# "Audience exchange": cultivating peer-to-peer dialogue at unfamiliar arts events

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of the "audience exchange" approach for audience development and research, and to highlight the insights offered by peer-to-peer dialogue in understanding experiences of unfamiliar arts.
**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a case study with contemporary arts audiences, and setting this in the wider context of studies with other first-time attenders at a range of arts events, the paper explores the use of the "audience exchange" method, in which facilitated conversations after performance events allow newcomers to reflect upon and deepen their first-time encounters with live arts.
**Findings** – The study demonstrates the way in which conversations about arts events can enrich audience experience, and shows how participants use exploratory and emotional language to articulate their understanding of unfamiliar arts events. Peer-to-peer learning occurs through these conversations, in ways that could be further supported by arts organisations as a valuable tool for audience development. The audience exchange discussions also reveal the varieties of participation from "drifting" to full attention that are all part of audience engagement.
**Research limitations/implications** – This is a small-scale, qualitative study, and the method has potential to be tested in future studies with a greater variety of participants (e.g. younger or more ethnically diverse groups).
**Practical implications** – Use of the audience exchange for enriching experiences of first-time attendance could be adopted by arts organisations as a regular part of their audience engagement. Greater understanding of how new audience members draw on prior cultural experiences in finding the language to articulate their first impressions of an unfamiliar arts event could be valuable for targeted marketing and increasing accessibility.
**Originality/value** – The originality of this study lies in its elaboration of the audience exchange method, and its focus on the language and peer-to-peer learning evident in the facilitated post-performance discussions.

**Keywords** Audiences, Qualitative research, Audience exchange, Facilitated conversations, Live arts experience
**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction: talking with audiences

The growth in qualitative research with arts audiences in recent years has implicitly placed a high value on conversation, used through interviews and focus groups to enable the articulation of audience experience in a way that goes beyond the demographic information and ratings scales of commercial market research (e.g. Burland and Pitts, 2014; Radbourne *et al.*, 2013). Emerging from these qualitative studies has been a realisation that the conversation itself is more than just a research tool, but can also enrich and solidify the arts experience itself, with potential benefits for future attendance and engagement. Just as memories and identities are built in part by talking about them (McAdams, 2001), so the transitory experience of listening to a concert or watching a play can be heightened and affirmed in the discussion that follows. For regular concert- and play-goers, perhaps attending with friends or making connections with other like-minded audience members, this discussion can form part of the social enjoyment of arts attendance, helping to build a



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sense of audience community (Pitts and Spencer, 2008). For newcomers, however, who might lack both the connections with other audience members and the confidence to articulate their opinions and responses, talk about the arts can be an obstacle to engagement (Dobson and Pitts, 2011). For audience researchers and arts organisations, this suggests the need to examine the ways in which regular and new audience members use opportunities to discuss their arts experiences, in order to understand the ways in which talking with audiences might hold potential for audience development and empowerment.

Arts organisations themselves have been aware of the benefits of talking with audiences for some time, and innovations in the presentation of classical music, to take one example, have focussed on making increased attempts to connect the musicians with the audience through pre-concert talks, post-performance discussions and spoken introductions to musical works during the concert. There is small-scale but consistent evidence to suggest that this greater contact with musicians is largely welcomed – and increasingly expected – by regular audiences (e.g. Pitts *et al.*, 2013), and can help to make new attenders feel that they have insight on the "expert" perspective of the musicians, as well as evidence that the musicians are "normal people" (Dobson and Pitts, 2011, p. 366). Of course, the effects of such communication are not guaranteed to be positive: reviewing the spoken introductions on a selection of archive music and theatre recordings, Ivry (2002) notes that "attempts to humanize conductors backfire when spoken-word excerpts show them as even colder fish than we suspected" (p. 186). Certainly the expectation of talking from the stage places new demands on performers: the pianist Susan Tomes has written of the "vulnerability" of speaking before playing (Tomes, 2012), though there is some evidence that these expectations are becoming more commonplace for recently trained professional musicians (James and Sloboda, 2015).

