

“Friendly Revolution”

Perspectives on Change and Transformation in Classical Concert Formats

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Abstract

Classical music institutions today are increasingly experimenting with concert formats. A diverse range of “unconventional” concert formats has emerged over recent decades, adapting the “standard” classical concert along multiple dimensions. This article explores how these formats are conceptualised by practitioners, based on sixteen qualitative expert interviews with artistic directors and managers in the classical concert sector. Alongside offering insights into the multifaceted landscape of unconventional concert formats, current terminology and underlying motivations for their development, our analysis also highlights the question of how and to what extent unconventional concert formats bring about change, or even transformation, both artistically and for organisational processes. Across terminology and conceptualisations, we observe a tendency to refer back to the norm of the standard classical concert and to change or adapt this standard, rather than to fundamentally transform it. We identify festivals as key players in driving change, reflect on how values in classical music culture act as barriers to change and consider the paths for larger-scale transformations of classical concert formats.

Heutzutage experimentieren viele Klassikinstitutionen mit Konzertformaten: In den vergangenen Jahren wurde eine Vielzahl “unkonventioneller” Konzertformate entwickelt, bei deren Gestaltung “standardisierte” klassische Konzerte in unterschiedlichen Dimensionen verändert oder adaptiert werden. Dieser Artikel liefert auf Basis von sechzehn qualitativen Experteninterviews mit künstlerischen Leiter_innen und Manager_innen der Klassikszene empirisch fundierte Konzeptualisierungen solcher Formate. Neben Einblicken in

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die breitgefächerte Landschaft unkonventioneller Konzertformate, sowie korrespondierende Terminologie und Motivationen beleuchten die empirischen Daten auch die Frage, wie und in welchem Ausmaß unkonventionelle Konzertformate Wandel (change) und Transformation befördern und wie sich dies in der künstlerischen und institutionellen Praxis auswirkt. Dabei zeichnet sich in Terminologiefragen und den Konzeptualisierungen eine deutliche Tendenz ab, unkonventionelle Konzertformate eher als Ableitungen des standardisierten Konzertformats denn als fundamentale Transformation zu verstehen. Wir identifizieren Festivals als wesentliche Treiber für Veränderungen innerhalb der Klassikszene, reflektieren potenzielle Hürden für Veränderungsprozesse und entwerfen einen Ausblick darauf, wie eine umfassende Transformation klassischer Konzertformate aussehen könnte.

Les institutions musicales d'aujourd'hui expérimentent de plus en plus de nouveaux formats de présentation de concert. Divers degrés de concerts « non conventionnel » ont ainsi émergé durant les dernières années, adaptant le « standard » des concerts classiques à de nombreux égards. Cet article permet de comprendre comment ces formats sont imaginés par les praticien·nes. Le texte est basé sur l'analyse de seize entretiens réalisés avec des expert·s (directeur·s artistiques, managers) du secteur musical classique. Tout en offrant un aperçu du paysage multiforme de ces concerts non « non conventionnels », en explorant la terminologie associée et soulignant les motivations liées à leur développement, notre analyse met également en lumière la façon dont ces concerts non conventionnels impriment un changement, ou tout du moins, une transformation, à la fois artistique et sur le plan du processus organisationnel dans ce milieu. Au-delà de la terminologie et des conceptualisations, nous observons une tendance à se référer à la norme du concert classique traditionnel et à modifier ou adapter cette norme, plutôt qu'à la transformer en profondeur. Nous identifions les festivals comme des acteurs clés du changement, réfléchissons à la manière dont les valeurs de la culture musicale classique constituent des obstacles au changement et examinons les voies possibles pour des transformations à plus grande échelle des formats de concerts classiques.

Keywords

classical concerts, unconventional concert formats, change, transformation, practice-based conceptualisations

Introduction

“Western” classical music culture is frequently referred to as being in urgent need of change.¹ Recent calls for change make connections to current debates over the legitimacy and wider relevance of the “Western” art music tradition (Bull et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2024) and to a range of different challenges for this art form, covering demographic shifts in core audiences (Allmanritter & Tewes-Schünzel, 2023; Liz Mohn Stiftung, 2025), funding cuts (Price et al., 2024; Kampagne #BerlinIstKultur, 2024) but also increasing pressure for classical music institutions to respond and adapt to contemporary issues. These include becoming increasingly present in the digital sphere (Colotti, 2021; Lepa et al., 2023), adopting sustainable modes of production (Emerson and Rivera 2023) and diversifying both its personnel (e.g. through greater diversity in background among performing artists and musicians; Griffiths, 2020; Uelner, 2021; Kolbe, 2024) and its programmes, moving beyond the practice of re-programming the works of a small number of historical male, white composers (Kalbhenn, 2011; Marín, 2018; Donne Report, 2024).

A central concern in these debates is the classical concert format. The standard format for presenting symphonic “Western” art music repertoire in a concert hall and its associated conventions of still, silent listening have remained largely unchanged since its standardisation in the 19th century (Tröndle, 2011; 2018).² This standardisation involved a greater separation of roles among the participants into organisers, performers and audience members, as well as the establishment of behavioural norms. For the audience, this involved conventions around not speaking or moving during the performance and around applause (Tröndle, 2018). Kirchberg (2020, p. 188) frames these developments as a growing “sacralisation” of concert culture, suggesting that classical music increasingly came to function as a cultural surrogate for religion as the power and autonomy of the bourgeoisie expanded and aristocratic and upper middle classes merged. Similarly, Bull (2019, p. 34) writes of the gradual “institutionalisation of music-as-art” in this period with the concert hall functioning as site for the expression and propagation of bourgeois taste (e.g. through the streamlining of programmes away from presenting many shorter pieces or individual movements to full works; see also Gunn 1997 and Weber 2008 for a comprehensive analysis of canon formation). Tröndle (2018, pp. 37-40) outlines the emergence of the standardised concert format in purpose-built concert halls with a symphonic programme from around 1870. The typical concert,

¹ We follow Bull, Scharff and Nooshin (2023, 4) in using quotation marks around the term “Western” in order to acknowledge that this designation is a historical construct and to encourage critical reflection on the global nature of classical music’s practices and influences.

