

# Understanding Audience Engagement in the Contemporary Arts

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## **7 ‘It’s okay not to like it’**

The appeal and frustrations  
of the contemporary arts

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## 7 'It's okay not to like it'

### The appeal and frustrations of the contemporary arts

Arts audiences are often understood to be on the search for a guaranteed good night out, as shown in previous research including our own with classical music audiences (e.g. Pitts, 2016; Price, 2017). New attenders for what might be (problematically) called 'mainstream' arts experiences can be risk averse, reluctant to prioritise the time and cost of attending a performance over other more reliable leisure time options (including staying in). Regular attenders at classical music or ballet, for example, can become fixed in their ideas of what is worth that investment, seeking out particular performers, repertoire or trusted venues and organisations in making a choice that is most likely to satisfy their cultural preferences (Kolb, 2000; Dobson, 2010), with claims that audiences 'will pay almost anything to guarantee a home run' (Brown, 2004, p. 2). With one eye understandably on ticket sales, classical music organisations can unintentionally reinforce this attitude in their reluctance to programme contemporary works: 'this trend is idiosyncratic of the classical music industry [and by contrast] old movies are shown in only a small percentage of cinemas, and all the authors on the New York Times best-seller fiction lists are alive' (Turrini, O'hare, & Borgonovi, 2008, p. 73).

Our UACA interviews demonstrated repeatedly that advocates of the contemporary arts are strikingly different from the assumed mainstream in their attitudes to seeking out new arts experiences. Their engagement was shaped by a willingness to be challenged, disturbed or puzzled by new arts encounters – though within limits (see Section 9.3). In this chapter we explore the attitudes of cultural and personal obligation that drive this distinctive attendance behaviour and characterise the appeal of the contemporary (see Section 7.1). We feature a case study of the Sound Investors who give financial support to previously unheard new music at Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (see Section 7.2), explore the frustrations that can accompany the contemporary arts (see Section 7.3) and probe the frequently made statement 'I *should* go more' (see Section 7.4) to understand what a commitment to the contemporary arts means for individuals, organisations and the future of the arts.

#### 7.1 The appeal of the contemporary

The openness to challenging arts experiences was expressed variously by UACA participants as a cultural responsibility, a personal preference for new work and an aesthetic curiosity. Each of these was underpinned, however, by

a common factor: frequency of attendance was the key ingredient in audience open-mindedness, since it gave a wider context to each arts encounter and ensured that one unsatisfactory experience would quickly be offset by another that was more engaging. Even within the same event, participants knew that there might be some failed experiments amongst the new discoveries:

I used to go to some free improvised jazz music. I have the theory that about a third of it was . . . terrible, about a third of it was okay, and the final third of it was really good, but you couldn't get to it without the other two thirds!

(Ld13)

In the same way that one 'bad' film does not cause a movie-goer to abandon all future cinema visits, frequent experiences of contemporary arts allowed for comparisons and negative opinions and gave participants licence and confidence to talk about not having enjoyed or understood an arts experience.

### **7.1.1 Cultural responsibility**

The compulsion to seek out contemporary arts experiences was for some participants a cultural or moral obligation, characterised by one as an urge to 'support the starving artist!' (Ld04). Artists and composers were described as 'put[ting] in the effort' (Bh37) and therefore 'deserv[ing] my attention' (Bh30), in an updating of the 'troubled genius' myth that gives a privileged place to creative people who set themselves apart from the world in order to comment upon it (Schroeder, 2005). Those involved in the art world themselves were particularly conscious of the 'long unpaid ladder' (Ld01) to success in the arts, but even audience members without that insider knowledge recognised their own place in supporting 'up and coming' creatives and their work. There was intrigue for the audience members too, in the possibility of being part of the discovery of a new creative voice:

It's new people and they've not really had an artistic life yet, they've only just started two minutes ago and then they've still got 20 years of what they're doing. Who knows what they'll be making over the years. And it could be phenomenal.

(Bh14)

Contemporary arts organisations were viewed favourably by their audiences as holding desirable ethical positions on diversity, access and inclusion, such that supporting their work was also a way of aligning with their social and cultural values (see Section 5.3). London theatre audiences, in particular, made a clear distinction between the commercial, high-production world of the West End and the low-budget, grassroots work of the smaller theatres they favoured (see Section 5.1.2). Both approaches had their uses,

with special occasions in the West End a feature of family celebrations for some respondents, but stronger affinity was expressed for smaller, 'issue-led' productions:

I like things that are quite kind of progressive and quite kind of liberal, I wouldn't go along . . . occasionally I do like to go to things which are like, kind of, conservative, you know, like kind of maybe something like *Lion King* or something, which is like, you know, it's kind of really high-end theatre, it's really, it's all perfected, all the dance moves are really lovely, it's really high production value . . . so I find that really inspiring as well, but I wouldn't go along to it all of the time and it's all quite expensive, so I'll do that a few times as a bit of a treat, and then other times I want to go to the things that when I go home at the end I'm a slightly different person, I've learnt something, I've changed, I look at the world in a different way. You know, it's enriched my life somehow.

(Ld32)

This participant gave examples of theatre that had generated this life-enriching response, including stories of diversity, disability, homelessness and LGBT lives, summarised as 'people who would often not be heard, voices which would often be overlooked' and whose experiences depicted in live arts events gave her insights on her own life: 'sometimes it helps to give you a new perspective and new tools or a new understanding of what you're experiencing' (Ld32). Respondents varied in the extent to which they described their choices as 'political', with several using the word as a positive attribute, but others avoiding 'things that have got a distinct political position, because, you know, I don't want to be, sort of, preached at very much. I want something that expands my – makes me think, rather than just confirming what I already think' (Ld13).