Beyond the one-way communication of spoken introductions and pre-concert talks, arts organisations have also been trialling more interactive audience discussions, providing a setting for feedback from audience members – a practice fairly well-established in theatre (Heim, 2012), but relatively recent in music (Dobson and Sloboda, 2014), and in both cases often associated with new works and experimental programming. Again, these interactions place new demands on performers, and Heim notes that "actors are often hesitant to interact with the audience and prefer to preserve the relationship of character-audience rather than create a new relationship of actor-audience" (Heim, 2012, p. 190). A singer-actor in Dobson and Sloboda's study commented likewise that discussion with the audience "detracted from my post-performance high […]. To be completely honest it took away from my ego" (p. 169), demonstrating that for performers, as for audiences, talking about arts experience shapes and changes that experience, and not necessarily for the better. Viewed more widely, such dialogue between audiences and arts organisations can be seen to "challenging cultural authority" (Glow, 2013), by taking the audience role beyond that of consumer, and into active participation in and shaping of cultural institutions. Heim (2012) suggests, however, that such participation is often subtly controlled by the organisation, typically following either an "expert-driven" or a "question and answer" model in which the voices of actors are privileged over those of the audience members. Organised opportunities to talk with other audience members, but without the mediating presence of an "expert" from the arts organisation, remain relatively rare – yet there is potential for such activity to bring the advantages of enriching audience experience through conversation, without the pressure to articulate a view to someone assumed to be more knowledgeable. Comparisons can be made with the more widespread phenomenon of the book club, which similarly "transform the intensely private process of reading into an open, public forum" (Sedo, 2003, p. 85) – with the same attendant risks and benefits of changing the experience of cultural consumption through dialogue with others.

In this paper, we explore the effects of talking about experiences of the arts, through an account of how our "audience exchange" method (described below) has been used in several

studies to facilitate discussion about unfamiliar arts events. The aims of the linked research projects in which audience exchanges were employed included the evaluation of this method – both for its potential to offer insight on audience experience, and as an applied approach for developing new and existing audiences for the contemporary arts, in particular. Additionally, we sought to investigate people's routes into arts engagement, and the varieties of participation evident in their connections with the arts. By drawing first on a case study from a project with a network of contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham, UK, and then on wider examples from recent studies with audiences in Sheffield and Leeds, we illustrate our uses of the audience exchange approach and the findings that emerged from these interventions – addressing the kinds of "talk about the arts" that they elicited, and the potential implications of these facilitated conversations for researchers, arts organisations and audience members themselves.

## 2. Research methods: the "audience exchange"

Our devised method of audience exchange brings together the established methods of ethnography and group interviewing, each of which have contributed to the growing body of qualitative studies with audiences across art forms in recent years (Burland and Pitts, 2014; Radbourne *et al.*, 2013). An audience exchange involves taking audience members to an unfamiliar arts event and asking them to reflect on their first impressions, their attempts to engage with the event and its sense of connection with their existing arts or leisure activities. These reflections take place through a group interview, facilitated by a researcher who has also attended the arts event, ideally held immediately following the performance in a relaxed social space such as the bar in the performance venue. The element of participant observation brought by having the researcher in the audience is essential to enabling conversation amongst people who may not feel they have the "expert" vocabulary needed to articulate their views: being able to refer to "that bit after the interval" bypasses the need for more technical language, and helps participants to generate their own areas for discussion rather than those being led entirely by the researcher. While full-blown conversation analysis has not (thus far) been part of this method, close attention is paid to the language used by participants and the reference points it provides to prior cultural knowledge and experience.

Interview questions have varied slightly across the three studies drawn upon in this paper, but topics have consistently included audience members' responses to all aspects of the performance or event, their impressions of the venue, staff and other audience members, and their experiences of seeking to engage with the art form, including the ways in which they drew upon other arts or media practices that were more familiar to them. Table I introduces the different studies in which the audience exchange method has been used, along with the codes that will be used to refer to these studies later in the paper.

Our experience of this method across the diverse settings of these studies has repeatedly demonstrated the usefulness of peer-to-peer dialogue after a new arts experience, not least in increasing audience members' engagement and enjoyment of the event by providing an opportunity to process their own responses alongside other people's. While the challenges of group interviewing are consistent with those reported in other contexts (e.g. Mason, 2002) – namely, ensuring full participation from all members and dealing carefully with sensitive subjects in an open forum – our audience exchange participants have explicitly welcomed the opportunity to explore their experiences in this way, and the peer-to-peer group format has created conditions in which ideas and experiences could be articulated, tested and contested amongst the group. Audience exchange members who have felt uncertain about their response to the arts event have found that uncertainty replicated in other participants, and so became more confident in their thinking aloud, drawing on the language and experiences of their other cultural reference points, and enriching their response to the event

| | Research projects and funders (with references) | Audience exchange events (and codes) |
|---|---|---|
| 2009-2010 | Yorkshire Forward Innovation Grant: "New audiences for chamber music in the 21-30 age group" (Dobson and Pitts, 2011) | Two exchanges with first-time attenders at Music in the Round chamber music concerts:<br>Compagnia d'Istrumenti – recorder, strings and harpsichord (CI)<br>Ensemble 360 – flute, horn, piano and strings (E360A) |
| 2013-2014 | Arts and Humanities Research Council, Cultural Value project: "Understanding cultural value from the perspective of lapsed and partial arts participants" (Pitts, 2015; Pitts *et al.*, 2015) | Three exchanges taking regular arts attenders to an unfamiliar art form:<br>Verdi opera, *Nabucco* (VN)<br>Music in the Round chamber music concert by Ensemble 360 (E360B)<br>Jay Phelps jazz sextet (JPJ) |
| 2014-2015 | University of Sheffield Innovation, Impact and Knowledge Exchange (IIKE) project: "Understanding audiences for the contemporary arts" (Gross and Pitts, 2016) | Four exchanges across contemporary art forms in Birmingham, with participants of varying levels of arts involvement:<br>The "Birmingham Show" exhibition at Eastside Projects (EP)<br>A family concert at Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG)<br>A performance by Vincent Dance Theatre at DanceXchange (DX)<br>An exhibition by A K Dolven at the Ikon Gallery (IKG) |

