Even cities that were not major musical centers were affected by such transfer. The growing similarity of repertoires, aesthetic preferences and performances demands explanation.

This paper is about how social communities in a society have been shaped by the public’s participation in musical performances. More specifically it is about how in the mid-nineteenth

century a once noisy audience learned to be silent. Lastly, I will try to show why social practices in musical life are an ideal means to explore the emergence of communities.

Musical Performances Create Communities

Concert halls and opera houses of the nineteenth century were social meeting places. Visiting them meant to attend a performance and make an appearance in public. Yet the behavior of visitors did not just reflect existing social differences and cultural customs. Rather the audience itself generated social order through its behavior. In accord with the concept of the performative, participation in musical performances can be defined as a practice that produces social order by enacting it. Only through mutual observation and confrontation do communicating communities become societies. In the nineteenth century, opera houses and concert halls fulfilled precisely the function of public spaces. They were where different classes interacted and relied increasingly on the judgement of others. Mutual observation shaped and altered audiences' behavior. Even contemporaries noted that what mattered at a concert was seeing others and being seen oneself. Many a man's interest in artistic beauty revolved not only around the women artists on stage but also around the social artistry of women in the audience.

Opera houses and concert halls were part of a public life designed for visibility and presentation, encounter and enjoyment. They were where private individuals met in search of the good life in pleasurable surroundings. Their sheer size and costly upkeep required the regular attendance of a sizeable paying public. Thus, in the 19th century they served not only for entertainment but also as one of the few public locations where the educated and the petty bourgeoisie could meet, as well as nobility of high and low standing. Music was the most important incentive, but just one among many. Inside these buildings erected for music, people met acquaintances and strangers, enjoyed their company, had a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, chatted about music or politics, while exchanging the latest news and gossip.

The architecture of opera houses and concert halls interrelated closely with audience behavior. Those who squeezed into formal dress and made their way through oversized stairwells into richly adorned auditoriums and often expensive boxes, so as to present themselves to the gaze of countless observers, had to adjust their behavior to an array of explicit and implicit conventions of self-presentation. In doing so, the audience transformed the musical space into a socially differentiated space. We observe the formation of a community of unequals.

The Invention of Silence

Today's patrons of classical music would probably feel ill at ease at a typical nineteenth-century performance. Until well into the middle of the century, listening behavior quite often did not resemble the aloof consumption of "culture", but the unbridled involvement at a soccer match. While the music was playing, people would chat, sometimes quietly, sometimes more loudly; they ate and drank, visited each other in their boxes or strolled around the hall. Businessmen discussed their commercial affairs, women showed off their latest attire, and courtesans vied for the attention of potential lovers.

The ruthless scramble for good seats in the pit or jostle for standing room infuriated music lovers. Moreover, an increase in seating at the expense of standing room hampered the flow of arriving listeners. After waiting in line, often for hours, music lovers sometimes even experienced brutal fights once the entrance doors opened. Chaos ensued also because numbered tickets for the pit were the exception in the first half of the nineteenth century. For instance, one London visitor complained that the woman accompanying him had been seriously injured in the scuffle.

Yet operagoers were not in fact inattentive; they simply focused highly selectively on the artists' particularly brilliant, circuslike feats and the especially "beautiful" passages of a score. At such moments, the audience participated actively in the event, potentially cheering or booing at every piece of music and aria di bravura. As cabaret artist Georg Kreisler put it, whether it was a performance of *The Valkyrie* or *The Battered Bride*—the audience was above all: loud.

The audience's lack of concentration also often exasperated the performing artists. Louis Spohr was surprised when before his concert at the court in Braunschweig, the duchess requested he not play forte, as too loud sounds distracted her too greatly from her card game. Here we need to understand that while such unruly forms of behavior may seem strange to us today, they were a reality throughout Europe in the early nineteenth century.

Interaction between audiences and artists was also quite spirited at the Royal Berlin Opera in 1818. The audience was enjoying Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's intermezzo *Il Geloso*. Prior to this, bass singer Josef Fischer had complained publicly about the absence of audience applause. A mistake for which he ended up paying dearly: the audience decided he needed to be taught a lesson. The *Haude- und Spenersche Zeitung* (March 21, 1818) spoke of a "tragic melo-comedy", for although Fischer made several valiant attempts, neither the singers nor the

orchestra had a chance to produce audible sounds of their own. Bowing deeply, Fischer begged the audience for mercy:

Yet the noisy flood only became louder—down came the curtain. “Apologize!” “On your knees!” “Down with the theater!” People shouted from all parts of the auditorium, and those clapping, shouting bravo, and asking for silence were outstripped, whereby the visible fear on the faces of the unfortunate ladies and the satirical smirks of the impartial were an odd contrast.