There were hints in some responses that seeking out new and 'edgy' work also brought desirable cultural prestige to the audience members, with the avoidance of 'mainstream' choices serving as a shorthand for a liberal, socially engaged lifestyle. The young theatregoer in London who lamented the pressure to make appropriately 'hipster' or millennial life choices (Ld17; see Section 4.2), echoed the attitude of another participant who preferred to seek out emergent productions rather than those that had transferred to the West End: 'there must be a sense that if I feel that everybody likes it, if it's embraced, I'm no longer that interested' (Ld03). Preferring to support 'a brave decision' (Ld03) rather than an acclaimed or popular production was therefore partly a moral choice but also part of building a self-image away from the mainstream, so aligning the values of the audience member with those of the productions they favoured. Beyond this obligation to the artists and their survival, some participants expressed a broader responsibility to support the continuation of creative practices in society, often viewed to be under threat from failures in education, infrastructure and funding.

**7.1.2 Seeking out the new**

For many of our participants, seeking out 'a space where you can be surprised' (Ld32) was the main focus of their arts engagement, with a preference for the unfamiliar forming the basis of booking choices and spontaneous attendance. Access to free or cheap tickets was helpful in framing an open-minded attitude, since it reduced the expectation that every aspect of an arts experience would be enjoyed: 'it's always worth going because if there's only one thing that you think is amazing it's worth the amount of the ticket' (Bh11). Similarly, the budgeting of available time was a factor, and audience members were more readily tolerant of a short but difficult experience: 'sometimes you have to take risks, and half an hour is a risk-able period of time' (Bh09). A semiretired participant noted that having more time available had increased her willingness to take risks, since 'if your time is limited you don't want to come away from the theatre or a gallery thinking, oh my goodness, why did I waste my time seeing that, I could have seen something else better?' (Ld06). This approach to arts attendance was acknowledged as requiring effort and energy, however, and some participants reflected in their interviews that they had lapsed in their search for cutting-edge arts experiences:

I think when I was younger, when I was at uni especially, I used to really actively seek new things and be much more in touch with new bits of theatre and music, new screenings, all that kind of stuff. But, actually now I have lived in Bristol probably for the last five, five and a half years, so I have become a bit samey, going to the Watershed, or going to Bristol Old Vic, or the Tobacco Factory. So, a bit samey.

(Br05)

The same attitude of appreciating variety, not just in the artworks but in the kind of response they provoked, applied also at the level of programming within a single event: 'I prefer to go to something where I like something a lot and then don't like something a lot, than go to something which is just going to meander along because I've heard it before' (Bh17). Many participants mentioned or implied that they were searching for a strong emotional response, and would rather be disturbed or challenged by a work than left indifferent. Some arts organisations played on that willingness to engage in different ways across an evening's programme, and BE Festival was singled out by many of our Birmingham participants as a format that could take risks within an evening that would still work: four new plays, either side of an interval in which a shared meal is served meant that there would always be some pleasure in attending:

I've never been to a BE Festival evening where I've hated everything, but equally I don't think I've been to one where I've loved everything either, and I think that's perfectly fine. I think the fact that you just have this selection and if you really don't like it or it's just not your thing, you can just put that down to experience, that's fine because the next thing's coming

along. And if all else fails, at least you've had something nice to eat and a chat with your mates.

(Bh09)

This quote shows a level of cultural confidence in being comfortable with a play being 'just not your thing'. Participants with a professional interest in the arts were unsurprisingly most adept at articulating their critical distance from an arts experience and found benefits in seeing a show which had traits that they would avoid in their own practice:

I guess because I work in that world, I find it really interesting to go and see stuff that I think I might not like and then come out and go, 'Okay, why didn't I like that and what aspects did I like and which bits were good, which bits do I think are bad, and why and what would I do as a director to change it into the show that I want it to be?'

(Br31)

One participant reflected on how evaluating performances was often a deliberate act, of 'always like writing down in my notepad: I write my thoughts, my responses, so it is very much like I am switched on to thinking about what are the merits of this piece' (Br20); however, this was something that could be partially switched off when attending for pleasure rather than work, when 'I might still be thinking those things, but I am not compelled to write them down'. Participants of this mindset were aware of the distinctions between their analytical, critical and emotional responses, again part of the 'okay not to like it' attitude, where a performance might be viscerally unpleasant yet still a worthwhile experience or poorly executed but intellectually fascinating. The professional or semi-professional status of some respondents provided a role or lens through which they could engage with any performance, though it generated a different struggle of how and when to behave as a more 'passive' or 'chilled out' audience member (Br05):

I don't think I've ever been able to . . . well, as an adult, been able to go to a live human performance and not think about what I would do with that show or, yeah, have an element of kind of analytical brain running concurrent. Whereas if I go and see a film at the cinema or I go and see a band I don't have that kind of . . . the critical part of my brain doesn't kick in if it's not an area that I'm interested in getting my fingers into, so . . . so if I want to switch off I'll probably go to the cinema. Er, I don't switch off when I go to the theatre, it's definitely like work, I guess, but in a really pleasurable enjoyable way.