**Table I.**
Audience exchange studies 2009-2015

through discussion. For arts organisations, this method therefore offers a useful illustration of potential ways of deepening, broadening and sustaining relationships with and between audiences. For researchers, it provides fresh insight on the relationship between organisations, events and audiences, and the place and potential that the arts hold in the lives of both committed attendees and, most particularly, those who are newly involved.

## 3. Audience exchange case study: "understanding audiences for the contemporary arts"

Our audience exchange for contemporary arts audiences took place as part of a study initiated by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG) with the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre to explore the potential for crossover between audiences interested in "new" art work. Working with a newly established network of contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham, UK, we conducted a research project between October 2014 and May 2015 which included 56 life history interviews with audience members, five interviews with staff in our key partner organisations, and an audience exchange, involving four visits with groups of 8-12 participants (see Gross and Pitts, 2016, for an overview of the project). Audience exchange volunteers were drawn from the individual interview stage of the data collection, and while they were self-selecting according to availability and willingness, they represented a spread of educational backgrounds, employment status, cultural preferences and levels of arts involvement. Typically, they were "new audiences" for the contemporary arts, or for the specific art form to which they were invited for the audience exchange, but they had more arts experience than those participants classed as "new" in other audience studies (e.g. Dobson, 2010). The average age of participants was 56.4 years, but while we had some participants in their 40s and 50s (and one ten-year-old accompanying her grandfather), the preponderance of retired participants was consistent with those of typical audiences for classical concerts and theatre (Keaney and Oskala, 2007). Using the audience exchange

method to reach younger, more diverse and less arts-experienced audiences remains a possibility for future studies, building on the effectiveness of group interview studies in classical music (Dobson and Pitts, 2011) and theatre (Lindelof and Hansen, 2015).

Audience exchange participants were asked to sign up for one or more of a range of events according to their availability and curiosity for particular art forms, and encouraged to select an event that would bring them into contact with an organisation or art form with which they were not already familiar. Participants were invited to bring a friend for whom the arts event was also likely to be unfamiliar, so allowing the research to reach new participants and ensuring that members of the audience exchange had some existing social connections with one another that would help to facilitate the group discussion. All four events took place in Birmingham in March 2015: details of the events and participants (using pseudonyms) are shown in Table II.

### *3.1 First impressions*

Each audience exchange conversation, held immediately after the event in a room within the venue and facilitated by the second author, Jonathan Gross, began by asking participants about their first impressions of the event. This open question generally prompted an evaluative response, in which participants expressed their enjoyment (or otherwise), often without much initial elaboration:

*Sara (EP):* "I love the space […] I think it's how an arts space should be".

| Event details | Participants, age and occupation |
|---|---|
| The "Birmingham Show" at Eastside Projects (EP): an exhibition held in a repurposed warehouse space in an industrial part of the city, featuring work made in and about the city of Birmingham, with contributions from over thirty artists | Ashanti, 51, arts administrator<br>Beatrice, 59, former teacher; storyteller<br>Clive, 73, former chaplain; theatre reviewer and poet<br>Helga, 56, management consultant with degree in design<br>Jasmin, 47, artist, working in community projects<br>Oliver, 57, retired art therapist<br>Sara, 47, teacher now working in art gallery education |
| A family concert at Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG): an annual event in which a concert of contemporary classical music is developed and performed in collaboration with a theatre company, making use of dramaturgy, sets, lighting and narration | Beatrice, 59 (as above)<br>Bridget, 67, retired doctor<br>Bridget's husband, Dennis (precise age and occupation not disclosed)<br>Clive, 73 (as above)<br>Ed, 68, retired IT<br>Karen, 68, full-time at home<br>Lorraine, 66, lab technician<br>Maggie, 10, Oliver's granddaughter<br>Oliver, 57 (as above) |
| A performance by Vincent Dance Theatre at DanceXchange (DX): "Underworld", performed in the Patrick Theatre, inspired by the myth of Orpheus. The performance was accompanied by the opportunity to explore and respond creatively to the company's archive – including materials that had inspired past productions – in a dedicated education and engagement room | Clive, 73 (as above)<br>Deborah, 57, community artist and arts educator<br>Ed, 68 (as above)<br>Jasmin, 47 (as above)<br>Lorraine, 66 (as above)<br>Oliver, 57 (as above)<br>Richard, 63, retired examinations administrator<br>Ursula, 68, psychotherapist |
| A K Dolven, "Please Return", at the Ikon Gallery (IKG): an exhibition held in Birmingham's most high profile and longest established contemporary art gallery, featuring painting, installation, film and sound by one of Norway's most prominent artists, addressing themes of sublime natural forces | Ashanti, 51 (as above)<br>Beatrice, 59 (as above)<br>Bridget, 67 (as above)<br>Doris, 57, local authority administrator<br>Ed, 68 (as above)<br>Karen, 68 (as above) |

