

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY LISTEN AND ENJOY A CLASSICAL MUSIC CONCERT

1. INTRODUCTION

Hearing live music is one of the most pleasurable experiences available to human beings. The music sounds great, it feels great, and you get to watch the musicians as they create it. No matter what kind of music you love, try listening to it live.

This guide focuses on classical music, a tradition that originated before recordings, radio, and the Internet, back when all music was live music. In those days live human beings performed for other live human beings, with everybody together in the same room.

When heard in this way, classical music can have a special excitement. Hearing classical music in a concert can leave you feeling refreshed and energized. It can be fun. It can be romantic. It can be spiritual.

It can also scare you to death.

Classical music concerts can seem like snobby affairs full of foreign terminology and peculiar behavior. It can be hard to understand what's going on. It can be hard to know how to act.

Not to worry. Concerts are no weirder than any other pastime, and the rules of behavior are much simpler and easier to understand than, say, the stock market, football, or system software upgrades.

If you haven't been to a live concert before, or if you've been baffled by concerts, this guide will explain the rigmarole so you can relax and enjoy the music.

2. THE LISTENER'S JOB DESCRIPTION

Classical music concerts can seem intimidating. It seems like you have to know a lot. What if you don't understand the music? What if you don't know how to listen correctly? What if you don't "get it"?

The good news is this: there is no right way to listen, there is no correct experience to have, and there is no one thing to "get." Understanding is not required. Your job is not to be an expert on the music. Your job is not to be a perfect listener.

**Your job is very simple:
Be affected by the music.**

That's it. That's all there is. Because you are unique, and because your collection of experiences is unique, the music will affect you differently than it will anybody else. It may affect your emotions, your thoughts, your spirit, your body—any part of you. The same music may affect you differently at different times.

Music is meant to trigger reactions, invite reflection, awaken feelings, activate memories, and touch the heart. So just let yourself be affected.



Of course your knowledge of music, and your experience with it, influence how you are affected. If learning something about the music makes its effect more powerful, then by all means learn more. If repeated listening helps you to be more and more affected by a piece, then by all means listen to the music a few times before coming to the concert. Whatever helps you be affected is good to pursue. If it doesn't help you, or if it gets in the way of your enjoyment, then don't do it.

A wonderful and mysterious thing about live concerts is that everybody comes to be affected together. Everybody onstage and everybody in the audience shares in the same experience, each of us in our own unique way.

3. THE CONCERT RITUAL

Every kind of music has its rituals. We need ritual to help performers and audience get into a musical frame of mind, and to contain the power released by the music.

The rituals for classical music can be confusing. They have developed over hundreds of years, in many different countries, and date back to societies that were very different from our own. Concert rituals aren't always the same, but here is an idea about what to expect: In an orchestra, the leader of the violin section is called the concertmaster. Often the concertmaster stays backstage until the rest of the orchestra is ready to begin. Then the



concertmaster comes onstage and takes a bow as the audience claps. The concertmaster turns to the orchestra, a tuning note sounds, and the musicians tune their instruments. The audience should stay quiet during tuning.

Next the conductor comes onstage. As the audience applauds, the orchestra may stand up to share in the applause. The conductor shakes hands with the concertmaster as representative of the orchestra.

As the players sit back down, the conductor turns toward them (away from the audience), and begins the music. The conductor's job is to direct the musical flow with gestures. (Most conductors use a little white stick called a baton, but some use only their hands.) You won't see the front of the conductor again until the first piece is over. That may be a short time, or it may be more than an hour.

The music may start and stop a few times within one piece of music. The musicians may pause between big sections to refocus their energy or to retune before playing the next part. Eventually, when the whole piece is over, the audience claps, and the conductor turns toward the audience to accept the applause.

Then the conductor leaves the stage. If the applause keeps going, the conductor will come return to the stage. He or she may ask the orchestra or individual players to stand to share the applause. Then the conductor will exit again, but he or she will return for more bows as long as applause continues

After all of this clapping and bowing, entering and exiting, the conductor finally ends up offstage, while the orchestra and audience get ready for the next piece. Sometimes some furniture has to be rearranged, or some players have to be added or subtracted.

Sometimes the stage crew has to rearrange furniture, or players have to add themselves in or take themselves out.

Eventually, when everybody is ready, the conductor will come onstage again to lead the next piece. If there is a featured soloist, he or she will walk onstage with the conductor, and you might notice the conductor staying a bit more in the background during the applause, allowing the soloist to be the focus of the audience's attention.