² Yet it is noteworthy that from the outset of public, commercial concert culture toward the end of the 17th century in England (Kosfeld & Reinle, 2022), a diverse array of different concert types always co-existed, including coffee concerts, open-air and promenade concerts, informal concerts, smoking concerts and many others (see Salmen, 1988 for a systematic overview, or also Rademacher, 2020 on different performance contexts of classical music in Berlin around 1900), not only including symphonic repertoire but also chamber music, solo or choral works.

for example, at the Golden Hall of the Vienna Musikverein, would begin at 8 p.m. In reverent silence, the audience listens to an overture and a solo concerto in the first half, followed – after an intermission, perhaps with a glass of champagne – by a symphony in the second half, all orchestral works from the Classical and Romantic era (see a similar characterisation in Small, 1998, pp. 19-26). The fact that these “ceremonial forms of the concert ritual” (Tröndle, 2020, p. 31) have changed so little since has raised questions about the ability of this presentational format and type of listening to resonate with contemporary, especially younger, audiences (Fein, 2011; Rebstock, 2020).

Toelle (2024) therefore describes the “standard classical music concert” as “the default option and starting point for all discussions about the future of classical music” (p. 195). Others have similarly noted the potential for change in the classical concert format, declaring the current situation a “crisis of format”, rather than one of repertoire per se (Tröndle, 2011, p. 10; see also Bugiel, 2015 for an analysis of crisis discourse in the classical music scene). The past decades have seen a vast range of attempts to change the classical concert and to reshape conventions of audience behaviour, as well as an increase in research on the impacts of these adaptations (Tröndle et al., 2025), but there are still few systematic explorations of the conceptualisations, values and motivations that lead to or obstruct the development of formats deviating from the standard classical concert. Through conducting expert interviews with sixteen artistic directors of prominent classical music institutions, we aim to provide an overview, via practitioners’ perspectives, of the current terminology and conceptualisations around “unconventional” concert formats, to understand the extent to which present efforts represent “changing” versus “transforming” the classical concert and the impact of such attempts on organisational processes within institutions.

Drawing on existing literature on classical music culture and definitions of “format” from media studies and other fields, our investigation is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: How do practitioners describe and conceptualise unconventional concert formats?; RQ2: What are practitioners’ main motivations for developing unconventional concert formats?; RQ3: Do unconventional concert formats have the potential to transform organisational structures and processes? On which structural levels in the classical music sector does change towards unconventional formats take place?; and RQ4: What are barriers to change and transformation in classical concert formats? We begin by outlining our understanding of the key terms “format”, “change” and “transformation” in this context.

Definition of Terms and Existing Research

Change, Transformation and the Classical Concert “Format”: Existing Terminology and Conceptualisations

Different concert types or variants are frequently referred to as “formats”. Combining approaches from media and theatre studies, Endres (2024) discusses formats, whether in the case of file formats or formats as units of artistic programming, as being characterised by both their adaptability and reproducibility. They represent an “interplay of changeable and unchangeable elements” (Endres, 2024, p. 50) and can have the effect of producing and fulfilling expectations through their familiarity and recognisability. Fahle et al. (2020, p. 11) frame this tension as one of “rule-breaking” vs. “standardisation” in the development of new media formats. They propose that taking the “format” as a unit of analysis in media studies enables the study of processes of change:

Formats [...] reveal the standards and proportions of media-studies analyses – boxes, boundaries, or norms. As a result, they possess a reflexive potential, namely to simultaneously interrogate the practices, operations and methods of media studies itself in the production of media-scientific knowledge. (Fahle et al., 2020, p. 18)³

Drawing on these observations, we analyse processes of change in the classical concert “format”, our unit of analysis here.

When analysing phenomena of change, it can be helpful to make a further definitional distinction between change and transformation. As O’Neal (2018) states, “transformation is a particular form of change” (p. 287), namely a fundamental and comprehensive one: digitalisation and action on sustainability are two examples of major present-day transformations (Tokarski et al., 2024, p. vi). In the context of organisational change and transformation, Tokarski et al. (2024) suggest that the core distinction between change and transformation lies in whether a paradigm shift has occurred, also in the sense of a shift in organisational culture. If this is the case, a transformation has taken place, which may result either from a gradual, long-term change (“evolution”) or from disruptive upheaval (“revolution”) (Tokarski et al., 2024, p. 3). Transformations are marked by their limited controllability and tend to have a radical nature (Tokarski et al., 2024, p. vi). They propose using the term “change” to refer to minor adjustments in the ongoing operations of an organisation (“adaptation”), or when a reorganisation produces major organisational and process changes without effecting the organisational paradigm or corporate culture (“reconstruction”) (Tokarski et al., 2024, p. 2).⁴ Building on this understanding of change as adaptation or reconstruction, and trans-

³ For this article, German quotations from both literature and interviews have been translated by the authors.

⁴ For a similar model addressing institutional change with a distinction between developmental and transformational change see Micoletta et al. 2017, 1896.

formation as evolution or revolution, these processes can be examined both at an organisational level and in terms of the artistic dimensions of concert formats. We aim to explore how practitioners approach the classical concert format as a site of change, the norms and standards that come into play here and the relationships between change and transformation in this field.