**Table II.**
Birmingham audience exchange events and participants

*Karen (IKG):* "Not a lot of stimulation or interest".

*Deborah (BCMG):* "I thought it was very inventive. I really enjoyed it. I particularly liked the visualisations. I think they were very effective".

These responsive statements, in which participants were rarely in complete agreement, quickly led to more involved discourse, often about how people had felt in the space or engaged with the event over its duration. Sara's enthusiastic response to the presentation of art in the vacated factories of the Eastside Projects, for example, prompted a variety of opinions on whether these galleries were sufficiently accessible to potential visitors:

*Clive (EP):* "It is a kind of place where you might pass by and not be sure whether you're supposed to come in, or are you allowed in – or if you come in, then what?"

Similar "imposter" feelings (Bridget, IKP) were expressed in other arts venues, with Bridget feeling out of place at the Ikon Gallery because "I haven't come for a while cos there's just so many other things to do". Others positioned themselves in relation to other audience members in judging whether their own response had been "typical" in some way: "I really enjoyed it, but that's probably because I like dance" (Jasmin, DX). In these early stages of the audience exchange discussions, therefore, the participants were articulating and comparing their experiences, quickly revealing a diversity of responses amongst the group, and so establishing a forum for debate and exploration.

### *3.2 Sense-making and responding*

From these initial responses, the conversation took different turns depending on the dominant interests and voices in the group. The Eastside Projects group moved quickly on to a discussion of city council funding and support for the arts, a topic that emerged consistently across the groups, but usually later in the discussion. This was one example of where the participants' prior arts experience or arts-related work steered the conversation in directions that might not be reached in audience exchanges where the members were less frequent arts attenders. In other groups, participants lingered on their responses to the specific event, with the temporal nature of the dance and concert performances often prompting a reconstruction of how their concentration and engagement had fluctuated over the course of the event:

*Ursula (DX):* "It was very long. It was very intense. I'd sort of had enough emotionally, I think. I think I felt I should have left before I did, really. I kept staying, thinking 'Oh, maybe I don't want to miss anything, you know, in case something really interesting happens'. But I think I overstayed my capacity for the intensity of it, really. So, in retrospect, I should have left before".

*Oliver (DX):* "I eventually looked at my watch and it was like over an hour and a half later. And in those uncomfortable chairs, for me, uncomfortable chairs, that was an achievement really; because normally I'm restless and I'm wanting to move, but I was transfixed".

Having access to other people's listening and viewing experiences is a rare insight for audience members, and the group members seemed accepting of and interested in the range of responses offered, even if Oliver (DX) prefigured his comments (above) with the statement, "I think I must have been watching something different". These articulated differences helped to highlight the relationship between the art and its audiences, with an implicit recognition that every viewer or listener brings their own perspectives, which interplay with the set of affordances the performance or exhibition offers:

*Deborah (DX):* "It's challenging, I think. It's challenging. I think it demands a lot more of the audience".

*Ed (DX):* "Yeah, I got a sense of struggle. Them struggling with one another, with themselves; and trying to present that struggle, you know, it was a struggle for us [Ursula: 'Yes.'] in a way, to know what was going on and why they were doing [things]".

The participants in the Birmingham audience exchanges were all talking about contemporary art, which might have encouraged them to be uninhibited in their expressions of puzzlement and "struggle", with the assumption that others in the group were unlikely to be any better informed about the specific work or event under discussion. An example of this came in the Ikon Gallery group, where visitors might have expected explanatory text next to the art, and responded variously to its absence:

> *Doris (IKG):* "No explanation on the walls. Which is the standard thing, you know. [Presumably] they want to challenge that, the Ikon does, and that's great".
>
> *Anouk:* "No, it's only this exhibition; they don't always not have […] things on the wall. They do sometimes".
>
> *Bridget:* "But they don't always help though, because I read it and think, 'Oh, I'm really thick' ".