(Br31)

Another participant had noted this professional perspective in his friends' responses to theatre, often finding himself enjoying productions more than his more critical companions who he described as 'putting a particular agenda, like

they want stuff done in a particular way [with] an aesthetic agenda, an ideological agenda or something like that, and they will object to stuff. Whereas I just kind of say, "It's all good" (Lv31).

Professional interest was not the only route into critical engagement combined with open-mindedness, and frequent attendance as an initially 'nonexpert' audience member could soon result in gaining perspective and context for individual events and finding the vocabulary needed to describe an unsatisfactory arts experience. Rather than prejudging attendance based on risk, these participants evaluated after the event based on 'regret' and 'respect', with a performance they had not enjoyed having limited impact on future attendance decisions:

Something that you might not like but you don't regret seeing it necessarily.  
(Bh14)

You might respect the artistry of it, but it didn't work for me as well as this final piece that I just thought was really cool and really engaging. So a good mix, for sure.

(Bh15)

As shown in the last quotation, the 'mixed bill' style of programming offered an easy way to accommodate less satisfying arts experiences, since the immediate point of comparison with something more engaging provided both reassurance and respite for the audience member. One regular contemporary music attender described seeking out programmes of this nature, aiming for 'highs and lows' rather than 'a level experience' (Bh17):

I don't mind going to a concert knowing there's a variety of work there and I fully expect to like some stuff more than others, or even like some stuff and not like others. That doesn't worry me. It's part of the experience. It's like going to an exhibition. It's fine to have a look at things and think that's great and the next piece you look at you think, quite honestly I could have done better myself! I think that clearly isn't true, but you do feel that. I think that's fine as part of the listening and watching experience. That sometimes you're challenged and sometimes you like it and sometimes you don't. But, the fact you don't like it doesn't mean to say it's not been a valuable experience in itself.

(Bh17)

A similar attitude was expressed in relation to theatre, where blockbuster shows including musicals were perceived as 'conforming to people all having a good time' (Bh10), and rejected in favour of productions that might be more demanding or engaging: 'if I think that in some way, it's going to challenge me . . . whether it's intellectually or creatively, I would like to go and see it' (Bh10).

Not all participants took this evaluative approach to new arts experiences, rather some trusted their immediate emotional response and made a quick



judgement about whether to engage further. Talking about art gallery visits, one participant stated:

If it doesn't grab me, that's my judgement on it there . . . to me, I don't value work on the aesthetics – beauty and things – those traditional ideals? For me it's very much more if it, if I find an affinity with it.

(Ld10)

Art galleries were particularly prone to these quick emotional responses of walking in and deciding not to stay, but the experience of an unfavourable arts event unfolding over time could lead to more negative responses to theatre, dance and music (see Section 3.2.1). Cost, similarly, affected the extent to which participants could tolerate a 'bad' arts experience, with free galleries or low-budget gigs easier to leave than a performance with an expensive ticket: 'for five quid, it's like, yeah, you take a chance, you don't like it, you leave early. It's not such a big deal' (Ld11).

Frequent attenders of one art form did not necessarily transfer their open-mindedness to other genres and might have different relationships with risk and regret in the varied aspects of their arts attendance; as seen in Chapter 5, openness to risk and experimentation in one art form could be accompanied by conservative attitudes and seeking a guarantee of enjoyment in another. Regular attenders used their prior knowledge to gauge the type of arts experience that different art forms and venues could offer them and would seek challenge on some occasions while avoiding it on others:

I suppose with music I can intellectualise it, and analyse it. Whereas theatre is much more of a visceral experience I feel, and can really get to you. And I'm not willing to expose myself to that so much.

(Bh05)

The effects of frequent attendance are shown again in the way that these limits were often linked to one bad experience or to assumptions about unfamiliar art forms: the adventurous concert-goer in the last quotation had a fear that experimental theatre would involve audience participation or sudden explosions, and this made her 'a bit nervous and edgy' (Bh05) and therefore less likely to book for a new play. Similar aversions were expressed to 'sugar plum fairy kind of dancing' (Bh34) or to music that was other than 'ordinary . . . you know, average' (Bh06), and in each case, audience members were less likely to explore new experiences that might change their opinions once they had developed an aversion to a specific art form.

### **7.1.3 Aesthetic curiosity**

Personal preference for contemporary arts overlapped in our data with ideas of aesthetic curiosity and the extent to which people sought out 'the new' and

'the contemporary' as a central part of their arts consumption. An eagerness to see what known artists would do next or to discover a new voice within an art form was a driver to attendance for some participants, keeping them at the 'cutting edge' and ensuring that their arts experiences remained fresh and challenging. One participant illustrated this through a lingering on the word 'pleasure' as he sought to define the qualities of contemporary music listening:

I haven't mentioned the word 'pleasure'. I should mention the word 'pleasure' because actually that's what I'm actually aiming at: things that will give me pleasure. You know, being delighted or surprised when things, for example, like composers or works I didn't know, do end up being pleasurable to hear.

(Bh19)

Another participant described the process of contemporary arts attendance itself as 'pleasurable', with enjoyment lying in the uncertainty of whether a particular event would 'hit all the boxes': 'you do live in hope and that's quite a pleasurable, you know, "I wonder if, I wonder if?" And if it doesn't, it doesn't matter – 'cos there's the next time' (Bh29). Linked to this is the idea of 'discovery' as part of the aesthetic engagement with new art, and several participants compared the predictability – and higher expectations – of an established visual artist compared to one who was unknown to them:

When there's somebody as established as being good, then you sort of, you go to an exhibit of their stuff with a different, with a different set of assumptions, and it's perhaps not as . . . not quite as exciting. I love discovering. That's one of the things that I really enjoy.

