



# The enactment of tastemaking in contemporary music

**AHRC Cultural Value Project**

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## Background in cultural / creative industries ...

- Chancellor Fellow, University of Edinburgh.
- Lecturer in Creative and Cultural Industries, University of St Andrews
- Research Fellow, University of St Andrews – ESRC project on the enactment of management in music festivals
- Post doctorate, University of St Andrews – exploring creative and management practices in advertising
- PhD – An exploration of the life histories of advertising creatives, University of Edinburgh
- Senior Market Researcher – Scott Porter Research (Edinburgh) and MRUK (Glasgow)
- Advertising account manager – WAM/McCann-Erickson (Edinburgh)

## Background to study: AHRC Cultural Value Call - “[To explore] Less Well Developed Lines of Research...”

- **“Qualitative evidence should not be seen as a fallback position when quantitative is not available – there will be no prioritising of one over the other, but rather recognition of the need to seek the most appropriate and robust evidence.”**
- **“Case studies will be an early priority for the Cultural Value Project because they will not simply be a source of evidence and evaluation...to get a better and more nuanced understanding of what constitutes value and how we might think about it.”**
- **“The role of cultural activity in helping to shape reflective and engaged members of society”. Focused on the benefits of:**
  - an enhanced reflectiveness;
  - an appreciation of the other and an understanding of oneself;
  - an ability to reflect on difficult aspects of one’s own life and that of others;
  - a sense of the diversity of human experience and values.”
- **“Develop a set of terms and vocabulary to capture this aspect of cultural value.”**

# Qualitative Research

- **Depth not breadth:** don't focus on the sample numbers, inserted for transparency
- Key and consistent themes: **comparative analysis** (Grounded Theory, Glaser and Strauss, 1967)
- Insights of cultural value in contemporary music from **'insiders'** – attenders, musicians, venue managers, creative directors and **'outsiders'** - potential audiences

# Theoretical framework



- **Our methodological approach acknowledges the complexity of cultural value....**
  - **Within society there are diverse range of values and meanings associated with these values, especially in relation to cultural value.**
  - **An innovative way of exploring this complexity: taste-making.**
- Taste-making is a situated activity that rests on learning and knowing how to appraise specific performances of a practice (Gherardi, 2009).
- **In this way music can be understood by studying the social and organisational practices of its creation, performance and communication, as well as its enjoyment; these are all music practices.**

# Theoretical framework



- **Taste shapes and is shaped within difference practices and is refined through negotiation and reflectivity**, in order to express aesthetic judgments of it (Gheradi, 2009). For example:
  - gaining pleasure from music is a form of attachment socially supported by the respective **communities of practice, which have developed vocabularies and specific criteria of taste and value in order to communicate, share and refine the ways in which such practices are enacted.**
- **This research involved exploring such enactments of taste-making and cultural value among the different communities of music practitioners.**

# Research and Impact Objectives



## Research Objectives

- To elucidate what constitutes **successful performance experience and thus cultural value among the different practitioners**
- To **identify and analyse taste-making and values that are enacted during contemporary performances** (among all practitioners)
- To **elicit and analyse the values practitioners espouse to drive their practices and perceived values in action**
- To **conceptualise the influencing factors in the practitioners' taste-making, values, actions, interactions and performance**
- To identify combined patterns of interaction, values and taste-making that facilitate or inhibit successful performance.

## Impact Objectives

- To **develop insights from the selected setting for broader application in the creative industries and beyond.**
- To **activate learning from the research in skills and capacity building for the practitioner, policy and academic communities.**

# Method



- Case Studies: 2 regional contemporary classical music ensemble – Red Note (Edinburgh) and Psappha (Manchester)
- 4 x focus groups:
  - 2 x attender groups (conducted before and after performances)
  - 3 x non attender groups (those who had not attended a Psappha or Red Note performance but with an interest in music/ arts)
- 2 x Artistic Director depth interviews
- 2 x composers
- 3 Venue Manager depth interviews
- 10 musician interviews (face to face and telephone)
- Attender Performance diaries
- Observation of performances (2x Psappha; 1x Red Note)
- Fieldwork conducted: October – December 2013

“Red Note have got this amazing football team together of all the best players...**a musical dream team...**”

## Red Note

- Formed 2008 by Robert Irvine
- Robert and John Harris are co-artistic directors
- Flexible large-scale Scottish-based professional contemporary music ensemble comprising up to 20 players
- Red Note’s twin foci as a company:
  - the development, commissioning and performance of new contemporary music to the very highest standards
  - reaching and developing new and underserved audiences for contemporary music through the development of new event formats, participation and education initiatives, and venue and promoter partnerships throughout Scotland and beyond.





