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# Memories of the Concert Experience – What Remains?

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## Abstract

Music plays a key role in memory recall, often evoking vivid recollections. While research has focused on music-triggered autobiographical memories, little attention has been paid to how musical events themselves are remembered. This study examines how classical concert experiences are recalled, analyzing responses from 314 attendees of 11 concerts in Berlin (Germany) via an online survey six weeks later. We identified key aspects shaping concert memories, including the evaluation of the concert experience, aspects of the concert location, the musicians' energy and engagement, and memories of the music pieces, titles, and composers, as well as the different formats and social interactions. Findings reveal that not only the music but also various other event elements contribute to lasting impressions.

**Keywords:** Performance Studies, Audience Studies, Classical Music Concert, Audience Development, Cultural Studies

## 1. Introduction

If you love classical music concerts, and visit many of those over time, there are only few you will remember even years later. Many of them are just "incidents" and only a few "events", most of them will not be remembered, and only rarely will you still be enthusiastic about your concert experience. However, what aspects of these concerts remain in our memories, and what elements fade over time? This study seeks to explore the lasting impressions of a classical concert. (Böndel et al., 2025)

## 1.1 Core elements of the concert experience

Certainly, the central element of a concert is the music itself. In their 2022 study ‘Environmental Factors Affecting Classical Music Concert Experience’, Chen and Cabrera present results that support this argument. Their quantitative research (n=153) finds that the performance of the musicians and the acoustics are paramount for the overall concert experience. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale, they show that both acoustics and performance significantly impact enjoyment (Chen and Cabrera, 2022: 14). Additionally, the authors note that the concert venue and social aspects have an impact on the concert experience: ‘the hosting venue of the performance and the social aspect of concert-going are both related to going to a concert as a special event. These are not directly related to the performance but complete the experience of going to a concert’ (Chen and Cabrera, 2022: 14). While Chen and Cabrera focus on general perceptions without tying their survey questions to a specific event, our study delves into the particular experience of attending a real classical concert at a live venue.

Kawase, who focuses on the factors influencing the seat selection in a concert hall, compares answers of students, consisting of 60 undergraduate music majors with an average of 15.5 years of performing experience, and 65 non-music majors. The study, conducted in Japan, found that in both groups visual factors were prioritized over auditory factors (Kawase, 2013: 313). The extent to which Kawase’s findings are applicable to the field of memories of a specific concert experience is yet to be established. Through three quantitative experiments (n=50) investigating visual and auditory cues regarding seat preference in an opera theater, Jeon and his colleagues found that both factors play an important role when it comes to evaluating the auditory and visual quality of an opera experience. However, concerning the evaluation of seat preference in the opera theater, auditory cues are more influential (Jeon et al., 2008: 4280). Kawase’s study as well as that of Jeon and his colleagues examine the general perception of the importance of visual and auditory aspects in the context of the classical concert experience or the opera theater. These studies offer valuable insights and a good base for further exploration of visual and auditory aspects – especially in regard to the memories of one specific concert experience.

It worth considering whether the music itself plays a significant role in this context of memories of the concert experience. Alternatively, might it be the social aspect of attending a concert that leaves a more lasting impression on visitors? Frith, whose research concerns the importance of live music events, states that the ‘live’ aspect of the performance plays an important role when it comes to the social function of live music events (Frith, 2007: 11). Music is tightly bound to one’s sense of self, and it therefore plays an integral role in identity formation. Attending classical concerts is – as pop music – one way of sharing musical taste and claiming affiliation regarding classical genres. It is enlightening to examine Frith’s concepts in the context of our study and to gain insight into the influence of social aspects on the memories of a concert experience.

Cohen examines memories of past music events, she found that within rock concerts and festivals, the aspect of community is pivotal (Cohen, 2014: 143). The rock concert as a shared

experience – being part of an audience that distinguishes itself from others, attending an event at the same time and at the same place and feeling connected – constitutes the aspects that remain in the audience’s memory. Certainly, the rock concert and classical concert could not be more different regarding the ritualized process of attending and the invisible code of conduct: while the audience of Western classical concerts usually sits still and only claps after a whole work or piece, people attending rock concerts dance, jump, and bump into each other. At rock concerts people sing, shout, and whistle, which is usually encouraged by the lead singer. This form of physical engagement when attending the rock concert facilitates the dissolution of the barrier of anonymity between individuals – the act of singing or shouting the same song, arm in arm, can foster a sense of connection that is not achieved when two individuals are quietly seated next to each other without any physical contact. Consequently, the findings of Cohen’s study are only partially comparable with those of our own study, which focuses on the classical concert. Nevertheless, the social aspect in relation to recalling the classical concert experience might be a significant one.

