

An astounding silence. Classical music, rules of conduct and social control in concert halls

English summary of: *Een verbazende stilte. Klassieke muziek, gedragsregels en sociale controle in de concertzaal*

Cas Smithuijsen, Amsterdam: Boekmanstudies 2001 (dissertation)

The generally accepted codes of social behaviour in the Western world have relaxed considerably over the past few decades. This also applies in the field of culture, which makes it all the more surprising to see that very strict rules of behaviour are observed at concerts where classical music is performed. Those who attend a performance by professional musicians assume an attitude of respectful and erudite attention. They have assimilated the social instructions that prevail regarding how to behave during a performance and conduct themselves accordingly. Most of these instructions are transferred through learning processes in more or less the same way as musicians learn how to play during their years of training.

Most people who attend concerts have enjoyed a form of higher education. In the current audience research the type of education always predicts which people are likely to attend classical music concerts. Nevertheless, it is evident that the number of those attending concerts has not kept pace with the increasing numbers of the more highly educated among the general population. Those attending concerts given by ensembles or recitals form but a small percentage of the entire population. Outside the formal circuits the interest in classical music is considerably greater — in private dwellings people are listening to CDs, or enjoying music broadcast by radio or TV, or perhaps attending open-air concerts. The public that takes part in such events has a far broader background, certainly qua education.

The starting point for the present study is the hypothesis that the atmosphere of self-control, concentration and respectful silence determines to a large extent the kind of people who are and are not attracted to classical music concerts. It is argued that the specific situation selects people according to their mental ability to conform to the concert etiquette. In order to discover whether this etiquette is indeed socially selective, this study investigates patterns of audience participation in concerts, based on the available literature, from around 1600 on. The question is continually posed: what kind of people adopt the specifically controlled demeanour of concert-going behaviour, what are their motives for this, and what are the social effects.

In general, studies of the concert-going public seldom raise the question regarding the extent to which the concert experience itself is socially selective. Generally speaking the researchers direct their attention to the objective characteristics of the public which might influence possible participation: such things as social background, status, education, age and income. Also, possible objections to concert-going are sought in for example familiarity (or not) with what is being offered, restricted leisure time, the price of tickets, or the distance between home and concert halls. In the research material available a modest place is reserved for possible 'learning effects' gained from going to concerts. But in this model too there is little information to be gained about the actual situation in concert halls nor about the selective effect this may impose.

In this study concert etiquette is used as a source of information about concert experiences.

Nowadays this etiquette prevails very widely during classical music concerts, but this has not always been the case. A backward glance reveals that this attitude is the result of a long process of mutual fine-tuning of behaviour between musicians and public. Indeed, this point is central to the way in which the present study of audience approach was carried out: the information about patterns of public behaviour is acquired by balancing it against the musicians' behaviour. Public

and musicians turn out to be bound together in one social configuration even though separated from each other just as are the stage and concert hall floor.

The behaviour shown by both musicians and public in concert halls when either attending or performing classical music testifies to a desire for something higher, something better. This longing may be traced to the humanist ideas that developed during the European Renaissance and were transferred from generation to generation among the more well-to-do. Members of the aristocracy, the upper middle class and later what in the Netherlands and Germany were termed the *Bildungselite*, a well-educated group, created a concert regime that ensured continuity of well-disciplined behaviour from both public and musicians. The urge to action felt by the concert regime may be understood by examining a selection of documents containing instructions and rules of behaviour for musicians and concert-going public.

Next to instructions and regulations, the present study is based on the theories of several authoritative sociologists. Max Weber was one of the first to discover that the composers' objective of making music more 'professional' and 'aristocratic' resulted in the decline in its accessibility. The patterns of behaviour that developed in the higher social regions vis-à-vis music may also be considered in the light of Norbert Elias's civilization theory. He recounts how after about 1400 members of the aristocracy attempted to create boundaries, by means of their elegant refined behaviour, between themselves and the rising middle-class elites. The tendency to produce social distancing by means of subtle nuances of behaviour insinuated itself into large portions of the population and inevitably made its influence felt in the musical world.

The sociologist Cas Wouters has further developed Elias's civilization theory, paying closer attention to the emergence of less formal patterns of social behaviour. He shows how fixed rules of etiquette that helped people determine their place in society have been fairly rapidly replaced towards the close of the twentieth century by a system of flexible guidelines. People may apply these in order to be accepted in different situations, be they formal or informal. Social inequality can thus be assessed by looking at the differences in people's ability to adapt their conduct to varying social settings.

Erving Goffman has described social interaction processes chiefly at the micro level. He is convinced that participants in social processes are always conscious that the dramatic quality of the situation in which they are acting will be threatened if they stop playing their part. Which explains why they always take the other players (those present) into account. This creates a situation in the concert hall in which the musicians take the public into account, and vice versa. There are psychological consequences here: if a soloist loses his music the public is embarrassed and it is equally unpleasant for the audience if one of the public ceases to follow concert etiquette.