# Psappha

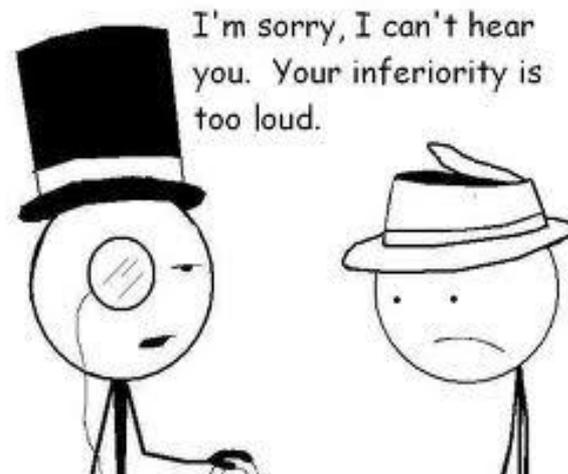
- Formed in 1991 by its artistic director Tim Williams
- The group specialises in the performance of music by living composers and that of the 20th and 21st centuries
- In its role as Contemporary Ensemble in Residence at The University of Manchester Psappha encourages the breaking down of barriers between artistic and educational experiences
- In August 2011 Psappha became the University of Salford MediaCityUK Ensemble in a unique partnership which uses the latest in media and digital technology to create exciting new ways of performing.
- Psappha is continually seeking to develop new audiences and break fresh ground through its innovative development of the digital dissemination of its work through free-to-view films of live performances

“There is a weird snobbery around contemporary classical music...elitist even and the which creates uncertainty for potential new audiences...and gives it baggage” (Musician)

## Audience development: Contemporary Classical - the ‘hard end’ of cultural value...

“It has got this reputation for being plinky plonk...squeaky gate and it has not shaken that off” (Musician)

- Range of terminology used by musicians:
  - “Contemporary music”
  - “Modern music”
  - “New Music”



Value

## Vocabulary around value in contemporary music: **musicians**

“The ensemble has to be intact, otherwise you lose the integrity of the music”

- “Wanting to do stuff that is new and different... contemporary beauty”
- **Challenge:** “I need to be involved in stuff like that...going into these things with a positive attitude” (musician)
  - intellectual and musical challenge
  - stretches you personally and is challenging to the listener
  - challenge – communicating something of value
  - learn things quickly: positive attitude
  - managing the complication of the unusual
  - willingness to play an ambitious piece
  - master new skills
  - mathematical challenge
  - challenge rhythmically / conceptual challenge – new complexities
  - “Fiendishly difficult”: “World that is deeply uncomfortable”

## Vocabulary around value in contemporary / music : **musicians**

“You have to have commitment to do extraordinary things on your instrument, so you need to believe in it”

- **Texture / Colours:** “For me it is the colours, textures, what the players might be doing...also in new music performance there are often so many diverse elements that are drawn together ...**soundscapes**” (musician)
- **Intelligence /cerebral / emotional / “piece awareness”** – “you can make it make it your own”
- The **experience of the not expected:** “there is more enjoyment when there is a risk”
- **Energy** of live music / experience of live music / energy on stage – drives the commitment
- **Physicality** - tangible feeling / connection / physical
- New music / **different ways to connect with people** / different ways for people to listen
- Like being the first: **“freshness”/ “newness”** ... “Find your own voice”
- Good performance – **striving for perfection** / **giving the best you can for the music and the composer** – do justice to the piece
- **Experience:** Extreme / frightening experience / lost in the experience / lost in the world / learning experience / powerful experience

## **Musicians: the value of playing contemporary music “Taking a journey with the composer”**

### **“Commitment to the genre”**

- “You have to have a **commitment to the genre**...you cannot sit there doing whatever kind of extraordinary thing you have been asked to do on your instrument if you don’t believe it”
- “Often for one 10 minute piece you might have to put **hours and hours of practice in to learning how to do these funny kind of noises**”

### **Passion: “I switched to new music...”**

- “The whole approach is different, I had a classical background. I grew up through youth orchestras and wind bands and things, but for me it just wasn’t in my blood...**I did not feel passionately about the music to devote my life to it...so I switched to new music** ...there is a much broader range of things you can do”

### **Relevance:**

- “**New Music is relevant to do us today**...it expresses we are dealing what we are today”
- “Important to look at things that are being created today...to **approach music in a fresh way**”

New music



**Musician:** “What’s to  
be gained  
in just doing ‘old’ music?  
It’s just daft to ignore new music”



### **Contemporary build on classical: progressing the genre**

- “It is important not to stultify as a musician or as a genre...that is the importance new music...we need new music...we need new Mozarts”

### **“Music for composers...not a cog in a machine”**

- “With classical I am selling myself as an interpreter of music...with contemporary I have the **intellectual and technical challenge** of communicating how important that work is... I am communicating something of value”
- “Extremely intellectual ...a mathematical challenge”
- “With contemporary it’s a different sound world”
- “Stretching non traditional things...punishing to the instrument”