Another aspect is the intensity of emotions felt during the concert. The emotional response to a musical performance might have an influence on whether an audience member retains memories of the concert in a positive or negative way. Although this seems obvious, we could not find any studies investigating how the emotions will affect the remembrance of the concert experience weeks later.<sup>1</sup>

Generally, it must be noted, there are numerous studies analyzing the recollection and evaluation of music, as well as several on concerts, and only a few are mentioned here. But, to our knowledge, none ask about memories several weeks after a specific concert experience. There are a few studies that model the concert experience as a holistic approach, focusing on the concert as an aesthetic encounter that involves the interplay of sensory perceptions, emotions, and cognitive processes. This approach seeks to understand how various factors – such as the listener’s expectations, emotional responses, and familiarity with the music – combine to create a unified and meaningful experience (Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 2021). However, despite the insights gained from these studies, little research has been done on how concert experiences are recalled after the event.

## **1.2 Enhancing classical concerts**

Since the recollection of the concert experience has been rarely analyzed, this study can provide valuable insights. Considering that classical concerts are primarily attended by an older demographic (Bradley, 2017; Gembris and Menze, 2020; Reuband, 2018; MIZ, 2023), it is inevitable that the demand for such events will decrease. To be able raise the attractiveness of classical music concerts to enhance the positive recollection of such an event, and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it can be interesting to look at research results at the level of individual pieces. Rating the felt emotions while listening to 11 songs from different genres (n=54), Schäfer, Zimmermann and Sedlmeier (2014: 8) found that the evaluation of the intensity of emotions felt during a past music event has an influence. According to the authors, the evaluation consists of all moments’ intensities, which are integrated, resulting in an averaged value. However, specific moments of high intensity appear to have an additional influence on the final evaluation.

encourage repeat visits, it is essential to identify the aspects of the concert experience that are most memorable.

To identify these aspects, the following presents a systematic characterization of the memories of the classical concert experience. In particular, we focus on the aspects of the concert experience stored in participants' long-term memory. This approach provides new insights into the question of what people actually remember after attending a classical concert, and therefore it might create a basis for further research, regarding, for example, the question of how classical concerts can be transformed to become valuable aesthetic experiences that might drive further concert visits.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Experimental frame and procedure

The data was collected within the project Experimental Concert Research (ECR), which aims to investigate the Western classical concert experience as well as the impact of different concert formats. In April and May 2022, a concert series of 11 concerts took place in Berlin. Two concerts were held at the Pierre Boulez Saal and nine concerts at Radialsystem. The Pierre Boulez Saal<sup>2</sup> mainly offers innovative solo and chamber music concerts, whereas Radialsystem<sup>3</sup> generally focuses on early and contemporary classical music, alongside new forms of staging concerts (Uhde et al., 2022).

Three concerts were performed by the emerging Yubal Ensemble,<sup>4</sup> and eight concerts by Ensemble Epitaph, which unites established artists (including Alban Gerhardt and Baiba Skride).<sup>5</sup> In each of the 11 concerts, one parameter of the concert frame was experimentally changed to measure the effects of different formats. Each concert was presented in one of the following formats: static-classical light, different dimmed lights for each of the music pieces, a moderation break during which the musicians were interviewed, screens in the background showing live-video close-ups of the musicians, an interactive task where the visitors were able to dedicate the concert to a deceased loved person through writing their name on a piece of paper before the concert, and amplified sound (in detail see Tröndle et al. 2025b). The musical program on all evenings consisted of the following pieces:

- 1) Ludwig van Beethoven, String Quintet op. 104 in C minor, Allegro con Brio
- 2) Brett Dean, *Epitaphs I–V*
- 3) Johannes Brahms, String Quintet op. 111 in G major

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.boulezsaal.de/en/about-the-hall>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.radialsystem.de/de/venue/uber-uns/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.radialsystem.de/de/veranstaltungen/konzserterleben-im-experiment-yubal-ensemble/?date=1651163400>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.radialsystem.de/de/veranstaltungen/konzserterleben-im-experiment-ensemble-epitaph/?date=1651336200>

People were informed about the project and the data collection before purchasing a ticket and could decide to buy either a participant ticket (6–8€) or a concert ticket without participation in the experiment (12–20€). Participant tickets could only be purchased after consenting to participation in the study.

Before and after the concert, the participants answered a standardized questionnaire on a tablet, which took about 20 minutes. This study does not thematize these entrance and exit surveys (in detail see Tröndle et al. 2025a).

At the end of the exit questionnaire, participants were asked whether they would like to provide their email address to participate in a *follow-up survey* six weeks later. This study analyses the results of that follow-up survey.