Pierre Bourdieu studied the effects of social differences as this affects participation in cultural phenomena. A harshly unequal distribution of what Bourdieu terms 'cultural capital' leads in his view to a situation where only the socially better-situated are able to develop an 'aesthetic disposition', that is, an attitude that predisposes them for attending classical music concerts and similar events. Especially in the higher-educated levels of society children soon learn concert etiquette, helped by the fact that they often learn to play a musical instrument in a serious way. Classical music may be distinguished from other types of music in that it has a more or less fixed repertoire and the same holds for its interpretation. It has developed into a form of art demanding intensive specialized knowledge, and both performers and public must undergo lengthy learning processes in order to acquire the active and passive skills necessary for an adequate appreciation. It is in these learning processes that the mutual dependency of musicians and audience is observed. For the length of their performance, musicians behave in a manner suitable to their

professional status, while the public to an increasing extent act as proto professionals. That means that they manifest the behaviour of laypersons that copies closely the behaviour of the professionals.

In this study the above-mentioned sociological understandings are linked with rules of behaviour that have been drawn up over the centuries for both players and listeners. Since the instructions for musicians turned out to be legion, the study restricts itself to advice written for keyboard players which have as criterion that they should indicate important shifts in the cutting-edge of piano teaching.

Shortly after 1600 a first category of instructions was drawn up by composers. At that time a group of Florentines wished to create a better relationship with the public. With this in mind they developed a school of music in which composers addressed themselves to 'the public' who in turn listened critically. In order to achieve this they adapted the general rules of rhetoric to produce a musical rhetoric, which they wished to use in writing pieces that would appeal directly to the listeners' feelings.

Building upon the rhetorical rules, the lists of instructions about music further developed in the direction of performance techniques. In the eighteenth century particularly, musicians became aware of the limitations and possibilities connected with performance on musical instruments. The writings on harpsichord playing would consider such matters as how the harpsichordist sat at the instrument, movements made with the head and facial expressions; all this became an extension of the traditional artistic training.

In the course of the nineteenth century the instruction books took on a more professional tone. Different schools and methods developed in keyboard teaching. The various elements contributing to a pianoforte performance were discussed more extensively and systematically. The pianoforte, with its greater artistic possibilities, allowed for more concentration on for example, finger technique, balance and weight, use of various muscles, movement of the body, the rotating lower arm, and so forth. The bodily forces were rationally reined in and subjected to strict control. All this was in order to exploit in as responsible a way as possible the new openings offered by the piano.

With the dawn of the twentieth century came a new development: beside books on physical aspects of playing, writings on mental approaches to musical performance were published. These were to prevent stage-fright and assist pianists in avoiding mistakes in their playing. It was suggested, and still is, that the cause of stage-fright was due to the audiences' increased musical expertise and critical ability. Performing musicians know that there are proto professionals in the audience (literally) waiting to tick them on the fingers.

Instructions for the behaviour of musicians develop side by side with rules for listening. Various stages in the story describing modern listening conventions are described based on commentaries on public behaviour, and publications of listening instructions. A first generation of behavioural rules for the benefit of 'correct listening' flourished within the *collegia musica* at the time when these societies of musicians relinquished their exclusive character and admitted an audience.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century the public performance of music began to gain the shape we know today. The theatrical trimmings of a concert acquired a fixed character with the concert halls built specifically for public musical performance. These buildings contributed greatly to the ongoing standardization of concert life.

The investigation of public behaviour extends to the end of the twentieth century. It includes an inventory of pedagogical and similar commentaries from this century, focussing on all sources of undesirable noises and 'interruptions' made by the audience. Although after about 1960 greater variation can be observed in how classical music is listened to, it is remarkable that within the

concert halls the social norms have become stricter. This paradox may be explained if we consider the background of a steadily increasing variety in performances and responses to performances. The increased variety of ways in which classical music is presently made available has however considerably limited the numbers of people who adopt a sober and serious listening behaviour. Even within the bastions of the concert halls, formal dress and behaviour is no longer obligatory. But when the programme presents a seriously classical repertoire the dedicated approach re-emerges and can be seen in the group of keenly motivated and deeply knowledgeable music lovers who turn up for the performance.

When all is said and done, it is not the repertoire but rather the context in which it is performed, that some people find off-putting. For within the context of the concert halls it is not only musical experiences, knowledge and skills that are exchanged. Fear and insecurity are also communicated and with them the psychological strategies used to overcome them. And where old-timers in the concert halls feel secure in knowing the right way to behave, newcomers may well experience these social conventions as psychological barriers. Fear of failure, or 'attendance fright', in this case the fear of inappropriate behaviour in the stately concert hall, keeps people away. This situation-linked anxiety is, like stage-fright, related to what the psychologist Gomperts names social phobias: undefined fears which lead to avoidance behaviour.

Social pressure and far-reaching behavioural control have become inextricably intertwined with the perfect performance. Live performances are overwhelming in their polished perfection and provide the traditional concert halls with their right to exist among the diverse other methods of broadcasting classical music. But they cannot maintain their position in a vacuum. It has become essential to mingle at the more informal scenes where classical music is now brought to the millions. Indeed, performing musicians are well aware of this. From time to time they leave the traditional space of the concert hall to play in contexts where the public is less sober.