Responses to not understanding art included Clive's (BCMG) "cynical" and Anouk's (EP) "intimidated" as well as Bridget's (IKG) sense of being "thick", but others embraced this lack of understanding, though paradoxically for broadly educational reasons:

> *Doris (IKG):* "It's a bit like all art, I come here for my own good – you know, it's good for me: a bit like eating broccoli. […] You're exposed to things you don't understand, and it allows you to be grumpy for a reason. *[Laughter from the group]* Or enjoy it".
>
> *Sara (EP/DX):* "From an educator's point of you I think, 'oh, well we should know something about it, we should be learning, we should know about what the philosophy behind this piece is'. And from an art consumer point of view I'm thinking, 'you know what, actually, no. We're too used to having things explained to us' ".

Sara's statement – reinforced later with a criticism of people who "spend more time reading the label than they do looking at the piece of art" (Sara, EP) – was resisted by various members of the Eastside Projects group, who grappled further with the complexities of when and how "understanding" should be sought in an experience of art. Oliver (EP) also enjoyed attending a gallery without having "read up about the what and the who and the why" and experiencing afresh "what it sets off in my head", but others expressed a need for "a little opening to enter" (Jasmin, EP) through the provision of explanatory texts or friendly curators who could answer questions. Their exchanges were polite but robust, using the group discussion as a vehicle for articulating and defending their positions, and revealing the multitude of assumptions and experiences that are brought to the interpretation of an event.

In exploring the importance (or not) of the provision of supporting explanations for performances and exhibitions, the participants indicated that the contemporary dance and music events (in these cases) had made more obvious attempts to engage and inform their audiences – perhaps because the interactions over time and with live performers made these attempts more visible and intrinsic to the performance. At the BCMG Family Concert, there were visual and spoken commentaries on the music, and whilst some found the visuals, particularly, to be distracting, Dennis related both to positive experiences of classical music concerts:

> *Dennis (BCMG):* "I think the combination of visual and music – it's like when one goes to see a stage opera; when Opera North came and did the Ring, and their visual stuff actually brought what was a fundamentally very difficult and complicated piece of music to actual life; and so I think this combination of vision and music, that the purist might object, but we're not here talking about the purist we're talking about trying to engage people and also to have enjoyment".

In his acknowledgement that a "purist" might not welcome the same visual input on a performance as he did, Dennis identifies one of the dilemmas faced by all of the organisations visited during the audience exchange: how to engage new audience members while also appealing to those who might be more familiar and confident with the art form?

At DanceXchange, audience members were invited to come in and out of the performance and also to visit an "engagement room" that had "a whole load of books and stuff about performance art" (Lorraine, DX). The variety of available sources of information meant that audience exchange members had experienced the event differently, and attributed those differences mainly to their engagement with the supplementary materials, as this conversation illustrates:

> *Deborah (DX):* "I enjoyed the engagement. I enjoyed looking at the activities they were inviting us to join into. I enjoyed looking at the books that obviously have inspired them, to see which artists that they've been referring to […].
>
> *Oliver:* "So this was something you could –" [*Ursula:* "It's still there."]
>
> *Deborah:* "There was a sketching activity, and writing activities, and all sorts; and just, you know, there's places to sit down and read the books".
>
> *Oliver:* "I haven't got to that yet".
>
> *Ursula:* "Oh, it was too much for me. I just couldn't – you know, I went in there, and I felt 'I can't be doing with this', cos my mind was still in the dance performance [*Ed:* 'Mmm', *in agreement*]. I just couldn't take anything else on, you know. Maybe if it had been another time. Or had I gone and done something else and come back. It was all too much".

These interchanges show how one person's sense of sufficient information is overwhelming to another, and while Richard (DX) offered the conciliatory suggestion that in engaging "raw" or with information, "you can do both", it seems that even the presence of explanatory or engagement materials invites a different kind of response, which might be disruptive for some audience members. The provision of an "engagement room" at DanceXchange can be inferred to be a careful attempt to offer varied levels of interaction for different audience members, but the mixed reception of these participants shows that the balance of emotional and intellectual prompts is hard for arts organisations to provide in a way that satisfies everyone.

### *3.3 Reflecting on the audience exchange*

After their rich engagement with their own arts experience and those of the other members of the group, several of the audience exchange groups ended their discussions in a similar way, by reflecting on the value of sharing ideas with other audience members:

> *Deborah (DX):* "It's really nice to talk about it afterwards. Rather than just sort of taking it all home with you".
>
> *Bridget (IKG/BCMG):* "[…] at the contemporary music thing, it was quite nice to sit down at the end and talk with other people about the experience *[agreement]* because otherwise you sort of wander away with a couple of inane comments, and sort of forget about it. But sitting down with people is an interesting way of reflecting –" [*Doris:* "It can add to the experience."]

This deepening of experience through conversation was also evident in the group discussions themselves, as participants wrestled with their own responses to an event and sought insight and reassurance from others in the group. They emphasised that the particular kind of discussion they had enjoyed in the audience exchange was not the same as the conversations with performers sometimes offered by theatre or concert providers, where Doris (IKG) felt she "would feel a bit intimidated about saying something not terribly deep and meaningful – but this doesn't intimidate". They also valued the facilitating of the discussion and suggested that it could be "useful for the organisation too, actually", implying that they would have been happy for their comments to be used to inform future events and marketing, though this had not been the stated aim of our audience exchange activities.