The investigation conducted in this project follows the guidelines set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki and adheres to the relevant regulations in Germany. Approval for the procedure was granted by the Ethics Council of the Max Planck Society, reference number 2702\_12.

## **2.2. Sample**

Of the participants who agreed to take part in the follow-up survey sent six weeks after the concert, 346 individuals opened the link that was provided via email and answered the questions. The adjusted sample is  $n=345$ , with an average age of 43.9. Within this group, 56.5% identify as female and 41.2% as male, while 2.3% prefer not to say.

## **2.3. Follow-up survey**

The follow-up survey was only sent to participants who previously agreed and voluntarily provided their email address within the exit survey that took place right after the concert. The email with the link leading to the questionnaire, hosted on LimeSurvey, was sent six weeks after the concert took place. Only after agreeing to the anonymous evaluation of their data and accepting the terms and conditions were participants able to answer the following four open questions, with a limited character count of 200:

1. In general terms, what do you remember from attending the concert?
2. Can you please tell us the composers and pieces that were played that evening?
3. Did anything about the evening particularly impress or move you? If so, what?
4. What else would you like to share with us?

## **2.4. Coding**

The entire approach, starting from the research interest, through the method of data collection, and up to analysis, is firmly rooted in the framework of grounded theory, meaning that the hypothesis and theory are derived from the collected data and its patterns become clear through the way the data is organized (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Meanwhile, it is important to mention that, with this approach of inductive reasoning, a strong emphasis is placed on

viewing theory as a process – an ever-developing entity rather than a perfected product (Glaser & Strauss, 1999: 32). With this approach in mind, the submitted replies of the follow-up survey were firstly merged into a spreadsheet to gain an overview, to be able to extract various categories. A table of main coding categories and descriptions was edited, and its use was tested by a second author to gain reliability. The results were discussed among the team. The created categories were transferred into the coding software Maxqda (MAXQDA2022, version 22.6.1) and the responses were individually coded. While coding and discussing among the team, it became clear that specifying these main categories by creating subcategories would contribute to more significant results. Therefore, the main codes in Maxqda were extended with subcodes, and where necessary the subcodes were even further extended with specific characteristics. For example, if an answer coded within the subcategory *general evaluation of the concert experience* was positive, then it was further coded and added to the characteristic ‘positive’. Contextual coding focused on phrases rather than single words. In a recursive manner, by analyzing the material, coding, and engaging in team discussions, the final coding was performed. For reasons of validity and increased clarity, every main category that contained less than 25 replies was excluded from further analysis. The coding method prioritized context, allowing the use of Maxqda’s Code Relations-Browser (CRB) to visualize overlapping codes and their frequency. This feature illustrated how many replies fell under multiple main categories. When overlaps were identified, the associated codes were revisited to explore how respondents related these specific factors.

### 3. Results

The following table (Table 1) refers to the quantity of replies that relate to the identified categories. In some cases, one reply fits multiple subcategories or features multiple characteristics, and therefore is coded several times. On the other hand, some replies fit only the main category and are too broad to be furtherly coded into a subcategory or specific characteristic. This results in the numbers of the subcategories not always matching the number of the main category.

Main categories	Replies—main categories	Subcategories	Replies—subcategories	Characteristics—subcategories	Replies—characteristics
Evaluation	172	general evaluation of concert experience	98	positive	96
				negative	3
		evaluation of music	82	positive	74
				negative	11

Concert location	196	architecture	72		
		atmosphere	68		
		seat location	12		
		stage	9		
		acoustics	10		
		survey room	4		
		temperature	1		
		smell	1		
		organization	6		
		catering offer	5		
		seating comfort	5		
		program booklet	3		
Musicians	206	visual impressions (facial expressions, clothing, age, gender)	28		
		quality of music making	35		
		energy and engagement	31		
		interaction and interplay	27		
		specific memory of single musicians	26		
		comparison of the two different ensembles	2		
		musicians' personalities	4		
		admiration	6		
	159	program variety,	56		

Music pieces and program		different styles of music			
		specific passages	19		
Names and titles	525	names of the composers	468	Beethoven	178
				Dean	88
				Brahms	202
		titles of the music pieces	57	String Quintet op. 104 in C Minor	18
				<i>Epitaphs I-V</i>	22
				String Quintet op. 111 in G major	17
Formats	87	order of the music pieces	13		
		moderation and interview	15		
		changing light conditions	31		
		orchestration with screens (stage setting)	24		
Social interactions	39	high degree of intimacy	22		
		low degree of intimacy	10		
Audience	34	individual relation and identification with audience	14		
		general memory of audience	17		
Emotions	121				

Table 1: Categories, subcategories, and characteristics with frequency of mentions

The main category *Emotions* does not contain any subcategories or specific characteristics, as most replies do not reveal what kind of emotions were felt during the concert and whether the emotions were positive or negative (e.g., ‘it was an emotional concert’).