During the next scene the audience continued the performance on its own, amusing itself with “strong words of all sorts”, many even screeching “da capo” with delight. An actor then walked on stage and declared that Fischer would be happy to sing again if the audience were so kind as to listen. Yet few wanted a musical intermezzo to replace their own splendid performance. The amused crowd reacted unequivocally, voting democratically in this musical parliament: “One hundred cried ‘No! No! No!’ And only a few ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’”. Consequently, the head of the opera terminated the show. The audience applauded, shouted “bravo”—and went home.

This musical culture started undergoing a transformation. Between 1820 and 1860 the audience invented silence. Concertgoers literally became music listeners—they listened to the music. It was not at the opera but at concerts that a very unusual silence took hold. Participants at musical performances gradually turned into listeners who concentrated on following the music as it unfolded. With self-control, they constrained their applause and disapproval, and entirely ceased conversing with the artists and their seatmates during the performance. The new cultural practice of silent listening first evolved at symphonic concert series in German cities. About a generation later this practice also established itself in European opera houses. While audiences—first in northern Germany as of the 1820s, and then in Vienna and Paris as of the 1840s—were listening to the music in silence, and sought to avoid unnecessary noise and talk, the picture in Great Britain was entirely different up into the 1870s.

A striking example can be found in the painting *En écoutant du Schumann* by Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff. A listener, dressed in black, sits bent over in concentration at the center of a drawing room. She holds her face in her right hand, her thumb touching her temple. The artistry of the pianist in the background can only be surmised, for the painter has directed the viewer’s gaze to the art of listening.

The significance of this new listening behavior can hardly be assessed highly enough, as it was indicative of a shift in social practice and collective judgement of taste. And yet, even today, little is known about the development of learning to listen. The question arises as to why

concert audiences began concentrating silently on performances in the first place and why this development progressed in the same direction in different European countries.

Of crucial importance for the success of silent listening was the rise of new aesthetic ideals: this involved a basic reassessment of music by the educated classes. Music in general and instrumental music in particular went from being considered one of the lower art forms to one of the highest. For adherents of this new bourgeois “religion of art”, music was no longer an entertaining extra but a valuable “creation”. Many regarded venues for musical performances as sacred temples of sorts that had to be protected from desecration as well as from inappropriate and inattentive behavior. Consequently, music was not simply to be enjoyed but also understood in order to have an edifying effect. As a result of this idealization of music and bourgeois self-presentation, the new practice, which evolved more or less out of necessity, was the behavior of listening in silence.

Another cause of this development was the professionalization of the performances. In an age of rising commercialization and changing preferences, interest in musical amateurs, ad hoc musical ensembles and inadequately trained soloists waned. The higher demand and expectations of audiences encouraged more professional performances by the artists and orchestras. Quality was a matter of extensive preparation, so that rather than amateurs, audiences expected accomplished musicians.

This shift is observable in the development of concert life between 1820 and 1860. The repertoires and tastes for operas and concerts gradually went their separate ways. At the same time, there was a considerable rise in high-quality concerts. This professionalization led, among other things, to more programs being put together based on artistic and aesthetic criteria. In terms of content, predominantly mixed-concert programs—which had previously included overtures, duets, choral acts, arias, passages featuring soloists as well as symphonies and dances—disappeared towards the middle of the century. Instead, large-scale works were performed. Symphonies replaced potpourris.

It took several decades for audiences to become accustomed to this new silence and to learn to self-discipline themselves during performances. Recurrent complaints of inappropriate behavior marked not only the gradual transformation of cultural practices, but equally the tenacity of traditional behavioral patterns. Until the last third of the century, critics and journalists lamented deficiencies in citizens’ behavior, in particular how rules of conduct were insufficiently followed in contemporary musical life. Musical works, performances and practices

were a distilled expression, so to speak, of both a country's specific culture and a transfer of norms within Europe. Rather than just assuming that a teleological process had led to the seamless spread of silent listening, it seems more useful to trace the mutual negotiation processes of different taste cultures in Europe.