An orchestra is a flexible idea, not a standardized group of instruments. Today's orchestras can expand or shrink in order to play music composed for the wildly different orchestras of different times and places. They can also meet composers' needs for special instruments not

My wife and I took some friends to a symphony concert. They had never been in a concert hall before, and scarcely knew what to pay attention to! They were amused by the audience's clothes, dazzled by the chandeliers, and confused by the human traffic onstage—all that entering, exiting, bowing, standing up, sitting down. While we were clapping after the first piece, the conductor turned to the audience, bowed, and left the stage. My friend turned to me with a worried look and asked, "Where's he going?"

normally part of an orchestra—such as saxophone, accordion, drum set, synthesizer, or guitar.

Chamber music rituals

In a chamber music concert or a recital, there is usually no conductor, so the musicians do all the bowing and walking in and out.

Rituals of Opera and Ballet

The orchestra for opera and ballet is usually not onstage, but in the orchestra pit in front of the stage. In this setting, the concertmaster doesn't usually make a special entrance. After the orchestra has tuned, the audience claps for the arrival, in the pit, of the conductor.

Opera and ballet have lots of quirky rituals. The most surprising ritual is that the story may be interrupted without warning for the taking of bows. The performers may break character to accept the applause, or they may freeze while the audience claps, and then return to the action.

When the curtain comes down at intermission time, the main performers sometimes come through the curtain to take a bow.

Intermission

Most performances have an intermission in the middle, a chance for performers and audience to take a break. The musicians leave the stage; you may leave your seat. You will know that intermission is almost over when the lights dim in the lobbies, or when bells or announcements sound.

As a musician, I love it when the audience gets excited and makes a big racket at clapping time. I don't care whether they shout the correct word, or shout "Yeah!" or whistle, or do a teen scream. (Watch out, though: I hear that in some European countries, whistling means disapproval.)



Giving and Receiving

If all the clapping and bowing at a classical concert seems peculiar and old-fashioned, it might help to think of a concert as an energy exchange. The musicians send out musical energy, which the audience receives. At the end of a piece, it is time for the audience to give something back by clapping, and time for the musicians to receive it, by bowing.

Standing Ovations, Shouting, Whistling, etc.

An audience can show extra enthusiasm for the performers by standing up while they applaud. You may shout "Bravo!" if you like. (To be politically and grammatically correct, shout "Brava!" for a female performer, and "Bravi!" [BRAH-vee] for a group.)

Booing

Nowadays people generally respond politely to classical music concerts, but just a couple of generations ago things were much wilder. A new composition could cause a riot, or its composer might be carried through the streets in triumph. Even today, singers at a certain Italian opera house have to be ready to dodge produce thrown by the audience.

4. "CONCERT MANNERS"

There's nothing mysterious or difficult about how to act at a concert. It's mostly just common sense: the music needs silence, so the audience contributes silence; both the musicians and the audience want to concentrate on the music, so listeners stay put during a performance.

One aspect of concert manners can be a bit confusing: knowing when to clap. At most other kinds of concerts, people clap whenever the music stops, but in classical music you wait to clap until the very end of a piece.

A Quick Guide to Good Concert Manners

When music is playing:

1. Be quiet.
2. Stay put.
3. Don't clap until the whole piece is over.

You don't have to sit like a statue. You can breathe; you can shift your body in your chair. You can respond to the music, but your response will be inward. You might experience intense feelings while outwardly sitting quite still. This inwardness is part of the style and vibe of classical music. (Nowadays some classical events welcome more outward response, but most classical concerts cultivate an inner experience—emotion without motion.)

The basic idea is to help each other focus on the music. Making noise, fidgeting, or walking around can distract other listeners, and it may interfere with the musicians' concentration. We're all used to talking and moving around while the TV is on—it's easy to forget that at a concert the performers can see and hear the audience! Your attention and silence will help the musicians to perform a better concert. They can feel your involvement, and it inspires them to give their best.

When to Applaud

A common concern of listeners at classical concerts, and one of the chief obstacles to enjoying the music, is the dreaded Fear of Clapping in the Wrong Place. It's no wonder the audience is afraid: Classical musicians don't usually make clear what they expect of the audience.