### 3.1. People judge – And remember their opinion

Results show that evaluating the overall experience is a very common aspect when one is asked what is remembered of the concert. Of the participants, 44.9% remembered the concert experience by generally evaluating it. The submitted evaluations vary. Some are very general, such as where people only remembered whether they liked the whole evening or not, and others evaluate specifically the music. While differentiating the main category *Evaluation* into the subcategories *general evaluation of concert experience* and *evaluation of music*, we find that in both subcategories the vast majority rates the overall experience as well as the music positively. These evaluations regarding the overall experience as well as the music are usually very vague. People remembered the concert experience as ‘a very interesting evening, in many ways’ (xxdb8), ‘a very pleasant stay’ (6mfx), ‘an overall interesting event’ (sgzz3).

Half of these evaluations focus on the experience in general, while the other half more specifically evaluates the music: ‘I remember the unexpected amazing music’ (jq2db), ‘The concert was generally very well played’ (ur3us), ‘I really enjoyed the Beethoven – the playing was spectacular’ (t8dyn). The high number of statements that contain overall evaluations and general opinions about the concert and music already indicate that it is the overall impression of the concert that sticks within the concert visitor’s memory.

### 3.2. Ambiance matters

The main category *Concert location* contains all of the following aspects, which were treated as subcategories within the data analysis. The subcategories were built from comments on the *architecture* and the venue’s surroundings, the *atmosphere* of the room, the *seat location* in the concert hall, the *stage*, the *acoustics* of the concert hall, the *survey room*, the *temperature*, the *smell* of the location, the *organization* of the event, the *catering offer*, the *seating comfort*, and the *program booklet*. Our analysis encompasses the initial five categories, as the subsequent ones lack sufficient quality.

Most people who mentioned the *Concert location*, when asked what they generally remembered, also mentioned the *architecture* or surrounding and visual aspects of the venue: ‘the beautiful concert hall’ (eb9k4), ‘the concert space and setting and the view of the stage’ (dw9jf), ‘the simple interior’ (q34zu), ‘the nice short stay on the terrace’ (ctpb9), ‘great weather and short wait in the garden behind Radialsystem with a soda’ (bfean). It is notable that the memories of the main category *Concert location* and subcategory *architecture* were then mentioned together with the subcategory *atmosphere*. The survey responses show an apparent relation between the concert venue and the ambiance as perceived by the audience: ‘I remember the great room and nice concert atmosphere’ (wbzxm), ‘the beautiful hall, and the good mood, the pleasant feeling’ (vo7zc), ‘the pleasantly young and open-minded atmosphere at Radialsystem’ (5ux3z).

Another connection including the subcategory *atmosphere* was observed: responses including *seat location* were sometimes mentioned together with aspects of the subcategory *atmosphere*. Submitted responses include ‘I remember a very nice, creative atmosphere [...] and to experience the musicians in the front row was terrific’ (tw2qm), ‘you can experience

the artists very close and so to speak feel the vibration of the musical instruments' (fyax5), 'since we sat in the front row, I remember great closeness to the music' (a8pro); these are only a few examples of how the *seat location* and *atmosphere* are remembered together. The answers that address the *seat location* do this while referencing the proximity to the *stage*.

### 3.3. The artists – Center of attention

Within the third main category, *Musicians*, we find the following multifaceted aspects: *visual impressions* of the artists such as their clothing or facial expressions, the *quality of music making* and the artists' interpretation of the musical pieces, their *energy and engagement*, their *interaction and interplay* with each other, the *specific memory of single musicians*, the *comparison of the two different ensembles*, and memory of the *musicians' personalities*.

