



# Alternative concert formats – what works best?

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New World Symphony in the US wanted to develop new concert formats that attracted new, younger and less-experienced concert-goers. They developed four formats. To give them all a chance of success, all four were programmed each season for three years and carefully evaluated.

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**Mini-concerts:** three 30 minute concerts in one night, at 7.30pm, 8.30pm and 9.30pm, each with a different programme. Tickets cost \$2.50 for each concert. They feature a commentary about the music by one or two musicians and video and image projection.

**Encounters:** the music and a scripted presentation with video are integrated seamlessly. The concert is followed by drinks with the orchestra at an all-in cost of \$25.

**Journeys:** three hour concerts with two intervals featuring one composer's work. Although marketed as an alternative format, they represent the traditional concert format in this research experiment.

**PULSE:** part club night and part concert lasting four hours and starting at 9.30pm. The concerts alternated DJ mixes with amplified orchestral performances with lighting and video projection, ending with a full-on party. The front seven rows of seats were removed so audiences could stand, sit or walk around close to the musicians. Following audience feedback, information about the music was projected onto the hall's acoustic sails and texted during the concert and small, unplugged concerts were also staged in a quiet, secondary space.

## Results

- Alternative formats do attract new audiences. Over four years, 3,000 first time ticket buyers bought 10,000 tickets
- Alternative formats attracted bigger audiences than free concerts
- Audience satisfaction ratings were very high for all four formats

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- 37% of first time ticket buyers at alternative formats bought for another concert within a year and over two years almost half came back
- The key factors in whether people felt positive about coming to another concert were the strength of their emotional response and whether they felt they had gained a better appreciation of classical music
- New audiences for alternative format concerts were more likely to buy a ticket for another paid-for event.
- The orchestra expected audiences to move on a linear path from alternative formats to traditional concerts. This did not happen. Different audiences were developed around each format.

### **Which format worked best?**

Mini-concerts attracted the most first time ticket buyers and the youngest, most diverse audience, followed by PULSE events. Even though Mini-concerts lasted just 30 minutes, audience rated the emotional resonance and aesthetic impact slightly higher than audiences at the three hour Journey concerts. A third of people who came to one mini-concert stayed for a second that night.

PULSE events attracted the most people who rated themselves as ‘not very knowledgeable’ about classical music, followed by Mini-concerts and Encounters. Each PULSE event sold out with an audience of 1,600.

Encounters appealed particularly to young professionals who went on to dinner after the concert and drinks. The social element was just as important as the music but not more important. The first of these concerts was called Symphony with a Splash with cocktails preceding the concert. Audiences said they wanted the music first then the drinks and that the educational element should be emphasised. The name was therefore changed to Encounters. Audiences did not want a lecture followed by the music: they valued the theatrical enthusiasm of the speaker and the integration of the presentation throughout the concert.

Journey concerts attracted by far the fewest first time ticket buyers, under 45s and people who rated themselves as ‘not very knowledgeable’.

More knowledgeable audiences also valued the informative talks at Mini-concerts and Encounters and did not feel patronised.

Thanks to Andrew Burke of London Sinfonietta for telling me about the research. You can read more at <http://www.nws.edu/ResearchAtNWS.aspx>

There are several documents: the conference presentation is easiest to read and has photographs of the different concert formats.

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