In other kinds of music, the audience claps whenever there's an ending—if the music stops, people applaud. But in classical music, one piece may have several parts, each with its own ending. You are supposed to wait to the very end of the very last ending before you clap. The musicians want everyone to hear the complete piece as a total experience. Long pieces may involve several mood changes, and it's lovely not to disrupt these with applause.



This can be tough. Sometimes you can't tell if the piece is over. Sometimes you get so carried away by the music that you really want to clap. Sometimes you're so enthusiastic after a section ends that you've just got to clap for the musicians.

Don't do it.

I know it seems cruel to squelch that urge to applaud, but please wait for the very end of the whole piece.

How do you tell when a piece of music is really over? Quite often a classical piece has several sections, each with its own ending, and it can be hard to tell which ending is the final ending, the one you're supposed to clap for. How do you know when it's really the end of the whole thing?

When in doubt, simply wait until lots of other people are clapping.

By the way, this tradition of waiting to applaud until the very end of a piece is relatively new. In other times and places, audiences clapped throughout the music. Mozart, for instance, was proud to report in a letter to his father that there had been wild applause during his latest symphony. So if you feel an urge to clap before the very end of a piece, you're in tune with an authentic historical tradition.

One more thing about clapping: snobs might try to make this into a really big deal. Snobs are only too ready to sneer at people whose enthusiasm results in mis-timed applause. Such snobbery should be pitied but ignored.

I know of one, snobby music critic who has heaped shame on an entire county because he thinks their concertgoers applaud too much. Such unfortunate mud-slinging not only spatters concertgoers but also stains the music. On behalf of classical music, I apologize to all victims of snobbery. As a performer, I'd much rather play for overzealous applauders than for snobs.

Sounds that Get in the Way

- Mobile phones, pagers, and beeper watches (Turn them off!)
- Talking (You'd be surprised how many people get so excited that they forget they're not watching TV.)
- Whispering (You'd be surprised how many people think whispering is silent.)
- Unwrapping anything
- Coughing (If you have a cough, then bring cough drops—unwrap them beforehand, please!—or take cough medicine.)

- Squeaking a chair
- Opening a purse
- Jingling coins
- Rustling the program
- Saying “shhh”

Activities that Get in the Way

- Texting
- Fidgeting
- Passing notes
- Adding or subtracting clothes
- Messing around with belongings
- Eating
- Entering or leaving
- Walking around

You don't have to be tense or uptight through the concert. You don't have to hold your breath! But do help to create a silence in which the music can thrive, and a stillness that helps everyone to focus on that music.

When to Applaud, Part 2

In some situations you can clap whenever you like something. This is often the case at opera and ballet. The audience may applaud the lights dimming, the curtain opening, the first appearance of a major star, an impressive dance move, a lovely song, or a beautifully designed backdrop.

But it's not like this at every ballet and opera. If you get confused (and I get confused myself sometimes) just imitate the rest of the audience. And remember this: if you're not sure when to clap, it's not your fault. The performers are supposed to help you know when to clap, but they don't always make it clear.



What about Children?

Concerts are not for everyone. Babies and little children, for instance, can't be expected to follow the rules at a grown-ups' concert. Leave them at home until they are old enough to understand how to behave. Even some adults can't meet these standards of behavior. Some people can't be quiet. Some people can't stay in a chair. Some people snore. Use good judgment and consideration about whom you bring.

Legal Matters

At a concert you shouldn't take pictures or make a recording, and don't even think of making a video. It is distracting to do these things, and it is usually illegal. Besides, you are there to experience the concert, not to preserve it!

5. READING THE PROGRAM

At most concerts, each listener receives a printed program that says what will happen. This program may be as simple as a piece of paper or as elaborate as a book. Look for the "program page" that lists the music to be played. (If the program is a booklet, this page is usually in the middle somewhere. Some booklets include programs for several concerts.)



Titles

Since classical music comes from different times and places, the titles on the program page will often be in foreign languages. You might encounter different ways of titling the same piece, and even different spellings for a composer's name. (Classical music originated before the age of standardization, back when a word might have three different spellings on the same page!)

A piece might have a main title followed by a list of its sections, rather like a book's name followed by its chapters.