The listening habits that established themselves in German-speaking countries and the rest of continental Europe gradually set new standards in Britain, too—albeit a whole generation later. For many “educated” Britons, learning from Germany meant improving their own taste and manners. Apparently, Richard Wagner's music dramas had similar effects in London as they had in the German-speaking world. A rather indignant reader of the British journal *Musical World* was outraged by what he regarded as the still somewhat unfitting applause during a Wagner performance in Covent Garden. At the same time, his report also made clear that the disciplining of London audiences was not always an entirely voluntary affair—whoever applauded at the wrong moment must, if necessary, be forced into silence:

...it is a frequent source of annoyance to hear individuals applauding with more enthusiasm than discretion at inopportune times, generally immediately after the last note of anything sung that pleases them, thus drowning the finishing bars to be played by the orchestra. [...] Last night at the finale of the first act of *Tannhäuser*, the “gods,” as usual, began to applaud, before the singing had ceased, and a little sensation was created by a gentleman resenting their bad taste (though in a somewhat noisy manner) by shouting “Order!” in stentorian tones, and afterwards (when the band had finished) calling out “Now!”, setting the example by then clapping vigorously. Cannot Mr Gye [the manager] set up a signal post of some kind to teach people when to be quiet and when to give vent to their enthusiasm? (MW, 23 June 1877, p. 431)

Might the assertiveness of musical experts explain the invention of silence? A clear answer to this question has yet to be found. Much indicates that society itself generated a new kind of audience. An important approach to explaining this shift in behavior lies in categories set up by the German sociologist Norbert Elias, who described what he called a “civilizing process.” In examining the transformation of early modern Europe, Elias identified the growing influence of self-discipline and the decline of spontaneous affective outbursts in public as a form of joint self-restraint. This development was by no means the achievement of a single class or group but resulted from how what had previously most likely been separate professions, genders, and confessions reacted to each other in public spaces.

Concert halls in the 19th century fulfilled precisely this function. They became places in which music listeners increasingly depended on the judgment of others and so sensitized to their own behavior. Audiences gathered more frequently at the same venues and listened to the

same pieces performed by the same artists. The relative autonomy of individual concertgoers dwindled as they oriented themselves with more regularity to other listeners and grew dependent on one another. Due to the social pressure for self-restraint, individual behavior started conforming and interest increased in a shared intimacy within one's own social sphere. This led to more refined tastes, discerning gestures and "silent" behavioral patterns. The new rules of conduct discouraged strolling about and private conversations, making it more difficult to have personal encounters with other listeners during a performance. The discipline of the educated bourgeoisie strengthened anonymity. Mutual awareness in the auditorium amplified feelings of shame and fostered a new and more disciplined way of listening to music. No matter how much educated music lovers praised the transfiguring "internalization" of participating in an evening's performance, what mattered was the decision to control the boundaries of one's own body, gestures and language in public.

Ultimately, the new relationship between talking and remaining silent revealed the degree to which silence also constituted a conversation. Through intentional display, even silence could be deafening. Furthermore, communication in concert halls and opera houses intensified because those taking notice of each other did not engage in audible conversation. By the mid-nineteenth century, audiences developed such an aversion to being embarrassed inside these temples of music that they eventually emancipated themselves from the burden of public judgement and took refuge in silence.

This is where emotions come into play. It is both a commonplace and an everyday experience that music and feelings cannot be separated. Musically motivated emotions are difficult to explain because of the assumption that they are easily understood. But this is precisely why music lovers have just as many interpretations as do contemporary researchers from different disciplines. Unlike a number of approaches in the natural sciences, historical scholarship rarely analyzes emotions as fixed physical impulses. Rather, historians are more interested in noticeable shifts in social practices and cultural interpretations or in new understandings between social groups—that is, they are first of all convinced that emotion and knowledge cannot be clearly differentiated; and secondly, they regard feelings as social products that may as such vary with different participants, contexts and locations at different points in time.

Sharing a love of Verdi or a dislike of Wagner, amicably agreeing to follow Beethoven's symphonies in silence, while disdaining the noisy aristocrats in the hall, made it possible for a collective to form. Communication through emotions had a social impact, because it unleashed a dynamic that motivated ever more people to participate in such communities. Not only the

controlled listening behavior of visitors but also their participation in chaotic protests were collective acts that made them not just adversaries but partners, too. The potency of competing emotions illustrates this shift, as do the changing assessments of what is beautiful and what is not. To display emotions yet deliberately alter them under the gaze of others, as well as to find less aggressive emotions more beautiful, turned ever more audience members into disciplined listeners. In doing so, educated listeners distinguished between the “right” kind of emotions, such as pride and honor, and the “wrong” kind of emotions, such as sorrow, anger and fear. Learning certain emotions and practices made educated music connoisseurs visible as a community that shared values. This can be seen especially in the constraints many of the educated classes imposed on themselves as well as in those imposed on them by others.