(Ld11)

Describing this also as the 'that excitement of finding the thing that you treasure and enjoy' (Ld11), this participant acknowledged through comparisons with her partner's reactions in a gallery that these aesthetic connections were personal and not guaranteed: 'He'll be like, "Oh I really like this" and I'm like, "Hmmm . . ." you know! [laughs] That's not very good!' (Ld11). The element of surprise was explicitly disconnected from personality traits by one participant, who declared that 'I quite like unexpected things, although I'm not in life a liker of surprises in my personal life, but on stage, in my ears, they're great' (Bh23). Previous studies of visual art have found stronger links between preferences for complex and abstract art and non-conformist attitudes (Feist & Brady, 2004), but this participant illustrates that 'experience seekers' as defined in Audience Finder segmentation,<sup>1</sup> like contemporary arts attenders, have their limits.

Evidence for the appeal of the contemporary was also shown in comparisons with established repertoire, which might be viewed as too familiar to be worth the investment of time: one BCMG audience member rejected Mahler's and

Brahms's symphonies on the grounds that 'I know them so well, and there's too much else to hear' (Bh26). Likewise, some gallery visitors actively avoided established art collections, searching instead for the unfamiliar and 'weird':

You can stand and stare at a painting for ages and get loads out of it, fair enough; but I'd rather see something bigger and more impactful and that kind of thing. Just different stuff. If it's weird I like it, basically.

(Bh27)

#### **7.1.4 Contemporary aesthetic**

While for some participants, witnessing experimentation was a strong motivator for attending contemporary arts events, for others, the appeal of the contemporary lay in the aesthetic of certain contemporary styles. Participants frequently described how contemporary or modern works provoked a greater emotional response in comparison to more traditional or classical forms. In contrast to positioning contemporary works as the most difficult repertoire for audiences to engage with, new works were at times described as easier to understand, more immediate and less reliant on existing knowledge to interpret.

Some participants articulated a clear preference for the aesthetics of contemporary visual art. This tended to present as a rejection of photorealism in favour of art which has an 'idea' (Lv09) or takes a 'stance' (Ld32). Rather than needing a narrative hook (as discussed in Section 5.1), it was precisely the appeal of the abstract which led these participants to newer works:

Apart from photography, I'm not really that interested so much in art that looks like what it was supposed to be, 'cos I'm like I could just look at a photograph (*laughing*). I don't know, it just doesn't sort of stir anything in me, whereas like something a bit more abstract does (*laughing*).

(Br10)

Furthermore, participants were attracted to the 'vibrant colours' (Br24) of some types of contemporary art, with 'strong' and 'in your face' (Br09) patterns and shapes, despite recognising that others might find the same thing simple or 'loud and lairy' (Ld42). Participants who preferred contemporary visual art to older forms sometimes felt that they lacked the relevant knowledge to be able to interpret classical paintings and therefore found modern art to be far more immediate:

I do appreciate historical stuff, but I suppose that is the sort of stuff you need a lot of background and history to actually understand. . . . I have gone around I think the National Portrait Gallery with my dad and he knows a lot about history and that made it a lot more interesting because he would be like, 'Oh, so that is this story from the Bible', or whatever, or, 'Oh, that is this King, and he is holding that because of this reason', and

like, 'The sword in his hand symbolises this', or whatever. . . . If you don't have that background then it is just like, 'Oh, that is an impressive painting', but it doesn't really mean anything.

(Lv27)

Classical paintings, which for participants variously referred to portraiture, landscapes, still life and religious iconography, were described as 'fantastically clever' (Br09) but also at times having a uniformity of style which make paintings hard to distinguish from each other: 'the old Masters . . . there's like, room after room after room of another portrait, of an old geezer. I mean it's fantastic, absolutely amazing, but I don't wanna see any more (*laughing*).' (Br24). Once again, demonstrating an ability to separate aesthetic evaluation from personal preference, participants described works as being both beautiful and boring in the same breath. The appeal of the contemporary, in these instances, was in its bypassing of knowledge in which participants felt themselves to be lacking and its promise of a more immediate, personal arts experience.

In theatre too, discussion of classical plays were often focused on Shakespeare, which was described as 'difficult to follow' (Br23), and the appeal of the contemporary was that the plot was less 'complicated' (Lv29) as well as tickets being cheaper (Ld35) and works being shorter (Br29). In contemporary music, crossover artists like Anna Meredith and Nils Frahm were depicted as being more accessible than canonical classical works due to their stylistic proximity to more experimental forms of popular music:

A lot of classical music I listen to tends to be the modern classical, 'cos I guess, you know, it's probably more of a tangent from that stuff to, er, alternative music or whatever, you know. . . . Yeah, there's almost like a link to kind of rock music, if you like, in the broadest sense, yeah.

(Br13)

The stuff that I really like is sort of minimalist stuff . . . people like Nils Frahm and all these, sort of, pianists who are sort of, one foot in classical, one foot in electronic, because actually those genres do weirdly cross over.