Regarding the aspect *visual impressions*, the replies usually contain memories of the musicians' facial expressions, bodily movements, clothing, approximate age, and gender: 'All dressed in black. Only one woman played, the rest were men' (gxpby), 'There was one male and the rest female. The first violin had a cool style' (to9e8), 'I remember the faces and movements of the musicians that were very expressive. Especially the central musician' (yrxqs). The aspect *quality of music making* was, on the one hand, often commented upon in a rather professional tone, mentioning skill and performance, but also elicited vivid, embellished descriptions: 'I remember the very good interpretation and execution of the music' (do6h4), 'the professionalism and high-class performance of the musicians' (en9px), 'The quality of the performance with technical and musical perfection' (qqwba), 'the musicians played so excellently, it deeply touched the soul' (3wz4m), 'I remember the vivacious, temperamental interpretation' (x2vdg). The third main aspect, when remembering the musicians, is *their energy and engagement* while playing: 'The enthusiasm of the musicians was palpable' (v3r4m), 'The performers enjoyed playing and that was conveyed to me' (en9px), 'In one of the two concerts I was very moved by the passion of the musicians' (bvzbf), 'The dedicated playing of the musicians with the associated great sound experience' (6xdex), 'High emotional engagement of all musicians' (ywrhg). Closely related to the aspect *energy and engagement* of the musicians is another subcategory: their *interaction and interplay* during the concert. As the results show, the harmony of playing, the synchronization, was often mentioned together with the energy the musicians radiate: 'I remember the emotions and the connection, "equal momentum" between the musicians' (afosj), 'How the musicians performed together and communicated with their instruments' (jrsm), 'I remember the atmosphere during the concert in general and the stage presence and interaction of the musicians' (98cte).

### 3.4. Genre and program

Concert attendees who remembered the musicians and how they looked, played, and communicated did not necessarily remember what they played specifically. However, results show that within the main category *Music pieces and program*, participants remembered the *program variety*, meaning the different types of classical music, *specific passages* within the different music pieces, the *titles of the music pieces*, and the *names of the composers*. Replies

regarding the *program variety* often include statements as to whether the music was unfamiliar as well as expressions of surprise that different types of classical music were all represented in one concert: ‘I remember the unusual mix of contemporary and classical music selections’ (dabmv), ‘I remember that the pieces were both classically melodic and atonal’ (j85p3), ‘it was unusual to have such different music in one concert; a very new experience’ (yf6g9), ‘It was an interesting selection of music pieces, first time hearing a piece by Brett Dean’ (sxm95). Frequently a general differentiation was made on the basis of the three composers’ different musical styles: ‘1st piece nice and melodic, 2nd piece hardly bearable, 3rd so-so’ (twbnz), ‘I remember the concert of about one hour with 3 works – 2 older and one contemporary’ (ndqhg). Even if the participants did not remember the *titles of the music pieces*, they often could still recall that different types of classical music that were played. Their memories of the music pieces consist of a rough distinction between the different types of classical music; rarely could participants recall *specific passages* within the individual pieces: ‘I remember the modern piece that opened with a kind of cello cadenza’ (f36cf), ‘I remember the unusual sounds made by the instruments during the modern piece, I can’t remember exactly but I think they were wind-like and disharmonized’ (99tjo), ‘I found the cello solo segment in Brett Dean’s piece surprisingly lyrical’ (kkx8n), ‘I remember the end of the Beethoven, some of the Brett Dean, most of the Brahms’ (cmzso). It is notable that most people remember ‘the modern, contemporary piece’ (ndqhg), where ‘string instruments were used in an unorthodox way’ (mcgsr), which refers to the musical pieces composed by Brett Dean. However, when it comes to remembering the *names of the composers*, Ludwig van Beethoven and Johannes Brahms were the ones remembered more frequently: 22.03% of the participants remembered Dean’s name; 56.69% Beethoven; and 64.33% Brahms. Regarding the *titles of the music pieces*, it is remarkable that, overall, they were only rarely remembered: Dean’s *Epitaphs I–V* was named by only by 7.01% of the participants; Beethoven’s String Quintet op. 104 C minor by 5.73%; and Brahms’s String Quintet op. 111 in G major by 5.41%.

### 3.5. The concert format can cause surprise

Another factor that participants sometimes remembered were aspects of the various *Formats* within which the concerts took place. The main category *Formats* can be subdivided into: the *order of the music pieces*, the *moderation and interview* with the musicians between pieces, the *changing light conditions*, and the *orchestration with screens* in the background during the modern music, displaying photos of friends of the composer Brett Dean who had passed away and who had influenced the creation of the music as well as live videos showing close-ups of the musicians (see 2. Materials and methods). The replies regarding the different aspects of the formats often include expressions of surprise, confusion, perplexity, or bewilderment: ‘I remember the peculiar jumble of the program’ (9j4mf), ‘I remember the initial confusion caused by the swapped sections’ (6xdex), ‘I was able to enjoy the mixed sequence of music after I stopped being confused’ (obafb), ‘I remember the alternation between the pieces, as well as the surprise that they were not played individually in their entirety one after another’ (ekbnx). Regarding the *moderation and interview*, again two dimensions of memory can be observed. As the results show, either the participants remembered very generally that an