This case study of the Birmingham audience exchange groups has illustrated some key features of the method, notably its ability to foster conversation between audience members, to encourage the articulation and comparison of their experiences, and so to reveal aspects of arts engagement and understanding that are often hidden from other audience members. Strikingly, participants in the audience exchange groups indicated how much they enjoyed the opportunity for these conversations, and directly asked the research team to suggest to the participating arts organisations that they schedule peer-to-peer conversations such as these into their regular programme of activities (something BCMG have indeed adopted following the completion of our research project). Some participants were keen to stress that these conversations should not involve "expert" participants: what was so distinctive and enjoyable about them was the opportunity to think out loud with other participants, exploring their (often equivocal and uncertain) experiences together without the sense of deferring to an authoritative "expert" presence. Participants also indicated that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet with other audience members with whom they would not otherwise make conversation. Both the opportunity to explore their experiences together and the opportunity to develop new forms of social interaction within the conditions provided by the arts organisation constitute significant new possibilities for how arts organisations develop relationships with and between their audience members.

## 4. Audience exchange: the wider evidence

Having used the Birmingham contemporary arts audience exchange as a case study to illustrate the effects and effectiveness of the process, we now draw on other previous uses of the method by the first author, Stephanie Pitts, to show how some of these features are generalisable across different contexts, and to consider their potential implications for researchers and arts organisations. Through our repeated uses of the method, we have identified three key features of the kind of talk that emerges amongst audience exchange participants, each of which reveals something about the way in which audience members experience unfamiliar arts events. The evidence from a wider range of arts events, including first-time attendance at opera, jazz and chamber music performances (see Table I for details), shows how some of the exploratory and reflective conversational trends from the BCMG case study, while perhaps made easier by the shared "puzzling out" of a contemporary arts event, are relevant for new audiences in other performance contexts too. Across each of these studies, the audience exchange members have engaged in a process of clarifying and refining their individual impressions in relation to the articulated experiences of others – and they have unanimously reported on the usefulness of that reflective process, so illustrating its potential as a tool for audience development.

### *4.1 Exploratory talk*

The invitation to "give your first impressions of the event" which began our audience exchange discussions is one made surprisingly infrequently to arts audiences. The business of arts reviewing is largely professionalised – though online "consumer review" culture is showing signs of changing this – and audience members are likely to be more used to reading "expert" reviews and publicity material than providing their own commentary on events (Jacobs *et al.*, 2015). While social media affords ever-increasing opportunities to give a public response to an event (Long, 2014; Bennett, 2014), this demands a certain confidence in expressing an opinion, perhaps more likely to be held by a long-standing audience member than a newcomer. By contrast, in the safe environment of the audience exchange, all participants had declared a similar level of unfamiliarity with the art form, and the reactions

of another confused listener or viewer often provided reassurance and prompted further discussion, as was the case for these first-time opera-goers:

> *Jane (VN):* "Loud. I thought it was going to be very loud, the music, and the singing. It wasn't as loud as I was expecting, actually".
>
> *Rose (VN):* "I thought the story might have grabbed me a bit more, thought I might have felt a bit more involved with the characters, instead of – I felt quite distanced from them".

These first responses to opera show how expectations are recalibrated after even just one exposure to an art form, and therefore how useful this initial insight could be to arts organisations seeking to understand how their work will appear to new audiences. First-timers at classical chamber music concert, similarly, highlighted features that would be commonplace to regular attenders, being surprised at the "communication between performers" (Asako, E360B) and the "closeness" of the stage (Akasuki, E360B). Hearing new audience members engaging in the formation of their understanding of an unfamiliar art form brings fresh insight for audience research; however, on some occasions we have found participants to be inhibited or uncertain in finding their own vocabulary to talk about events or art forms. New audience members at Music in the Round, for example, referred to pieces of classical music as "tracks" and "songs", borrowing more familiar terms from pop music, but acknowledging that this was "wrong" in some way through comments such as "I've still got no idea what they're called – the first bit of music" and "'tune', that's not very good is it?" (Bryony, E360A). This uncertainty reinforces the particular character of the audience exchange conversation identified by the Birmingham groups (see Section 3) that having a facilitated discussion but without "expert" input provided a necessary forum for the exploration and articulation of new arts experiences.