(Br16)

A common theme for participants who were not particularly engaged in dance was that they could admire the skill and 'physicality' of ballet but spoke of it being underwhelming: 'it is very impressive how people do it, . . . I know people who are very moved by dance. . . . I haven't got much from it . . . either emotionally or intellectually' (Lv12). Ballet was seen by some as 'sumptuous' (Lv08) but 'stiff' (Lv23), 'formal' (Ld31) and 'boring' (Lv43). Its reliance on a codified language of movement was interpreted by some as being less openly expressive: 'I remember watching a ballet and just thinking, "The music is great, but I don't feel that their dancing is anything to do with the music"' (Lv33). Contemporary dance, on the other hand, could be more emotive,

could carry a stronger and more current message, with a sense of freedom for artists to express themselves: 'ballet is almost too controlled and regimented to be classed as full expression, because it's all about control, stamina, er, speed and timing. . . . When you see interpretive dance, and that's more expressive, it's open, and it's raw' (Lv40).

Similar comments were made about opera, in which participants were able to see evident artistic skill but often did not feel moved by the work in that way opera fans professed to be. Some participants assumed that this was because either they did not know enough about the art form to appreciate it or they had not been brought up engaging with it and struggled to make that connection later in life:

I know it's meant to be a very emotive medium but . . . I think you have to be in the know, you have to have a bit of knowledge about opera and like 'look at that key change from this to that' . . . whereas I'm just like wow, what a great singer.

(Lv22)

Participants were aware of attempts to modernise classic operas through alternative productions. While some felt that this was sometimes poorly executed, others welcomed these endeavours: 'I think [opera] has a responsibility to speak to issues of the day or re-evaluate issues of the past. . . . Why not say something, you know, the way it overlaps with current thinking or current issues?' (Ld41). Birmingham participants ( $n = 13$ ) spoke highly of the Birmingham Opera Company (BOC) productions, which featured a community choir and modernised the stories, both of which were seen to make operas more accessible and relevant for a wider audience.

One of the key reasons given for preferring contemporary works was that they were rooted in the modern world and in participants' lived experiences. This was often described as being more 'relevant' for interviewees:

Shakespeare's good and that, but, like . . . even the modern adaptations and stuff . . . they're alright, but I don't come away with the same feeling as if I saw something that was dead, like, relevant. So, that's the thing with *The Way I See It*, that I saw in the *Everyman*, 'cos again, it was talking about people in Liverpool and just general things [about] being a young person, it was so, like, relatable. Like, every kind of thing that was funny about it, it was funny 'cos it was dead relevant to you.

(Lv39)

The contemporary arts attenders in our study therefore enjoyed artworks more when they were explicitly connected to their lived experience of the world, despite at times criticising themselves for being 'selfish' (Lv39) or 'egocentric' (Br16) upon realising this. While this is linked to the desire for thought-provoking arts experiences as discussed earlier, this participant (Lv39)

demonstrates how relevant work need not necessarily be challenging but could also be funny or uplifting. The important thing was that it was work that was firmly rooted in the contemporary situation, speaking to today’s audiences, and could not have been made earlier.

The appeal of the contemporary also lay in a different relationship between artist and audience than in more historical works. In theatre, dance and visual art, participatory works created new and more active forms of audience interaction, which was appreciated by numerous participants: ‘As an adult I love anything that’s got lights, anything that you can push buttons, anything that you can sit on, swing on, play with, that you can interact as an adult’ (Ld05). In classical music, a long-term listener to contemporary music noted a big difference from ‘trying to listen to contemporary music in the 1960s on the radio and listening to it in concert now’ (Bh35), finding the composers of the last two or three decades to be ‘very conscious now of composing music that communicates with people’.

These four motivations for contemporary arts engagement overlap significantly; participants sought out experimental work on the fringes of an arts scene, whether led there due to their boredom with familiar works or by finding art set in the modern world an easier proposition. This search for the unexpected and love for contemporary aesthetics led them to seek out new and original artistic voices, chasing the thrill of witnessing something completely new. The desire to support emerging artists was partly philanthropic but also an act of self-interest in order to promote the production of work that may be a source of pleasure. Participants scoured the contemporary art landscape to find new works to enjoy. While some enjoyed the sense of being in at the beginning of a new premiere, what was equally important was that this work was new to them, their attendance guided by their desire to find their next passion, whether that was a new venue to explore, a new artist to follow or – put simply – ‘shit-hot music’ (Ld22) to enjoy.

## **7.2 Case study: BCMG Sound Investors**

As an illustration of the appeal of the contemporary, our Birmingham participants included a group with particularly strong connections to the promotion and support of new music: the BCMG Sound Investors (SIs), who contributed financially to the sponsorship of commissioned works, and in return gained access to rehearsals and the premiere of those pieces of music. None of the 16 SIs whom we interviewed had professional involvement in the arts, and most were retired from managerial, social care or education work: their demographic profile was therefore typical of our Birmingham interviewees, but they were distinctive in being consumers rather than makers of arts. Sponsorship of BCMG commissions gave the SIs access to a musical and creative world that was otherwise outside their experience, and they took pleasure in the sense of cultural responsibility and contribution that their investment made as well as the direct experience of being invited to rehearsals and performances.