## Creative Directors: Value from Music

“I personally like things that screw my head up...that my make my brain running down the same old tracks...that make me look at the world in a different way or hear things in a different way, however challenging that is”

- “I don’t really have an artistic agenda in the sense that I don’t really have a ‘I think contemporary music should be like this’ ...**I’m quite up for programming things I don’t like**, but that I can see they have value...people find value in them...the Glass is a classic example, I’m not a fan at all but I can see that it has value”
- The core set of values...we’ll check against them...we’ll always go back to them if we think something is drifting a certain way. I think that the key , **the very heart of it is how good the playing was...if players are of excellent quality and they turn out excellent performances...**
  - They’re not on the back foot, they’re always on the front foot
  - They’re positive
  - They’re precise
  - They’re communicative

**Creative Director:** “I hate performances that are removed from the audience...I like it when it is full, when there’s a really great atmosphere in the room”

- And...
  - Was it the right venue?
  - How was the whole thing framed?
  - Was the audience engaged and comfortable?
  - Could the audience see? Could the audience hear?
  - What did they feel?
  - Was it in a space where they felt welcomed?

**“If those things are in place then some of the secondary things like, was it a financial screw up somehow become less important”**

**Non Attenders:** “Recently when I have been off and been using different techniques to relax I have got quite into listening to classical music on the radio. I don’t know much about it but I like it”

**Non Attenders: (“conservative” musical taste / experience the familiar)**

- Theatre
- Cinema
- Art galleries
- Exhibitions
- Museums
- Comedy clubs
- Internet: iTunes
- Concerts / music tastes: Deacon Blue, Gary Barlow, Simple Minds, Take That, Bon Jovi, Five, 911, Simple Minds, Christy Moore, Jazz, Celine Dion, Beyonce, Jay-z, Snow Patrol, 80s music, Abba, Bee Gees, Michael Buble, One direction

“I listen to any kind of music as long as the lyrics are ok...lyrics are very, very important”

## Non Attenders: Value from Music

- Rhythm
- Emotion
- Passion
- Talent
- Enjoyment
- Connecting
- Memories
- Poetry
- Identify themselves through music
- Environment
- Engagement
- Relaxation
- Defines different moods / activities: bed/ cooking / cleaning...
- Evokes memories
- Escapism: “I guess it is a bit of a release from the everyday world”

“I really enjoy making music with other people. I think that’s a big part of why I like music”

**Musical tastes (attenders: experimenters / reflective)**

- Classical
- Acapella
- Progressive rock
- 70s blues rock
- Contemporary industrial metal and stone rock
- Progressive metal
- African music
- Contemporary
- Opera (Contemporary / Traditional)
- Choral music
- “I like anything from Madonna to Napalm Death”
- “Zappa: “Mood and music go together...whatever mood I am in he has got something for me”

“It’s about taking abstract things and applying them to more concrete ideas. Sometimes you go to concerts you get a different creative perspective on something”

## Attendees: Value from Music

“I think on a kind of emotional level the kind of feelings you get from listening to music are different to any other aspect of life ...I agree with the self-therapeutic thing”

- Self therapeutic
- Self-expression
- Emotion
- Relaxation
- Rhythm
- Defines different moods / activities: bed/ cooking / cleaning...
- “Contemporary music...I just like the beauty of it , I particular like music that most people find a bit dissonant”
- “It’s a mood thing ...something that just conflicts with your idea of what is actually good and then the way you can just flick that round” (and relates to context)
- Journey with musicians: “The Transatlantic sessions...I tend to go off and go on a journey in my mind ...because the harmonies, they have really interesting instruments...it is such a rich thing”

## Vocabulary around value in contemporary: **Attenders and Non attenders**

“Feels alienating, like something is wrong with me for not being able to appreciate it” (attender note during performance)

- Too academic / Too cerebral / Uneducated view
- 1970s piece – still a challenge to pieces
- Too out there / It loses you
- Quite abrasive
- Excluded -
- Make fool of self
- Confused about what is going on
- Need to research / be educated / lack of knowledge
- “Feels alienating”

Concluding thoughts: “...A cultural experience can mean so many things to different people and have many different intended outcomes and impacts.”

- Not qual versus quant: taken together these methods are complimentary or at least contribute to a ‘rounded’ picture of value
- Findings suggest that cultural value is not a fixed entity: fluid and variable among practitioners but there are common themes with communities
- Musicians and Creative Directors: Challenge – technically and mathematically; quality of playing...but also venue and engaged audience
- Attenders and Non attenders: emotion; relaxation, rhythm, a social experience ...Escapism: “I guess it is a bit of a release from the everyday world”