### *4.2 Seeking peer-to-peer clarification*

Related to the idea of exploration, audience exchange members have often sought clarification from one another – on a confusing opera plot, for example, or the "meaning" of a contemporary dance performance. At a jazz gig in Sheffield, audience exchange members returned several times to the question of "how much [the performers] were actually improvising" (Julie, JPJ), exploring their uncertainty together in a way that was creatively distinctive from the input of a more authoritative source, such as a programme or pre-concert talk. Amongst the opera-goers, some had bought a programme and read the plot synopsis, while others had struggled to piece together the story from the acting and surtitles: the richness of their exchange of ideas came not from the discussion of these alternatives, but from the expression of opinions about whether the opera had made sense to them, emotionally and intellectually:

> *Alice (VN):* "I mean, the musicals I've seen have always had like an intensity of emotion – I've always felt like I've really engaged with some of the characters, and you kind of get that intensity. Where, with this, I didn't. So I don't know why – I couldn't work out if it's a piece of music which I really enjoyed, and really liked the sound of it, or whether it was a bit of theatre. Cos it was almost like a choir, but dressed up, I guess. Which made it interesting to look at, but it was kind of different".

In various audience exchanges, participants have expressed contradictory views about whether the provision of information, such as programme notes or gallery captions, has been useful to their understanding (see Section 3.2 on the "engagement room" at DanceXchange). Research on the effectiveness of these supplementary explanations is similarly inconclusive, with one study suggesting that a written explanation of an unfamiliar piece of music can aid listeners' enjoyment (Silva and Silva, 2009), while another found that "conceptual listening may not be more pleasant" (Margulis, 2010, p. 298), noting that higher levels of intellectual engagement with a performance were not linked to increased pleasure in listening. Even while the new audience members struggled to find a

vocabulary to talk about their response to a concert, some felt that the language being used by the arts organisation also failed to capture their experience, with too much of an emphasis on analysis and not enough on the emotional impact of the music:

> *Bryony (E360A):* "For me that description of tonight doesn't make it sound very exciting – it makes it sound a bit rubbish!" *[laughs]*.
>
> *Adam (E360A):* "Especially the Martinů one, like that was my favourite one, and it says it 'exhibits the flute to great effect' *[laughter]* but to me it was the violin that was really interesting, and the variations in the music".

Participants acknowledged the difficulty for arts organisations in communicating with their regular audiences while welcoming newcomers: references to past performers, for example, create a feeling of distance for newcomers, while contributing to the sense of community that is highly valued by regular attenders (Pitts and Spencer, 2008). This highlights again the value of peer-to-peer dialogue, which creates an opportunity for exploring uncertain responses to an arts event and, in this instance, for processing the available sources of "expert" information and considering what they say about the art and how they say it.

### *4.3 Reflecting on attention and drifting*

Participants at the various events have reflected on their levels of concentration and engagement, often expressing a slightly guilty realisation that their attention had drifted during the course of a performance, as in this conversation between first-time chamber music listeners:

> *Amelia (E360B):* "I did look around once or twice, and I did see some people kind of like, looking off, and some people were like, really intense, which was quite nice to see – made me feel a bit guilty that I couldn't maintain that level of intensity!"
>
> *Dan:* "I don't think you should feel bad, there were at least sixteen people asleep at one point!"

Amelia explained her sense of "guilt" in relation to the performers, who were "so enthusiastic" that she felt she should have been giving them her full attention. Akasuki, by contrast, claimed her "right to daydream", expressing the view that if the music encouraged her into personal thoughts and memories, this was in itself a response to the performance and not one for which she should feel apologetic. Given that notions of "drifting" and inattention – or rather, attention to features other than the liveness of the performance – have occurred in many of the audience exchange conversations, it would appear that the continuum between background listening in everyday life and distracted listening in the concert hall is a fruitful direction for further research. Akasuki's "daydreams" are in contrast to the kind of analytical, concentrated listening that is implicitly encouraged in programme notes, and fostered through the quiet attention that is embedded in a traditional performance venue, with its dimmed lights, fixed seating and focus on the stage. The abstract "ideals" of musicological analysis or other perceptual frameworks that dominate the research literature have seeped through into the world of programme notes and reviews, with only a few provocative voices documenting the extent to which classical music can be a prompt to relaxation rather than attention (Goedde, 2005, p. 441).

While our participants (and indeed Goedde, 2005) expressed feelings of guilt and disrespect around their confessions of "drifting", their inattentive listening comes most often from enjoyment of the situation, rather than frustration with it, and is in itself a form of audience response. Alice's comparison of theatre and music offers further insight:

> *Alice (JPJ):* "I suppose because I'm used to seeing theatre, it's making your own visuals, isn't it, in your head? So I would be, again, drifting in and out of myself and thinking of other things and associations, and – sometimes it was quite relaxing, actually, I was starting to think 'oh, this is nice!' – and then there would be a sequence that would jar and I'd be back in the room again, so that was strange".