We have elsewhere described the SIs relationship with BCMG as 'liminal' (Pitts, Herrero, & Price, 2020), comprising a close connection with the organisation that is contingent on their continued giving, and which places them somewhere between the organisational staff and the rest of the ticket-purchasing audience in their level of influence and involvement. The social elements of this organisational relationship were highly valued by the SIs: they enjoyed being greeted personally by staff and felt at home in BCMG's rehearsal and performance venue. The musical insight afforded by their access to rehearsals was also a strong motivator to continue giving to the SI scheme, since it enhanced their listening by hearing new music 'coming to life' (Bh31) at the first rehearsal as the musicians 'comprehended what the final thing was going to be' (Bh18). As audience members without musical experience of their own, seeing the players at work gave an extra dimension to their listening as well as a sense of trust that the musicians 'don't need to be diplomatic in our hearing' (Bh18). To know 'that when you heard the music no one else had heard it before' (Bh05) gave them a temporally privileged position and also meant that they might hear a new piece several times and so gain increased familiarity and understanding of the work (cf. Halpern, Chan, Müllensiefen, & Sloboda, 2017): 'each time you hear it becomes more familiar, and sometimes familiarity breeds contempt and other times you think, "Oh great, it's growing on me"' (Bh37).

The most intriguing aspect of the SIs' experiences was their open-mindedness around not necessarily enjoying the piece of music which they had helped to support. One participant acknowledged that the financial investment meant that there could be a 'terrible moment when you sit down to listen, you think, "I've paid money for this, I could have paid for a holiday", and then you think to yourself, "Was this worth it?"' (Bh20). Even in that case, however, there was an acceptance that composers should not be constrained by their commissioning and instead should be free to pursue original ideas, with the resulting new music being 'all different: I don't think there's any I actually regret, though there are some I probably don't like' (Bh32). These doubts or dislikes were set in the context of being within 'a sympathetic audience' (Bh29) for contemporary music, and therefore a willingness to support composers, both 'big names' and 'up and coming'. This in turn brought its own sense of satisfaction, since 'even though you've only contributed money, there is a sense of achievement that you've helped to bring this thing into being' (Bh35). SIs were aware that they were helping to fill a funding deficit in a sector 'that's under a lot of financial pressure at the moment, with the way things are and have been for a number of years' (Bh17) and felt the imperative that 'if we don't invest it won't happen' (Bh36).

Underpinning all these financial, cultural and social aspects of SI membership was the enhanced experience of being an audience member: 'the music really comes first and foremost, for me' (Bh36). Observing 'the mechanical elements of actually watching them rehearse and seeing what has to be done' (Bh20) gave SIs new insight on the musicians' work. Similarly, they gained a

fresh perspective on the composers and their thinking, both through watching rehearsals and in some cases having opportunities for conversation, even though several SIs noted that the composers were sometimes 'fairly stilted' (Bh32) or reserved, and they too might find themselves 'a bit tongue-tied' (Bh23) in that situation. As well as developing 'a more intimate involvement with the music' (Bh31), one SI noted a deeper awareness of the 'social apparatus of contemporary music' and felt that the SI scheme made BCMG a more inclusive organisation, since 'they keep people really well-informed about the progress of the piece they've commissioned' (Bh19).

Of course, BCMG could easily be criticised for making this deeper audience engagement available only on condition of a financial investment in their activities: one of the participants talked about being 'envious of the people who were investing before I could actually afford to do it' (Bh36), and others had lapsed in their involvement when finances were tight. This kind of heightened engagement with a contemporary arts organisation would not be right or possible for the majority of the audience, but it brings genuine depth of involvement for these SIs, which goes beyond – in some cases even contradicts – a transactional sense of getting personal value for money. Similar access to the insight gained by rehearsal attendance can be found through many learning and participation programmes and could become a model for reaching new audiences or increasing the concert-going habits of occasional attenders. Ticket-purchasers, if viewed in similar ways to these SIs, are not mere consumers of an arts venue's productions but are investing in the organisation's future and might better understand their role as audience members if this was more transparent in their interactions.

The SI case study encapsulates the 'okay not to like it' phenomenon by focusing on the experiences of people who are investing in contemporary music with a view not only to their own listening pleasure but also to supporting an organisation whose work and values they believe in and so facilitating the work of individual composers and the survival of new music more broadly. 'Liking' the resulting new works is acknowledged to be a process that is sometimes difficult and involves sustained effort and engagement through attendance at rehearsals and repeated listening. The SIs showed a willingness to learn and a respect for the skill of the musicians and the creative freedom of the composer and placed a high value on being able to be a greater part of this creative world through their modest investment: as one put it, 'I'm happy that I probably pay for the teabags' (Bh20).

### **7.3 The frustrations of the contemporary**

While good experiences of contemporary arts supported an open-minded attitude, a series of increasingly poor arts encounters could start to generate a sense of distrust or doubt: 'I don't know if it's part of getting older, or whether the art world is truly disappearing up its own arse, but there's a lot of it that's very thin, I think' (Bh43). The accumulated arts experience of 'getting older' seemed in



other participants, similarly, to reduce the tolerance of less satisfactory experiences: 'I've just seen too much stuff, that I don't like that basically . . . I don't make that same effort any more than when I was . . . I'm more discerning now than I used to be when younger' (Ld03). Part of this resistance was about not wasting time on arts experiences that might not be enjoyable, though one participant who expressed this view modified it with an acknowledgement that others might be gaining something different from the same performance:

[Contemporary music is] not nice to listen to sometimes, so it's not enjoyable, and I think, why would you listen to stuff if you don't enjoy it? Maybe as an intellectual exercise. Maybe if you were a musician you would be extending your repertoire, advancing your own education. But as someone who is purely audience, there has to be something that I think I'm going to enjoy about this or why would I bother? . . . But I'm happy to think it might be a deficiency in me rather than [anything else].