Hence, it is instructive to take a look at the signaling effect of emotions. Showing emotions by altering them strategically when observed by others and then finding these new emotions more beautiful reinforced a shift that turned all the more people into listeners wanting to belong to this sophisticated community. Noteworthy here is that emotions displayed in the concert hall and opera house are perhaps not so much aesthetic stimuli or physical reactions as they are cultural products. Listeners’ perceptions are actions; their emotions are intentional moods. Previously noisy listeners were not simply silenced by the music being performed but used it to create moods in desired situations with which to build an elite community. In this process of “emotion construction” (British sociologist Tia DeNora), social groups used musical taste to mark a sense of belonging or otherness within a society. Did acting out emotions make the boundaries between popular and sophisticated musical tastes more fluid, since people valued both physical stimulation and acquired knowledge? Did shared emotions reduce social and political barriers? Preliminary findings show that these concerts did not challenge existing conditions, but rather strengthened publicly acknowledged societal structures. In short, with their successful self-disciplining, nineteenth-century concert audiences eventually caused more cultural problems than they solved. In concert halls and opera houses to this day, the price many music lovers pay is high. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century listeners have gained many new musical insights due to this change, yet at the same time they have forfeited much of their spontaneous enjoyment of musical experiences. What they gained in taste, they lost in entertainment.

Outcomes and Outlooks

In this talk it was my intention to illuminate the emergence of communities in the musical world. A question that should interest us in the future is whether interacting with music facilitated or complicated understanding between individual groups or even within society. Did musical culture create a new community? What did communication motivated by music achieve that was not accomplished in other forums? And is this true for 1760, as well as for 1920, not to mention 2021?

Of all disciplines, historical scholarship is best suited to investigate these issues. From a historical and not exclusively musical or aesthetic standpoint, what counts above all is public interaction with music in the context of performance. Thus, it is less about composition than about reception, less about a seemingly cohesive work than about the impact of music through diverse performances and discourses. It is a matter of bringing the structure of music and society together, relating what seemed disparate. While historians are unable to grasp in their entirety the many parameters mentioned here, they can provide insights into how other and often new communities evolve by interacting with music.

Musical life can be explored and, under ideal circumstances, expanded by studying the practices of the audience. When listeners adopted a new practice, they learned a physical movement, taste and form of consumption. This enabled them to increase their capacity to act. The consumption, education and taste of an audience are generated primarily through social practices. It is through its practices that the audience articulates its interests and a taste of its own. Through regular repetition, the audience shapes a lifestyle. What counts for research are not so much listening habits but listening behavior itself—not only what people heard in the concert hall, but how they behaved there. Put bluntly: decisive is not so much whether but how Beethoven or John Lennon were heard and valued.

Musical practices allow us to see how groups form. Going to a concert, a church service or even a soccer game, where people chant in chorus, creates social networks. Music lovers strive to establish bonds with other listeners, to strengthen or weaken them. Music plays a substantial role in satisfying the needs and interests of groups. Attending a performance is a way for humans to form a group, it is a socializing act. Participation in performances enables us to learn rules of behavior. And this is not just about the shared enjoyment of music, but also about listeners' desires, social relationships, political rankings or the economic inequalities between them.

Such a socially integrative effect is inherent in all of the arts; however, when it comes to the world of musical performance, it is particularly pronounced because music caters to large groups. Music is perhaps the most social of the arts. Jürgen Habermas (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) was one of the first to point out the connection between cultural practice and social genesis:

The shift, which produced not merely a change in the composition of the public but amounted to the very generation of the “public” as such can be categorically grasped with even more rigor in the case of the concert-going public than in the case of the reading and theater-going public.

Writing about music is like dancing about architecture. These words have been attributed to many, including jazz pianist Thelonius Monk. Historians do not dance and, to be on the safe side, they avoid working on the effect of music. Ultimately, music’s impact is not so great as to “make” society—but it does shape it. For this reason, musical performances should not be regarded as merely random forms of entertainment, but as potentially relevant phenomena within a society and between different societies. Studying audiences and their practices teaches historical scholarship at least one thing: music matters!!!

Translated from the German by Catherine Kerkhoff-Saxon