interview took place or they had more detailed memories and recalled the *musicians' personalities* by the answers they gave: 'I remember the superfluous moderation' (ywrhg), 'The musicians were very empathetic' (uusmp), 'the honesty of the musicians during the Q&A sessions' (wmbwb), 'I remember the conversations with the musicians between the pieces, and actually also the content and humor / character of the musicians' (gk6dk), 'I remember the moderation, the conversations with the ensemble ... – I liked that' (wyb5e). The *changing light conditions* in the concert were also an aspect of the category *Formats* that received attention in the memories of the participants: 'I remember the beautiful reddish brown light on the stage' (9j4mf), 'The light concept that distinguishes between Brahms, Beethoven (warm) and Brett Dean (blue)' (afosj). A recurring observation can be made here again with regard to the light settings: comments on the *atmosphere* and how the *changing light conditions* made participants feel. Similar to the already described replies regarding the *Concert location*, results show that the atmosphere seems to have been remembered quite frequently as well whenever the light settings were mentioned: 'I remember the special atmosphere and mood created by the lighting' (9mu9n), 'The lights and scenography was very minimalistic. Felt very simple and accessible' (yrxqs). Similar to the replies addressing the changed order in which the music pieces were played, confusion and irritation can be observed regarding the replies that address the screens in the background: 'I remember the videos which strained me' (vwd7q), 'I was wondering what the photos of these people meant' (bechn), but also 'The camera shots during the classical music irritated me' (q5fwe), 'I found the staging to be unpleasant – having video recording running parallel to the musicians distracted me greatly' (s5kze), 'however, at times I found the stage design to be overly cluttered' (usv9v).

### 3.6. The concert as social experience

One factor influencing the evaluation of the concert generally is pleasant or unpleasant social interactions. This main category *Social interactions* is divided into the subcategories *low degree of intimacy* and *high degree of intimacy*. Some replies were kept formal and merely described the social conditions in which the concert was attended: 'we were four people' (wvbb), 'I invited three friends' (2rbzm), 'I remember my companion' (2axbe). Others, by contrast, emphasized the intimate connection in relation to the social interactions at the concert: 'I remember holding hands with my new lover' (qbrgm), 'The wonderful feeling of having been at the concert with my friends' (sgzz3), 'I was delighted about the concert experience with an old friend' (xczq4), 'I liked spending the evening with my wife' (nrxxu). Similar to the subcategories *high degree of intimacy* and *low degree of intimacy* within the main category *Social interactions* we find two different types of answers when it comes to memories regarding the audience. Therefore, the main category *Audience* also consists of two subcategories. The first is *individual relation and identification with the audience*, where the participants remembered the other people in a way that related back to themselves as individuals. Results show that some participants remembered themselves as being part of the crowd, experiencing the concert as a form of communal event: 'I remember the nice ambiance and a feeling of community with the other participants sitting in the Pierre Boulez Saal' (apqa5), 'Having the musicians in our midst and being able to see the other visitors' (wedax).

Second, as indicated by the second subcategory *general memory of audience*, the results show that participants also remembered the audience in a very general and broad way that did not relate to them as individuals being part of a community: ‘I remember many people attending the concert’ (znttv), ‘I remember that the audience was quite young’ (tdc2a).

### **3.7. Music can cause a rollercoaster of emotions**

Emotional involvement is an aspect that cuts across all categories. Results show that especially the music itself evoked certain emotions: ‘I remember the first piece as very moving’ (agbbk), ‘The epitaph pieces were impressive in their mood’ (cc6hc), ‘The roller coaster of emotions because the composers all represented different types of music’ (sxcb4), ‘I remember the completely different emotions experienced while listening to different composers – with the more modern one, I even felt a bit nauseous’ (6n3wa), ‘I remember that my emotions shifted from joyful to disconcerted because of the music’ (eb9k4). But the replies also indicated that (besides the music) the concert as a special event, an experience outside of everyday life, can evoke strong emotions: ‘I vividly remember the joy of experiencing music live’ (v3r4m), ‘I remember feeling happy but at the same time feeling heartbroken. Cried a lot during the concert’ (brg6j), ‘It was one of my first live concerts after “COVID-19”. That alone made it moving’ (obafb). However, some replies indicated that neither a live concert as a special event nor classical music itself guarantee emotional intensity: ‘I wasn’t exactly impressed or moved’ (ptxbc), ‘It was a good concert, but I was not particularly moved’ (tdc2a), ‘I was no more impressed or moved than by other music I listen to’ (9mdzv), ‘This was not one of the few truly lasting concerts that rarely materialize. Very good, but not moving’ (qx7dn).

### **3.8. Overall**

After differentiating the individual categories, the following figure provides an overview. The word cloud (Fig. 1) shows the frequency (see Table 1) with which the main categories were mentioned. Some of the main categories are represented through their associated subcategories due to the frequency of mentions and for better clarity (e.g. ‘Beethoven’, ‘Brahms’, ‘Dean’ instead of ‘names of the composers’). To be sure, the following is only an overview of the analysis of the answers given six weeks after the concert experience; more differentiated insight is provided in the previous Results section (3.1 to 3.7).