Different kinds of titles

Naming the piece:	<i>On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring</i> <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> <i>Quartet for the End of Time</i>
Naming the type of piece:	<i>Symphony No. 6</i> <i>Concerto for Violin and Orchestra</i> <i>Sextet in B-flat</i>
Naming the expressive character:	<i>Adagio misterioso (slow & mysterious)</i> <i>Allegro (lively)</i>
Traditional nicknames:	<i>Brandenburg Concerto No. 3</i> <i>"Eroica" Symphony</i>

Personnel List

Orchestral programs usually list the players and the instruments they play. Sometimes the list doesn't exactly match the players. There may be last-minute substitutions, or, for large pieces, extra players may have been hired. An orchestra's string players may be listed in alphabetical order, not by where they sit.

It can be fun to match the list to the instruments and people you see on the stage. Many concertgoers enjoy learning to recognize different musicians and what they play.

Biographies

Programs often include information about the featured performers. This is where you find out where else they have appeared, what recordings they have made, and what honors they have received. Don't expect to find many personal revelations; such biographies are usually written to impress you with the performer's professional accomplishments. Many performers also have their own web sites, where you can learn more about them.

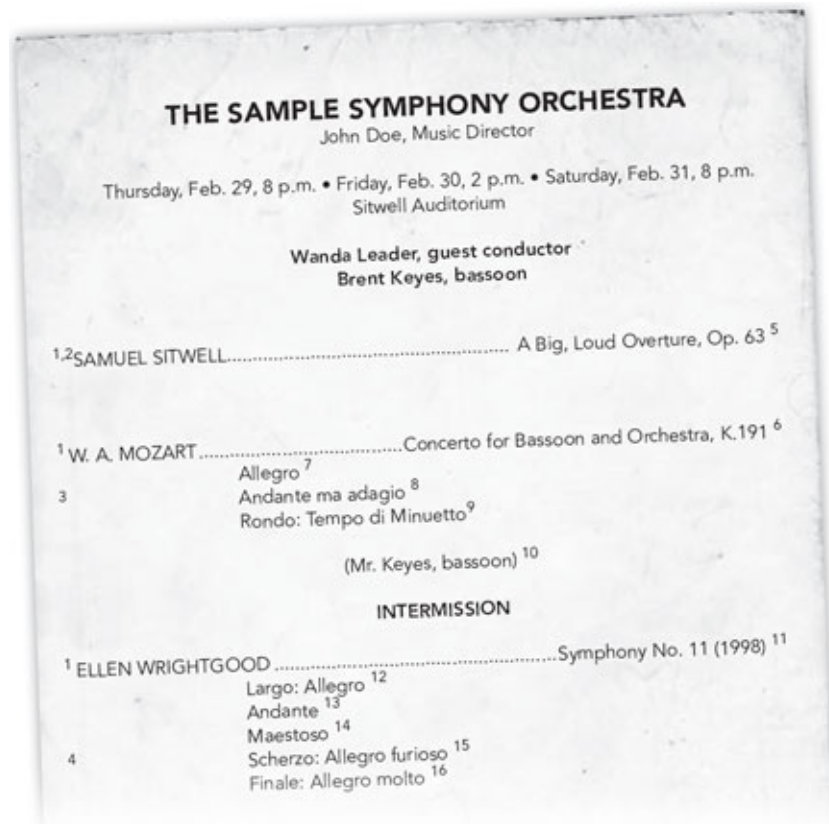
Program Notes

Some programs include short essays about the music, about the composer, or about the historical context. Some program notes describe what will happen in the music; some analyze the music or present historical background.

If information helps you enjoy music more, consider arriving at the concert early enough to read the program notes before the performance. Some organizations make their program notes available in advance of the concert, mailing them to ticket holders or posting them online. But beware: Although many program-note writers provide lively and insightful essays, some program notes might obstruct your enjoyment. If you don't find the program notes helpful, just ignore them!

Pronunciation (don't worry)

Classical music concerts are full of professional jargon, esoteric terminology, and foreign words. Don't worry about how to say everything. Some of these words are pronounced differently in different places, anyway.



Program Guide Key

1. There are three pieces in the concert.
2. The first piece doesn't have any separate sections listed, so it will probably be one continuous piece of music.
3. The second piece is divided into three sections, or "movements." Probably they will be separate and easy to count (so you'll know when to clap at the very end), but occasionally a composer pulls a trick and connects two movements without any silence in between.

These movement titles are the composer's indications of the speed and character of each movement. The titles might be in any language, but most often they are in Italian, the first international language of music.