Previous research has discussed concert formats and ideas of norms or the breaking of concert conventions in various ways, though rarely with an explicit focus on processes of change or transformation. The classical concert, in the form as outlined in the introduction, is frequently referred to as the “standard” (Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 2021, p. 4; Toelle, 2024, p. 195) or “traditional” classical concert format (Petri-Preis, 2024, p. 220). Deviations or adaptations “can be understood as a form of aesthetic and social critique” of the standard format and its accompanying norms (Wald-Fuhrmann et al. 2021, p. 4). These contrasting formats have been referred to as “unconventional concert formats” (Petri-Preis, 2022, p. 95; Jakob & Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2025), “new and experimental concert formats” (Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 2021, p. 4), “interdisciplinary concert formats” and “innovative concert formats” (Leba & Paulus, 2025, pp. 1, 7) or “altered concert formats” (Tröndle, 2020, p. 40). Following Petri-Preis (2022) and Jakob and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn (2025), we will use the term “unconventional concert formats” in this article as an umbrella term for all “non-standard” formats, whilst seeking to gather an overview of the current terms that are in use by practitioners through our empirical investigation.

The existing literature on unconventional concert formats points to a wide and ever-diversifying range of possible adaptations of the standard concert format, revealing in relief the aspects that allow it to be viewed as the “standard”. An exhaustive discussion of these developments is beyond the scope of this article. The most prominent trends, discussed briefly in turn here, include: 1) providing forms of verbal information or discursive formats, 2) developing formats that mix classical music with other musical genres, performing arts disciplines or media, 3) types of participatory concert formats and 4) concerts that take place outside the concert hall setting.

1) Providing spoken introductions to pieces in concerts or forms of information beyond a programme note or a separate introductory talk represents a deviation from the standard classical concert, in which engagement with performers is typically exclusively non-verbal. Audience research has identified this aspect as being particularly challenging or surprising for newcomers to classical music. In Kolb’s (2000) study with students new to classical music, the participants expressed surprise that nobody came out to “greet the audience and announce the music” at any of the concerts (Kolb, 2000, p. 24), as well as reporting unfamiliarity with other conventions of the classical concert hall. Dobson (2010) invited nine participants, who had all attended no more than one classical concert in the twelve months prior to the study, to each attend three orchestral concerts. The most popular concert among the study participants had a format that featured a lot of context and knowledge transfer around the music, primarily offered by the performers (Dobson, 2010, p. 119). In their study using an “audience exchange”, a form of facilitated post-concert discussion, Pitts and Gross (2017) highlight the potential

of formats that connect artists and audiences beyond the music through discursive elements and they advocate for approaches that enable and encourage peer-to-peer exchange among audiences. Wimmer (2021) describes such formats for adult audiences as involving a form of “contextual practice before and during the concert” (p. 125). By this, she refers not only to discursive formats but also to other practices that prepare audiences for the concert experience in various ways, such as movement- or yoga workshops, designed to guide participants into a state of focused awareness. One such example of this is the project *Anders hören*, curated by Marina Abramović for the *Alte Oper Frankfurt* in 2019, where the audience prepares for the concert through various mindfulness exercises (Pott et al., 2019). Leba and Paulus (2025) investigate formats that embed “Western” classical music within a broader socio-political or scientific context through additional spoken elements such as storytelling, lectures or interviews, understanding these as a response to classical music’s perceived crisis of social relevance. They conceptualise such formats as “interdisciplinary” concert formats, as collaborations between artistic and scientific practice. Their findings indicate that the implementation of unconventional formats of this nature requires not only new skills but also new coordination roles within organisations and that organising interdisciplinary formats involves considerable extra labour. However, these efforts are worthwhile: such interdisciplinary concert formats addressing scientific and socio-political themes can attract new audiences and provide low-threshold access for first-time visitors (Leba & Paulus, 2025, p. 107). In their study on audiences’ meaning-making in unconventional concert formats, Jakob and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn (2025) also suggest that a thematic-centred curation of concerts enhances their relevance for individual audience members by creating links to personal or broader societal topics, thereby increasing a sense of institutional relevance.

2) The term “crossover” (Barber-Kersovan & Kirchberg, 2021, p. 299) has been used to refer to formats that mix classical music with other musical genres while “staged concerts” references formats that may include theatrical or performative elements and/or technical effects such as lighting design, video projections or voice-overs (Wimmer, 2022, p. 99; Klein, 2023, p. 369; Curtin, 2025). Such experiments have been discussed as broadening the sensory experience of the concert and creating shifts in the perception of the music performed. Discussing an example of slam poetry combined with a classical concert, Petri-Preis describes the combination of spoken word and music as opening up “a new level of perception” (Petri-Preis, 2022, p. 95). In response to an audiovisual concert by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, audience members reported the additional visual aspects of the concert (in this instance, lighting and sets) as making the experience of hearing challenging contemporary works easier (Pitts & Gross, 2017, p. 71). Unconventional concert formats combining analogue and digital elements are also referred to in literature as “hybrid concert formats” (Baumann, 2024). The concert experience can additionally be expanded to include olfactory or gustatory elements (Chaker, 2022).

3) Given that “Western” classical music is a “presentational” musical culture (Turino, 2008, p. 52), in which a division of roles between artist and audience is the norm, attempts to break away from the standard concert format increasingly involve attempts to engage audiences in participation or alternative forms of audience behaviour. Müller-Brozović (2023, p. 162) distinguishes three levels of participation in concert situations, ranging from externally guided to collaborative and then to fully self-determined involvement. In a mixed-methods study of new participatory works, Toelle and Sloboda (2019) show how participation can potentially foster meaningful and enhance audience experiences, though they also note ambivalences around this. The authors talk about how the terms used by participants to describe the power relationships in participation “range on a continuum” (Toelle & Sloboda, 2019, p. 14), with some feeling they had equal standing with the artists and active insights into their world and others feeling superfluous or patronised by the format. Spronck et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate that audience participation is not automatically desired or meaningful and that it is worthwhile, when designing an unconventional concert format with participatory elements, to carefully negotiate and articulate the parameters of participation throughout the entire concert process.