# Evaluation

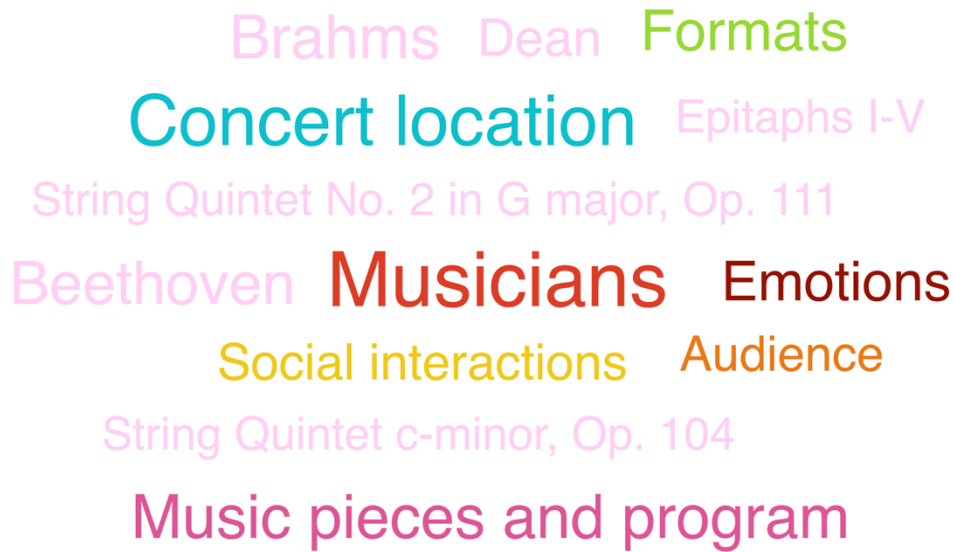


Fig. 1: Word cloud of the most frequently mentioned categories. The musical piece the quotes refer to: Ludwig van Beethoven, String Quintet op. 104 in C minor, Allegro con Brio. Brett Dean, Epitaphs. Johannes Brahms, String Quintet op. 111 in G major.

## 4. Discussion

It is natural for humans to evaluate their environment, so it is not surprising that most participants remembered whether they did or did not like the concert experience. While specific details may have faded, participants typically recalled *why* they liked or did not like the event. This study reveals that these reasons vary based on personal preferences and priorities, highlighting the complexity of remembering classical concerts.

### 4.1. Our results compared to previous research

Chen and Cabrera conclude that ‘performance and acoustics were both considered very important [...] while architecture design, social factors, and other attributes were slightly important’ for the overall enjoyment of a concert (Chen and Cabrera, 2022: 791). Our study can confirm this, but we also have to add several new categories. In fact, in our study, in which the concerts took place in two different concert halls, the acoustics were rarely mentioned compared to the architecture. A reason for the difference between the two studies could be that Chen and Cabrera did not investigate on the basis of particular memories but asked in more general terms about important factors for an enjoyable concert experience.

In examining the memories of *seat location* in the concert hall, we discovered that the participants who took part in our specific study associated this aspect with proximity to the stage. The fact that a greater number of participants referenced the physical attributes of the artists they recalled, the artists’ interplay, their communication, and their engagement while

performing indicates that the preferred proximity to the stage is influenced more by visual factors than by auditory factors. The interpretation that visual factors are of significance to the concert experience, and that it is not primarily about the acoustics, is consistent with the findings of other earlier studies. Kawase found in his study on seat selection in a concert hall that students, whether majoring in music or not, tended to prioritize visual aspects over auditory ones when choosing a seat. He concludes that ‘the audience members thus chose seats quite consciously with regard to the visibility of the performers, and when having to choose between better visibility or better sound, they considered visibility more important for many types of performance’ (Kawase, 2013: 312). Jeon and his colleagues, who in 2008 conducted three quantitative experiments on the effects of visual and auditory cues regarding seat preference in an opera theater, found that ‘both the perceived acoustical quality and the perceived visual quality in opera houses correlate with positive evaluation of the auditory-visual quality’ (Jeon et al., 2008: 4282), meaning that both factors play an important role. Regarding seat preference, the research team found that ‘auditory cues were more influential in evaluating seat preference than visual cues in the opera theater’ (Jeon et al., 2008: 4282). Jeon et al.’s experiments, conducted in a controlled laboratory environment, presented participants with static images of stage views, and our study examined real-time experiences in a live concert setting, which could account for the varying results. Nevertheless, all three studies collectively highlight and affirm the importance of visual elements within the context of a concert hall.