4. Five movements.
5. "Op." or "Opus" means "Work." This is either the composer's 63rd published composition, or the 63rd piece that he wrote.
6. This is a catalog number. After Mozart died, a man named Köchel catalogued his compositions and gave each one a number, roughly in the order they were composed. A few other composers' works have catalog numbers, usually with initials indicating who organized the catalog.
7. "Lively"
8. "Walking tempo but slow"
9. "Rondo [see glossary] at the speed of a Minuet"

10. The name of the soloist in this piece.
11. For modern works, sometimes the year of composition is given instead of an opus number or catalog number.
12. The first movement starts out "Slow," but changes to "Lively."
13. "Walking tempo"
14. "Majestic"
15. "Scherzo" is a kind of movement [see glossary.] This Scherzo is to be played "Lively and furious."
16. "Finale: very lively"

6. WAYS TO LISTEN

There are lots of things to enjoy at a concert, lots of things to pay attention to. Your job is to be affected by the music, but you can be affected by whatever most appeals to you, or by whatever grabs your interest. Here are a few choices for what to listen to. Choose whatever you like, switch as often as you want, and feel free to add to the list.



Some things to enjoy in classical music

- Loudness and softness
- Changes and transformations
- Recognition of something heard earlier
- Different speeds
- Instrument sounds
- Melodies
- Rhythms
- Patterns
- Terrific performing
- Ebb and flow of energy
- Musical conversation
- Moods and feelings
- Memories that get triggered
- Visual images that come to mind

What to Watch

A concert is an event for the ears, but there is plenty for the eyes, too. Watch the players and feel their energy and intensity; watch what they do to make their instruments sound in different ways. Watch as the music moves between players, or between groups of players. Watch the way the conductor controls events, or how he or she gives control to the musicians.

What if I get bored?

Don't worry; it happens to all of us at one time or another. Sometimes you don't connect with the music. It's perfectly normal.

If this happens, just choose one of the many ways of enjoying the music.

What if I don't like the concert?

No one expects that you will like every moment of every concert. Remember, your job is to be affected, not to like everything.

Everybody's taste is different, so a concert that is wonderful for one person might be awful for another. All you can do is let yourself be affected by whatever the music has to offer.

I can remember one concert where I didn't like the playing, but I still noticed that the music was touching me.



Evaluating the Concert

Human beings instinctively want to evaluate their musical experiences. Some music critics give the impression that the listener's job is to pass judgment on the performance, and that the performer's job is to try to get a good rating, like an Olympic ice skater.

Of course we all try to pick concerts we will like, and we all talk about what moved us and what didn't. But don't be fooled by all the judgment that surrounds classical music. The listener's task is not to pass judgment; it is to be affected. Instead of asking yourself, "How good is this?" or "Do I like this?" you can ask, "What is happening now?"



Coping with Snobs

Snobs are everywhere, in every field. Baseball snobs sneer at neophytes who don't know Ty Cobb's lifetime batting average or Willie Mays' hat size. Computer snobs roll their eyes if you don't know ROM from RAM.

Classical music snobs can be some of the snobbiest snobs of all. They assert their superiority by showing off their knowledge and declaiming opinions. Often their snobbery masquerades as helpfulness, but snobs have a way of making ignorance appear to be shameful.

Nobody should feel ashamed of ignorance. If a classical music snob tries to shame you at a concert, don't take it personally. They're just showing off, and may be unaware of diminishing others.

Classical music has a reputation for snobbery, but in fact the audience is full of wonderful people who aren't snobs at all, people who come to enjoy the beauty of the music. These people know that what really matters is your willingness to open your mind and heart to the music.

What if I don't understand the music?

See "The Listener's Job Description" at the beginning.

7. MEETING THE PERFORMERS

After concerts many performers make themselves available to meet the audience, sign autographs, and chat. Some members of orchestras and chamber groups really like to hear from listeners. Even some of the most famous conductors, singers, and instrumentalists may take time to meet listeners.

Of course not every musician is willing to meet the public, and sometimes another engagement prevents a performer from staying around after the concert. But it's worth a try. Leonard Bernstein, for instance, would spend as much two hours greeting listeners after a concert. Whether or not the musicians are famous, this might be your chance to tell a performer or composer how the music affected you.

Some musicians sign autographs or recordings in the lobby at intermission or after the concert; some can be found backstage. Ask an usher where to meet the musicians, or look for the stage door or artists' entrance. You may have to wait for a while, but the fun of meeting the performers can be worth it.