4) A further common practice across unconventional concert formats is the choice of venues that were not purpose-built for concert performances (Burland & Windsor, 2014; Kellersmann, 2018; Kirchberg, 2020; Barber-Kersovan & Kirchberg, 2021). In addition to potentially serving as a form of outreach to communities that would not typically attend concert hall performances (e.g. the projects of the Multi-Story Orchestra, Curtin, 2025), unconventional venues can also change expectations and encourage different audience behaviour. Moreover, spatial arrangements and the related aspects of visual and auditory perception significantly influence the musical experience (Uhde, 2018, p. 137) and consequently, experimenting with unconventional spatial settings (e.g. musicians in the middle of the room, a lying rather than seated audience) is also a common practice in concert format design.

Across this existing literature, concert formats have been theoretically modelled in various ways, often highlighting their adaptability. Very commonly, the standard concert format is broken down into distinct elements or parameters that can be modified in order to bring about change or forms of deviation from the norm. Lüdke (2011) describes a model with eleven parameters of concert design, including repertoire, performers, audience groups and space, that are intended to be viewed as potential levers for change. Uhde (2018) presents the model of the concert as an “organism” (p. 131), emphasizing extra-musical parameters such as lighting, setting and participation, as well as processes prior to and following the concert event, as adaptable elements that allow the creation of intentionally designed concert formats. Similarly, Vang-Pedersen (2017) outlines a concert design concept based on six design principles: structure, story, sensory, surprise, specificity and shared. Unconventional concert formats, in her view, constitute “a multi-sensuous, holistic and potentially dramatic event, with focus on both social and cultural elements, as well as inclusive, participatory, syncretistic and surprising elements” (Vang-Pedersen, 2017, p. 208), in effect combining the different trends

reviewed above. Further conceptualisations on a more theoretical level include viewing concert formats as frames for aesthetic experience intersecting across the listener, the musical work and other mediating and components (conventions, spatial arrangements and information, Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 2021) or as comprised of an interplay of multiple spheres – the artistic, situational, contextual, social, discursive and individual – which together shape the concert atmosphere (Wild, 2025, p. 147).

Motivations for Change, Potential Barriers to Change and Impacts on Organisational Processes

Existing literature has identified a number of motivations for developing unconventional concert formats. In the broadest sense, such changes are often seen as responses to the wider perceived crisis of relevance for classical music, in which concert formats seen as playing a significant role, as sketched out in our introduction. Fein (2011) outlines early projects with unconventional concert formats from 2004 to 2008, proposing a need for the standard concert format to respond to the listening and audience behaviours of the 21st century. He sees the growing significance of “new concert- and festival formats” as aligning with five different strategic approaches (Fein, 2011, p. 242): the music mediation approach (emphasis on the aim of contextualising classical repertoire), the marketing approach (being motivated by the aim of reaching new or younger audiences), the financial approach (aim of broadening funding opportunities through offering new formats), the media attention approach (aim of having new formats generate media attention) and the thematic-curatorial approach (aim of engaging broader audiences and supporting cultural participation through programming e.g. connected to contemporary social issues; referred to as “social connection approach” by Leba & Paulus, 2025, p. 92). This highlights a potential mix of organisational or management motivations alongside more artistic ones or an altruistic sense of societal responsibility connected to receiving public funding (see also Leba & Paulus, 2025 for similar motivation results, building on Fein’s framework).

Similar to Fein’s observations about the need to adapt classical concert formats to contemporary forms of listening, Rebstock (2020) identifies a crisis in the production of “presence” in classical concerts, a need to elevate the “eventfulness” of such performances in order to fulfil a desire for intense experiences and to compete successfully in today’s arts and media landscape (see also Hitzler, 2011 on eventisation). Alongside strategies such as the “visualisation” and “theatricalisation” of concert formats, Rebstock proposes greater experimentation with forms of spiritual and physical closeness to establish a greater sense of presence in classical concerts (see also Uhde & Gögl, 2024 as well as Tröndle, 2019 and Müller-Brozović, 2023 on fostering resonance through concerts). Theatre and performance art scholar Claire Bishop observes that performance and how we perceive it today is increasingly shaped by digitally-informed ways of socialising and paying attention (Bishop, 2024). She proposes that the future of contemporary performance could lie in formats that allow for pluralised and less normative modes of paying attention, what she describes as “hybrid attention” (Bishop, 2024,

p. 46). For Bishop, formats such as performance exhibitions or installations that allow audience members, for example, to use their smartphones to document or share their experiences during a work mark a significant future direction for performing arts formats. Such behaviours should be welcomed as newer forms of paying attention, rather than judged or wished away: “whether we like it or not, hybrid attention is ‘OS XXI’, the operating system of spectatorship in the twenty-first century” (Bishop, 2024, p. 46).