Our study found that participants generally remembered the types of music or genres played, rather than specific melodies. Some participants noted that they recalled the modern classical pieces but couldn’t repeat any melody. However, only a few participants in our study were able to recall the titles of the pieces performed, indicating that other contextual information was more memorable.

The observation that participants were surprised regarding the mixing of different genres can be extended, including the expressed surprise about the unfamiliar formats. The results indicate that irritating aspects, which attract more attention in the moment, are also then later on more present when remembering the concert experience. However, whether these memories of the unexpected formats contributed positively or negatively to the overall evaluation of the concert experience, and whether they made the concert experience more or less enjoyable, appears to be dependent on individual subjective preferences.

Participants who mentioned their social interactions during the event described their relationships with the other individuals they attended with and their own position in relation to the audience. But compared to other aspects, such as the *Concert location* or the *Musicians*, the aspect of the concert being a social event and the memories of social interactions were rarely mentioned. It is noteworthy that participants recalled the individuals who accompanied them to the concert and the audience as a whole, yet did not frequently or enthusiastically mention the concert as a shared, communal experience. This finding is distinct to other observations examining the experience of live concert events. The aspect of sharing musical taste and experiencing the concert as ‘public celebration of musical commitment’ (Frith,

2007: 14) is, however, not something we found distinctly in the recollections of the participants. This may also be due to the fact that Frith refers to pop music, whereas the subject of our research is the classical concert. Additionally Cohen, who investigates memories of live rock concerts by using the method of map-making, found that ‘live music events tended to be remembered as a unique social, collective and participatory experience’ (Cohen, 2014: 137). Cohen and her colleagues investigated historical memories of rock concerts, such as the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in New York State in 1969, that were characterized by collective dancing and singing (Cohen, 2014: 152), whereas the classical concerts in our study were characterized by a more reserved and calm audience that did not share communal moments of collective singing or dancing. It is difficult to compare the two studies because these historical festivals, which lasted several days, were founded upon a strong ideological foundation and served as a social interaction space for individuals with shared beliefs and values. Nevertheless, this discovery of discrepancies may serve as a foundation for contemplating approaches to transforming the conventional classical concert experience into one that is more social in nature, wherein individuals perceive themselves as members of a community that collectively engages with a shared love for classical music.

## **4.2. Conclusion**

The results of this study show that a classical concert experience is remembered through a complex interplay of visual and auditory factors that all of that influence an audience member’s overall evaluation and leave a lasting impression on their memory. Attendees often remember the general atmosphere, including elements such as the venue’s architecture, their seat’s proximity to the stage, and the musicians’ energy and engagement. Interestingly, recall of the titles of specific music pieces or melodies was less common, with memories of a variety of genres and the names of the composers (Beethoven and Brahms) taking precedence. Even though social interactions with acquaintances, friends, or loved ones and the audience in general was remembered, the classical concert experience was not frequently described as a communal, shared, or emotionally connecting experience. Emotional impressions associated with the variety of genres seem to be anchored in the memory, however. Furthermore, the use of innovative concert formats and unexpected elements such as lighting changes and stage settings were also remembered. This highlights the importance of novelty and innovation when thinking about developing the classical concert and thus also increasing interest for some segments of the audience. However, some responses indicate that the unexpected formats caused irritation and were therefore a negative influence, considering the overall evaluation of the event. At this point, further investigation is required to ascertain whether there are any regularities in the manner in which people respond positively or negatively to unexpected concert formats (see Tröndle 2025a, 2025b).

Nonetheless, the research results, based on 11 concerts, indicate that novel aspects are remembered and therefore important for concert attendees. These findings offer a base for concert organizers to adapt classical performances in ways that respond to the aspects that remain in the participants’ memories. By transforming these insights into action, the classical concert experience can evolve, not just to be remembered, but to resonate across a broad audience.

### 4.3. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into how classical concert experiences are remembered, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused on a specific set of concerts in Berlin, which may not capture the concert experiences of attendees in other cultural or geographical contexts. Furthermore, the study concentrated on Western classical music, which limits the applicability of findings to other genres and musical traditions. Finally, while the grounded theory approach allowed for in-depth qualitative analysis, the subjective nature of coding and interpretation may introduce researcher bias, even with efforts to ensure reliability. Future studies should aim to address these limitations by including more diverse samples and music genres to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how music events are remembered. Another way in which future studies could build on the results of this study is by analyzing single aspects of concert memories in depth. Additionally, evaluation of the concert and its specific aspects directly after the concert, and then how the concert is remembered weeks later, could be analyzed to gain a better understanding of the concert experience.

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