(Bh31)

While this participant struggled with new music, another reported that greater experience had reduced its impact, since the tropes and challenges of the repertoire had become more familiar over time:

I kind of miss the struggle now. I think back to what it was like and – genuinely – think, 'Goodness, I remember when I first sat through that, and that was tough but now I just hear it as it is, as what it is, and there's no challenge in it.

(Bh33)

Another perspective on attitudes to the contemporary arts came from our national survey responses, which had been intended to explore the 'I know what I like' stereotype of nonattenders and those who would avoid new work in their performance choices (see Sifakakis, 2007 on visual art, and Sigurjons-son, 2010, on music). However, as noted in Chapter 2, the high proportion of arts professionals who completed the survey skewed the sample away from the anticipated 'mainstream attender' demographic. Filtering the responses to include only 'nonprofessionals' ( $n = 64$ ), only 25% ( $n = 16$ ) indicated that they would be unlikely to attend (rating of  $\leq 3$ ) an arts event described as 'contemporary' (see Appendix C). Nine respondents selected the maximum 'I am very likely to attend' option. Asked to explain their ratings, responses ranged from a minority of views expressing distrust or dislike of contemporary arts, through a middle ground of needing more information or being dependent on opportunities or companions that would increase the likelihood of attendance, to a majority who declared themselves to be open minded either in principle or through past experience to attending contemporary arts events.

The most strongly positive views were close to those of the interview participants, emphasising enjoyment of 'unique and thought provoking

new experiences' (NS064) and aligning personal values with contemporary arts culture: 'I love contemporary art, I find it speaks to me on a personal level and it's important to me to see different reflections of modern life' (NS067). Other responses were more provisional, suggesting a future open-mindedness rather than an existing engagement: 'I feel I should be open to new experiences and the possibility of something which is good, enjoyable and possibly thought provoking' (NS056). The word 'should', explored further in Section 7.4 as a feature of discourse around arts attendance, is a reminder that these respondents might have been engaging in the 'positive evaluation phenomenon' (Johanson & Glow, 2015), reporting their cultural values in ways that they felt best matched the expectations of the researchers.

The 'unlikely to attend' responders explained their ratings with reference to the common challenges of audience development – namely, perceived lack of opportunity, the need for companions with shared interests and the need for further information about an event. This latter challenge was in some cases based on 'hit and miss' (NS054) prior experiences of the contemporary arts and highlighted a difference in booking habits compared to more familiar repertoire and events:

Typically, contemporary to me triggers a response to research more into the subject. Typically I like experiencing arts without foresight, but I don't feel like that's possible when something is described as 'contemporary' and I instantly have presumptions.

(NS051)

Several respondents described seeking a recommendation through reviews or the credentials of the group/person doing it (NS083) in order to overcome the risk of 'travelling to and paying for something from which I will learn nothing new' (NS008). Dislike or distrust of contemporary arts was sometimes based on past experience, which had been 'inconsistent' in some cases and off-putting in others: 'My experiences of contemporary music have always been bad even though I have been to several concerts and I see that the musicians care passionately about it and have great technical skill – it just doesn't work for me' (NS097). In these negative responses, the 'work' involved in choosing, attending and responding to a contemporary arts event was a cost to the attender, rather than part of the pleasure, as was the case for more highly engaged contemporary arts audience members.

#### **7.4 The dilemma of 'should' attend**

Qualitative interviews not only record participants' thoughts on the arts but actively shape them (see Section 2.1.1), and nowhere was this more evident than in the 51 interviews in which participants said that they 'should' behave differently. Invariably, what participants felt that they 'should' do was be more

involved in the arts: attend more often, attend a wider variety of events, engage more deeply.

I should go a lot more to the theatre, because The Rep does some very good stuff now.  
(Bh17)

I should really be more kind of open to different things.  
(Bh38)

A traditional exhibition I kind of whizz around pretty quickly. . . . Maybe I should spend more time.  
(Br02)

This recurrence of the word 'should' or 'ought' implies a sense of obligation or duty to modify their arts engagement. It is loaded with moral connotations, and so we were careful, each time it was said in an interview, to ask participants to reflect on this:

I should look on the internet and see what it is happening in Bristol, but I don't.

*Why do you say you "should"?*

I don't know. Probably because I might find out about more stuff. Because I don't do enough, I really feel that I ought to be seeing more stuff. I want to be at the Tate in Bristol [*sic*] where there is some exhibition, but honestly nobody wants to come with me, so fine.

(Br09)

When these comments were probed further, 12 participants explained that they believed they would enjoy particular arts events if they were to make the effort to go. This 'should' was therefore not an obligation to the arts but a sense of chastising themselves for being lazy and therefore missing out on enjoyable experiences: 'I try to seek out new experiences [but] I think I suffer from a little bit of laziness and wanting to be happy and sloth-like' (Br22) and 'I will make enquiries to go and see something at the Philharmonic and then I let it kind of slip, and then I think, "Oh, I should have gone to see that, I would have enjoyed that"' (Lv01). A further eight of these participants were discussing arts events that were not currently on their radar to attend and the feeling that they might be missing out on enjoyable experiences by unfairly dismissing certain types of events. The desire to attend more events for these participants was therefore experience led, driven by a belief that they would be enjoyable and that participants did not want to miss out.