Audience research has identified that the conventions around classical concert attendance and the perceived need for musical expertise in this repertoire represent central deterrents to engagement with classical music (Dobson & Pitts, 2012; Burland & Pitts, 2014; Dearn & Pitts, 2017; see also Wilson et al., 2014 on the ethics of classical music concert attendance). Artistic directors and concert designers may respond to this through adapting or seeking to change the standard classical concert format, which fuses Fein’s motivational categories together, in particular the marketing approach, which could also be referred to as an approach led by the goal of audience development and the thematic-curatorial/social connection approach. The prevailing understanding of audience development was, in earlier conceptualisations, primarily about cultivating the “audiences of tomorrow” (Petri-Preis & Voit, 2023a, p. 15; see also Barlow & Shibli, 2010; Gembris & Menze, 2020 for more on the evolution of this term) as a core responsibility of music mediation departments and was therefore mostly peripherally situated within organisations. In recent years, and with the growing importance of music mediation – namely, the desire or aim to provide people of all ages with aesthetic experiences of music, grounded in the values of cultural participation (Petri-Preis & Voit, 2023b) – a gradual shift has become apparent: audience development is now being viewed more broadly, increasingly encompassing considerations under a stance of cultural democratisation and inclusion (Petri-Preis et al., 2025, p. 19), thereby also addressing underrepresented communities or topics (Uelner, 2021), questioning programming choices (Kalbhenn, 2011) and expanding outreach and community engagement activities (Dollman, 2023). We will explore how artistic directors negotiate this fusion of marketing or organisational motivations with artistic motivations or a sense of social responsibility to contribute to cultural democratisation.

A further topic of our study is understanding how changing or transforming the classical concert impacts processes within programming institutions and where barriers to change might arise. Tokarski et al. (2024, p. 9) identify three interrelated key dimensions for shaping change in organisations: 1) The “necessity of change” captures why change must occur, requiring recognition and acknowledgment of emerging challenges, akin to Kotter’s (1996) notion of a “sense of urgency”; 2) “Readiness for change” reflects the mindset and openness of leaders and employees toward embracing necessary transformations and 3) “Capacity to change” encompasses the skills and resources, such as strategic planning, organisational structures, wider organisational culture and digital infrastructure, required to effectively implement and sustain change or transformation. Our study mainly focuses on these dimensions at the meso-level of specific institutions. At the underlying micro-level, individual actors and their behaviour also

play a crucial role in change processes: individuals are the most powerful lever for effecting change in organisations (Tokarski et al., 2024). However, due to the scope of this study, change processes on a societal and political macro-level however can only be captured marginally, for example, through the inclusion of one interview partner from a national organisation (interview participant P14).

The transformative potential of unconventional concert formats for classical music institutions has so far received little scholarly attention. Barber-Kersovan and Kirshberg (2021), highlight this aspect in the context of independent ensembles in Germany, which they identify as “innovation engines” for the classical music scene. According to their findings, change in the field of classical music emerges where artistic freedom, organisational flexibility and societal transformation intersect and is based on interdependent dynamics between micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

The growing field of literature on change and transformation in “Western” classical music culture has identified the values underpinning this culture as a significant barrier to change. As Smith and Peters (2024) observe,

[...] the traditions of classical music and their roots in the romantic order create a significant obduracy in relation to change. Organisational approaches of institutions, as well as practices and rituals of concert-going and listening, create a barrier to any immediate and revolutionary change. (p. 13)

Bull (2019), in her ethnographic study of music education settings, describes “Western” classical music culture as being based on and still propagating values that developed out of the processes of canonisation and standardisation in music education and performance in 19th century: musical autonomy and excellence, the disciplining of performers and audience members (through a moral sense of “wrong” and “right” audience behaviours and performance practices) and respect for authority and institutions (see also Leech-Wilkinson, 2016). Drawing on Bull’s work, Emerson and Rivera (2023) observe that these values and a wider culture that does not prioritise critical self-reflection represent a significant barrier to transformations towards social-ecological practices in classical music institutions. They suggest that a tendency to romanticise the power of classical music stands in the way of more practical transformation and that, in particular, the “preservative” value of classical music culture (e.g. in preserving a canon of works and ensuring their re-performance) stands in fundamental opposition to openness to change and transformation (Emerson & Rivera, 2023, p. 117, drawing on values research by Schwartz, 2017). Other forms of value conflict that could act as barrier to change and transformation could be a resistance to the idea of transformation itself: Mohr observes a rejection of transformation-related topics by cultural actors, partly due to their associations with neo-liberal, market-oriented agendas (Mohr, 2023).

Empirical Data Basis and Method

Sample

Between February and June 2025, we conducted a total of sixteen semi-structured interviews with experts working in a range of classical music institutions. In the majority of cases, these individuals work for concert halls, orchestras or festivals and are either artistic directors, managing directors and/or part of programme planning and education departments. This sample of interviewees, the majority of whom work in management positions, offered access to perspectives on strategic-organisational processes as well as artistic decisions. Among the institutions represented in our study *TONALi* and *tuned – Network for Contemporary Classical Music* are exceptions: *TONALi* describes itself as a “cultural and educational project” (Tonali n.d.) but also has its own venue and organises a festival, while *tuned* is a funding programme of the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Tuned n.d.). The study was mainly based in Germany but also includes perspectives from other European countries: twelve interviewees work for institutions in Germany, three outside Germany (Zurich, Paris and Brussels) and one for a German and an Austrian institution (Feldkirch). All institutions have the explicit aim of developing unconventional concert formats or, in case of *tuned*, are actively promoting and supporting them. Of the institutions represented, three (*Beethovenfest Bonn*, *detect classic festival* and *TONALi*) are members of the *tuned – Network for Contemporary Classical Music* and four are part of the European Concert Hall Organisation (*Kölner Philharmonie*, *Bozar Brussels*, *Philharmonie de Paris* and *Elbphilharmonie Hamburg*).