Alice's response shows her drawing on her greater experience of theatre in responding to a musical performance, and compensating for a lack of "visuals" as she listens. Other participants made reference to films and television in forming their own ways of attending, illustrating Frith's (2002) assertion that constant exposure to music in contemporary society can generate new listening skills rather than, as is sometimes feared, eroding the capacity for attention. Some arts organisations have begun to respond to changes in listener behaviour amongst younger potential audiences, with experiments including the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's "Night Shift" programme of informal classical music presentation (Dobson, 2010). However, others might be understandably cautious of the effects of changing formats upon their established audiences, and the audience exchange discussions illustrate that there are no easy answers to this dilemma: while some newcomers would have welcomed a more flexible, informal setting, others were keen to adapt their behaviour to the perceived norms of the existing audience, with the expectation that their experience of the arts event would develop with practice.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

As arts and cultural organisations in the UK respond to the ever-diminishing support of the state, they will need to think in increasingly creative ways about how they develop relationships with their audiences. The findings of our research with the audience exchange method suggest there is significant potential for arts and cultural organisations to create new opportunities for peer-to-peer discussion. While our audience exchange participants welcomed the presence of a facilitator who was perceived not to be an "expert" or linked to the arts organisation, they simultaneously demonstrated their own distinctive expertise as co-creators of organisational value, fulfilling Walmsley's (2013) call for "a neo-institutionalist, creative management approach to articulating and evaluating artistic value" (p. 214). Our work in Birmingham strongly suggests the potential for strengthening the relationships between audiences and cultural organisations through the audience exchange approach, creating conditions in which audience members are more likely to become committed participants and "cultural citizens" (Gross and Pitts, 2016), for whom cultural organisations are a site of on-going encounter and conversation.

Our findings also demonstrate the considerable potential of future action research initiatives which combine the ethnographic advantages of *in situ* conversation and participant observation with the opportunities offered by facilitated, semi-structured conversation. This may be particularly generative in sites of cultural experience in which deep qualitative knowledge of audience experience has been elusive, in which social encounter is not typically built into the mode of engagement, or in which there are well established regimes of "legitimate" knowledge and vocabularies of judgement. As financial necessity and artistic ambition increasingly prompt arts and cultural organisations to explore possibilities for collaboration (Cultural Institute Enquiry, 2015), the audience exchange method offers a powerful tool for developing relationships between audiences, researchers and organisations, extending collaborative working in the arts in ways that are productive for all involved. By bringing a group of audience members into contact with one another's arts experiences, the method confronts some of the tensions at the heart of audience development, namely, whether the value of such activity is in deepening the experience of existing audience members or reaching out to new constituents (Lindelof, 2015): the audience exchange can do both at once, and so demonstrates the connections between varieties of past experience and potential for future engagement. At the most practical level, it also begins to encourage the flow of audiences from one organisation to another, offering opportunities for cross-marketing in ways that are now being explored by our Birmingham network of organisations.

The audience exchange approach also suggests possibilities for more effective methods of evaluating arts and cultural programmes and events. One possible direction in which to take this would be to explore the experience of arts events by particular audience groups. For example, Gross *et al.* (2014) used an audience exchange approach as part of the evaluation of Leeds City Council's Light Night festival, which takes place in venues across the city on the evening of the first Friday in October. This audience exchange was with a group of participants from the Arts and Minds Network, and the evaluation addressed whether the festival was accessible and enjoyable to a group of people who at times suffer from social anxiety, exploring these sensitive questions in ways that could have been less productive using conventional research methods. Sedgman (2015) has observed that audience members who consider themselves to be "non-expert" or "not the right kind of people" to evaluate arts events are consequently under-represented in the collective understanding of how the arts are meaningful in contemporary life. The audience exchange offers one way to reach marginalised groups who might be alienated by standard arts evaluation practices, and so would be valuable in demonstrating the impact of arts engagement on a wider section of the population, as well as identifying ways in which arts organisations can speak more powerfully to the full breadth of their potential audiences.

In light of our findings, organisations might start to think beyond "audience development" as an extension of marketing strategy, and think more broadly about the varieties of participation that take place within the organisational conditions they create for their visitors. At BCMG, the facilitated conversation of the audience exchange method has now been adopted as a regular post-concert feature, and while this closer alignment with the organisation risks drifting into the "virtuous circle" of positive audience responses identified by Johanson and Glow (2015), early indications are that the conversations are performing a valuable role for both attenders and the organisation. Peer-to-peer conversations are one promising way to "keep the non-performance spaces alive", as one participant in the Birmingham research put it. Audience exchange conversations not only indicate new ways for researchers and arts organisations to gain insight into audience experience and attitudes; they also indicate one way, amongst others, that arts organisations might expand the range of social encounters – and the varieties of "participation" – that take place before, during and after the experience of "the art itself". The findings emerging from our use of audience exchange methods to date suggests that action research initiatives such as these, in addition to generating important new knowledge, offer possibilities for arts organisations and their (current and potential) audiences to develop fuller, more satisfying and potentially more enduring relationships.

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## Further reading

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