On the other hand, for 11 participants, the feeling that they 'should' engage more with the arts came from a desire to be open minded and a discrepancy

between their self-image as an open-minded person and the narrow scope of their arts engagement: 'there's also just a part of me that wants to be a really well rounded person! Wants to be a person that sees cool things. And sees strange things' (Ld01). Being open minded was seen by these participants as a virtue and trying new things was 'good for you' (Lv26), 'good to try new things' (Ld42) and a source of enrichment:

If I go and see something really good, it just kind of feels almost like nourishing, like, ah, I feel, erm, fulfilled in some way by that. . . . If I was only going to see sort of one art form . . . [and then I see something different] how can I describe it? Yeah, almost feeling like you've had a really good meal (*laughter*).

(Ld31)

In addition, there was a slightly different sense of obligation associated with arts of cultural importance where it was as though attenders wanted to have said they had been, closely linked to the 'when in Rome' cultural tourism discussed in Section 4.3:

We are talking about going to The Globe at some point as lots of us have been here for a long time and we haven't been, but it's one of these things that you feel you should do rather than . . . it's one of these things that you kind of have to do once in your life.

(Ld34)

For these participants, therefore, why they felt that they 'should' attend was due to a disjuncture between their identity and their actions, wanting to be a cultured person but not necessarily following that up with arts activities.

Finally, a third group, of only seven participants, described how their sense of obligation came from a desire to support the arts. As discussed in Section 5.3, audiences for contemporary arts were seen to be highly aware of the challenges in securing funding and attracting audiences to new and experimental works; therefore they were aware of the power they had in turning up and putting more 'bums on seats':

I didn't really go to the theatre very often when I was [living elsewhere], and I felt a bit guilty about that. . . . I felt as if I should support it.

(Lv36)

I think it's like you sort of want to be supportive but then there's time and there's like maybe not quite getting around to things.

(Lv44)

You feel obliged to like these, like these artists have made work and someone has to go see them or they deserve recognition and . . . I don't know.

(Lv17)

Nevertheless, 30 of the 47 participants who shared this duty to engage more highly also offered a justification for why they did not currently do these things. The reasons given were varied, ranging from feeling out of place to it being too expensive:

There's a sense of being out of your . . . out of place, 'Oh that's not for me.'  
(Br31)

You should stay open-minded, shouldn't you? I think I'd probably go more if it wasn't for my husband saying, 'I'm not going to see that.'  
(Lv26)

I can't think of the last time I went to [spoken word]. Erm. . . . Years ago. I'd love to go, but just can't you know. Something's got to give.  
(Ld20)

We do occasionally go to plays but not as much as we should. . . . I sort of feel I should. . . . I used to love – you know, I did English at A level and I used to just love all of that, and then I just – time goes and you don't do it anymore. Although having said that, . . . [when friends describe what they've been to] I think, 'God, that sounds deadly dull!'  
(Ld36)

While participants gave a variety of reasons for not already attending the events that they had said they 'should' be engaging with, ultimately those events were simply not as much of a priority as other arts events or leisure activities (see Section 10.1.1).

## **7.5 Conclusions: connecting with the contemporary**

Analysing the appeal (see Section 7.1) and the frustrations (see Section 7.4) of the contemporary illustrates the fine line between these two attitudes. Our participants very often wanted to like contemporary works on principle, whether as a means of challenging themselves, supporting emerging artists and small arts organisations or gaining a new perspective on the world. Given the highly engaged nature of the audience members that we interviewed, and their connections with the contemporary arts organisations in their cities, this is not surprising. However, this principle did not translate into a universal outlook on the contemporary arts: for each participant, there were usually some art forms where the contemporary aesthetic had strong appeal and others where it was more challenging. The coherence between them came from the 'It's okay not to like it' attitude, which enabled participants to walk away from arts experiences that had not spoken powerfully to them, still satisfied in the expectation that other audience members would have taken something different from the event. Rather the 'guaranteed home run' (Brown, 2004, p. 2) of

more traditional arts engagement, these enthusiasts for contemporary arts had multiple routes into being an audience member, and were prepared to be puzzled, annoyed and disturbed by some of their arts experiences, with the only cardinal sin being indifference.

A striking finding in this exploration of 'It's okay not to like it' is how much audience members are having to reach that conclusion for themselves. The feeling of lacking knowledge, described in some participants' approaches to more classic, traditional artworks (see Section 7.1.4) can be very alienating to audiences, but we encountered many examples of contemporary arts offering a way to bypass that deficit model and to focus instead on making a personal connection with art that speaks to now. Moreover, participants responding to new artworks felt confident to make their own interpretation, without feeling that other people would be doing that 'better': their own perspective intersected with the artwork in ways that were meaningful to them, and in many cases that was felt to be sufficient. That personal connection might also change over time, as new experiences of a contemporary art form became more familiar and established a context for making a critical response and offering an opinion.

Arts organisations could do more to encourage an 'It's okay not to like it' attitude: indeed, the tagline of 2018 Sonorities Festival of contemporary music Belfast, 'You Might Not Like This' suggests that the marketing potential of this approach is already being explored, and our audience exchange discussions in the UACA pilot study (Pitts & Gross, 2017) showed that opportunities to admit a lack of understanding or enjoyment were powerful sources of deeper audience engagement. Of course, many of our participants *did* like much of their contemporary arts experiences, and this is important too, but the freedom to respond without being wrong, ignorant or pressured into a particular response appears to be at the heart of seeking out new and challenging arts experiences.

## Note

1 [www.theaudienceagency.org/audience-spectrum/experience-seekers](http://www.theaudienceagency.org/audience-spectrum/experience-seekers)

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