Table 1. *List of Participants: ID, Institution, Job Title*

ID	Institution	Job Title
P1	Tonhalle Orchester Zürich	Executive and Artistic Director
P2	Kölner Philharmonie	Artistic and Managing Director
P3	Alte Oper Frankfurt	Artistic and Managing Director
P4	Bozar Brussels	Head of Music
P5	Heidelberger Frühling	Artistic and Managing Director
P6	Philharmonie de Paris	Co-Director and Head of Artistic and Production
P7	Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz	Artistic and Managing Director
P8	Köthener Bachfesttage, Montforter Zwischentöne Feldkirch	Artistic Director
P9	Elbphilharmonie Hamburg	Head of Education
P10	Beethovenfest Bonn	Artistic Director
P11	detect classic festival	Managing Director

P12	Deutsches Sinfonie-Orchester Berlin	Head of Artistic Planning / Orchestra Operations
P13	Bamberger Symphoniker	President and CEO
P14	tuned – Netzwerk für zeitgenössische Klassik, Kulturstiftung des Bundes	Programme Director
P15	Konzerthaus Berlin	Programme Director
P16	TONALi	Managing Director Tonalisten

Data Collection and Content Analysis

The sixteen expert interviews addressed 1) terminology and communication around unconventional concert formats; 2) the organisational processes behind the development of unconventional concert formats and possible transformations of these processes; 3) changes in observed audience behaviour; and 4) underlying motivations for experimenting with concert formats (Appendix: Interview Questions). The interviews followed a similar pattern, while also allowing for follow-up questions and slightly varying areas of focus with ad hoc- or clarifying questions. The interviews with P4 and P6 were conducted in English, all others were conducted in German. All participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, about the purpose and use of the interview data, and agreed to its publication by signing a consent form. As the participants were interviewed for the study in their professional capacity as experts in their field, we did not seek approval from an ethics committee. The interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes and were recorded and then transcribed. The transcribed interviews were analysed using MAXQDA24 (Version 24.11.0) and evaluated using an iterative content analysis approach with category formation and thematic codes, following Kuckartz (2016). The first author began by openly coding the first interviews. Once an initial code system had emerged, this was gradually categorised by topic, followed by another complete coding run. The second author then reviewed the coded transcripts, slightly adjusted the categorisation of the initial code system and added new codes. After another round of processing by the first author, the final coding was agreed upon. The quotations in the result section below have been shortened by removing superfluous filler words and omissions are indicated with square brackets and ellipses.

Results

RQ1: How do practitioners describe and conceptualise unconventional concert formats?

A wide range of terms for referring to unconventional concert formats emerged from the interview data: “new concert formats”, “format-concerts”, “elaborate concert formats” (original German: *raffiniert*), “unconventional concert formats”, “experimental formats”, “interdisciplinary concert performances”, “contemporary concert dramaturgy”, “concert installations”, “concert design”, “staged concerts”, “experiment-formats”, “popular formats” and “special formats”. In these chosen terms, the standard classical concert format, with its associated conventions, setting and spatial arrangements and repertoire, serves as an implied point of reference and distinction for our interviewees. It is considered the rule and standard against which change is measured (Fahle et al., 2020): these formats are “special”, “unconventional”, “experimental”, their difference from the norm is marked in this terminology.

Some of these terms touch on further nuances. “Format-concerts” and “concert design”, for instance, imply that creating unconventional concert formats involves a more conscious approach to the “unit” of the concert and its development than a standard concert would, this does not need to be “designed” in the same way.

The terms “contemporary” and “popular” draw on associations with modernising the classical concert format and, in the latter term, also convey a value judgement, suggesting that such formats may extend beyond the “art music” framework to reach audience groups perceived as different from the core audience (see Price 2022 for more on definitions of “core” vs. “populist” repertoire in classical music programming). Similar nuances came through in more explicit references to the standard concert, for example, that it is “Mahler 7 without frills” (P1). Some interviewees aimed to actively counteract potential value judgements in their references to different formats, suggesting that there is an awareness that cultural hierarchies around different formats need to be overcome: “We don’t use terminology such as “special projects” because that also implies a certain attitude. It is one project among many, and this means different approaches. But it is an artistic project, just like all the others.” (P9)

Five overarching forms of changing or adapting the classical concert emerged from the data: 1) changes through the inclusion of spoken, mediation elements, such as moderation within the concert; 2) changes through mixing musical genres in programming; 3) changes through collaborations with other artistic disciplines and practices, such as dance, theatre or spoken word, or through the inclusion of elements aimed at creating a multisensory experience, such as visual effects; 4) change through adopting participatory elements, for example through audience participation in curatorial processes or the musical performance; and 5) changing the concert setting in terms of venue or spatial arrangement.

In their conceptualisations of the process of creating unconventional concert formats, it would appear that our interviewees tend to conceive of their work as modifying specific elements of the standard concert (space, audience participation, lighting etc.) by using “effects”, new “constellations” or changing “parameters”:

“special technical or additional effects, for example in terms of spatial changes” (P1)

“and this leads to very different constellations, in the sense of classical repertoire in a very unusual setting, or a completely different repertoire in a traditional setting” (P7)

“If one thinks of concerts holistically and in terms of different parameters – that is, not reduced solely to the musical content – elements such as space, as well as other aesthetic, performative, verbal, participatory and visual dimensions, also play a role in their design.” (P16)

“There is a wide range of factors – that is design and impact parameters – that we can actively influence.” (P8)

While breaking down the classical concert into different parameters is a helpful conceptual tool for the task of concert design, it becomes evident from these comments that change and not transformation in a larger sense, is realised here. To refer back to Tokarski et al. (2024), the classical concert format is mostly being “adapted” and “reconstructed” here, a paradigm shift that questions its fundamental form does not take place. This raises questions around what transformation would look like. In a number of instances, the interviewees implied that transformation would mean losing a sense of a concert, for example, if audience members were to ask “was that even a concert, or was it theatre, was it performance?” (P16).

Approaches that came closer to more fundamentally reinventing the classical concert were often tied to festivals. Unmoored from regular production dynamics, festivals were described by one interviewee as offering “interdisciplinary spaces of freedom” (P9). A particularly striking example from our sample that comes closer to truly transforming the classical concert is the *detect classic festival*. *Detect* is an open-air festival that draws inspiration from pop music festivals, taking place on a summer weekend at a festival site with several stages, food and drink stalls and areas for camping; “our colleagues from the classical music world question whether we even qualify as a classical music festival” (P11). Through this framing, one that stands in complete contrast to the standard concert and its conventional setting, the concerts at *detect* go beyond simply changing specific parameters, as the transformed context also invites different kinds of audience behaviour: “We have a lot of very spontaneous behaviour. So, the applause doesn’t just come when we have a pause in the sonata or symphony concert, but also in between, when a solo is over [...]. I do see greater freedom than in other

contexts and that some people listen to the same concert sitting down, some standing up, some lying down and there is no right or wrong way to do it” (P11).

Creating an atmosphere in which the audience feels comfortable, free, and at ease seems to be more important than the aspect of novelty or innovation: To return to conceptualisations of their work, the innovative aspect of unconventional formats or a sense of doing something “new” is of less importance to the interviewees. In some instances, the term “innovation” was rejected and intentionally avoided:

“What we often refer to as “new” has usually always been there.” (P8)

“So, I prefer to talk about how we manage to think from different perspectives and become more adaptable. That interests me more than whether it’s the newest thing under the sun.” (P7)

This applies both to their personal conceptualisations as well as to their communication with the audience: In external communication, terms such as “new”, “innovative” and “concert format” are also generally avoided and are considered to be insider terminology or jargon. Instead, the focus is on conveying the content and offering a sense of the experience:

“I’m not looking to differentiate by claiming “this is totally new and innovative”, because I believe that radical experimentation and complete novelty are terms that tend to scare people off.” (P7)

“It’s interesting that even in progressive classical music there is still such ivory tower terminology. Take the term “concert format”, for example – many people can’t really imagine what that means. You have to be careful. [...] The audience isn’t interested in whether we’re creating a new concert format and thus a new experience; people are there purely for the experience.” (P10)

Communicating authentically and understandably about non-standard formats comes with significant challenges. It is also apparent here that perceptions of audiences’ expectations play into the scope of change, whereby radical change, or what might be understood as transformation, is framed as something potentially negative and intimidating for audiences. Given that formats develop a certain recognisability and shape expectations of their reception through this (Endres, 2024), the interviewees mentioned employing strategies that might draw on audience members’ expectations of certain formats, for example, relying on visual information to give cues about the nature of a particular concert format or using marketing language to craft a recognisable brand for a repeating format or series:

“And of course we also use images, whether they are graphics or photos of the artists. Ideally, the communication already primes the concert experience. That means

if I have two people in suits holding their instruments up in front of the camera, I'm probably expecting a more classical concert format than if two people in obviously different dress codes were printed on the poster, then people would expect something different from what they would expect from a standard concert at the Elbphilharmonie." (P16)

"The key thing with these formats is that the format itself is the star. And once people have gained confidence in the format, we as organisers can pack it with a wide variety of artistic content." (P3)

In this latter comment, once the brand of a specific format is established, this can lead to more freedom in artistic programming while maintaining audience trust and engagement. Here, the format goes far beyond being a "frame" (Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 2021) for musical content, it is essential to the identity of the event.

RQ2: What are practitioners' main motivations for developing unconventional concert formats?

We identify three main categories of motivation for developing unconventional concert formats from our interviews: 1) a sense of societal responsibility to offer a diverse range of programming as publicly funded institutions; 2) combining audience development aims (the marketing approach in Fein, 2011) with the aim of cultivating openness and connection through concert formats and as institutions; and 3) beliefs about the importance of classical music and individual artistic aims.

A sense of the socio-political responsibility of cultural institutions came through in the interviews, with unconventional concert formats being seen as a way of responding to a range of cultural needs:

"Especially as an institution that is publicly funded, i.e. with everyone's money, I believe that we must constantly ask ourselves how we actually impact society as a whole and what other offerings and formats are needed." (P7)

"We need a balance of very different offerings to ensure that audiences with different interests can see themselves reflected." (P15)

Closely linked to this sense of societal responsibility is the more strategic issue of audience development, of developing different formats to reach specific audience groups: "it goes without saying that these new formats also go hand in hand with the desire to appeal to new visitor groups" (P3). Here, we saw evidence of the shift towards a broader understanding of audience development, as being more than just trying to increase audience numbers or cultivate a "younger" audience:

“In the past, people focused more on age. Discussions centred on how young or old my audience actually was. But I would say that today we are actually beyond age discussions. It’s more about whether we can appeal to different groups in society and whether they come here. Because if we don’t manage to do that, we haven’t reflected the diversity of society.” (P15)

This broader interpretation of audience development – moving towards audience as well as community engagement or empowerment strategies – is fused with the aim of cultivating a sense of openness and inclusion in formats and more generally as an institution. This expressed itself in comments on desired institutional culture but also on creating concerts with a greater sense of intimacy and connection as well as spatial proximity to the artists:

“We have a position here that underpins everything: the concert as a space for experiences and encounters where everyone is welcome, this sense of togetherness that is conveyed, hospitality, warmth and cordiality.” (P15)

“To me, proximity and connection are the two most important keywords; cultivating connections in the sense of developing connections, maintaining connections, really on a very personal level.” (P7)

This emphasis on closeness further encompassed the aim of reducing hierarchies, for example by avoiding positioning performers on a raised stage, creating opportunities for artists and audiences to come into contact or intentionally choosing alternative venues for the increased sense of connection they produce:

“Some artists really like to interact with the audience. And I really feel that a lot of them are aware that something needs to change in the way classical music is seen in the convention with the audience. And they are really prepared to interact, to tell a story with the music, but also really to tell a story with words and create a connection.” (P4)

“It’s not just – “just” in quotation marks, of course – the idea of reducing barriers, but also approaching people in a different way with this step outside [the main venue]. So, I don’t think that just one building is enough for this connectivity.” (P7)

Assumptions about the standard classical concert format come into relief through these motivations and conceptualisations of alternative approaches: the standard concert format is for an exclusive group of society and its conventions foster distance. Only rarely did the interviewees explicitly comment on the history of the classical concert format and express being motivated on an individual level to introduce change in order to reject its norms:

“Because, clearly, what is being programmed now in general stems from ancient structures and mechanisms [...] that were shaped by a world and a way of thinking that was guided by patriarchy and Eurocentrism. That’s where classical concerts come from.” (P15)

More commonly, interviewees expressed a personal belief in the intrinsic aesthetic and societal value of classical music. Along this line of argument, developing unconventional concert formats is a way to ensure that classical music retains its relevance and place in society in the future, that it might be preserved through change:

“With a strong belief in the power of this music, it’s a search for contexts in which this music can take place and thus become more interesting, exciting, relevant, contemporary, whatever you want to call it, for people, both on stage and in the audience.” (P16)

“You want to preserve what you love” (P15)

This points to a potential conflict in values and motivations: how much can truly be changed or transformed alongside this valuing of preservation?

Finally, on this individual level, some interviewees see unconventional concert formats as an opportunity to express themselves artistically and further develop the potential of the classical concert, a field in which much remains unexplored:

“For me, it’s really also a matter of personal motivation to some extent: I try not to become bored in this world. [...] I think it’s such a broad artistic field that’s opening up, one that seems so unexplored: The concert as an artistic platform. [...] In the concert sector, some of this is completely unexplored. What you can create there, what parameters there are and so on... I think it’s just such a low-hanging fruit to approach it artistically.” (P10)

RQ3: Do unconventional concert formats have the potential to transform organisational structures and processes? On which structural levels in the classical music sector does change towards unconventional formats take place?

Across our interviews, there was clear evidence that developing unconventional concert formats has consequences for organisational processes, alongside creative and artistic exploration. Here, a high potential for transformation and “capacity for change” (Tokarski et al., 2024) emerged, as these formats in some instances demand entirely new processes and production conditions: “all routines are renewed” (P3). Due to the extent of this disruption, unconventional concert formats have the potential to transform existing hierarchies in institutional structures. Traditionally, for many of the institutions

in our study, ideas for unconventional concert formats would have been developed in the programme planning departments in consultation with the artistic manager or through collaborations with artists or external organisations. Alongside creative artistic solutions, unconventional concert formats force a rethinking of this division of labour towards more flexible models of networks or matrices within institutions and “cross-functional roles”, leading, at times, to stronger interpersonal relationships across these teams:

“So, there are new meeting structures, there are new interfaces, because this cannot be reflected in the normal and previous discussion formats. [...] There are intensive bilateral project groups, i.e. small groups that gradually come together with two, three or four departments.” (P3)

“There are representatives with cross-functional roles. We see it as a matrix, with concerts, events and projects on the vertical level and these functional levels on the horizontal level.” (P10)

“Programming these new formats, or anything unusual for that matter, only really works if the whole team pulls together.” (P15)

“Appreciation and trust have increased enormously.” (P15)

Within institutions, change around concert formats takes place in the interplay between micro- (individual) and meso-levels (institution). While individual figures such as artistic directors still play a significant role in initiating change, a number of the interviewees in this position in their respective organisation specifically mentioned rethinking their understanding of their role. Ideal conditions for transformation appear to emerge when the artistic director’s initiative coincides with employees’ desire, readiness and capacity for change:

“It used to be top-down, with the artistic director ordering a transformation process. But on the other hand, there was also a desire among the workforce to speak up and change things. And of course, that worked out extremely well. So, it was kind of amplified. [...] And now, when unusual programmes are on the table and the question arises, should we do this or not? We look at the whole thing much more confidently than we used to.” (P15)

As was noted in the results for RQ1, out of the examples for alternative programming offered by our interviewees, festival contexts present the clearest opportunities for transforming the standard classical concert and for organisational transformation. We propose that festivals are key drivers of organisational and artistic change in the classical music sector. Two types of festival formats are represented in our data: festivals embedded within and presented by institutions that operate continuously throughout

the season (in our sample, *Tonhalle Zürich*, *Kölner Philharmonie*, *Alte Oper Frankfurt*, *Bozar Brussels*, *Philharmonie de Paris*, *Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz*, *Elbphilharmonie Hamburg*, *Konzerthaus Berlin* and *TONALi* present such festivals) and institutions that exist as festivals and do not operate continuously (*Heidelberger Frühling*, *Köthner Bachfesttage*, *Montforter Zwischentöne*, *Beethovenfest Bonn*, *detect classic festival*). The idea of the “embedded” festival is to offer many different events, some of them parallel, on one site and limited to a few days, which requires completely new organisational processes for institutions that do not operate as festivals. For example, the tightly scheduled line-up of the *Fratopia Festival* at the *Alte Oper Frankfurt* involves “events on five fixed days, at a total of eight venues within the building. It starts at 3 p.m., ends at midnight and offers a continuous programme in half-hour intervals: 30 minutes of music, 30 minutes of break” (P3).

Institutions that are festivals in their basic structure are generally considered to be more agile in practice and consequently are associated with greater flexibility by the interviewees. The fact that they only actively organise events during specific periods means that they are inherently extraordinary: “Festivals are, of course, quite different from concert halls in that the non-ordinary element already exists to a different degree” (P14). This may be why, on a macro-level, initiatives supporting the transformation of the classical concert have coalesced around festivals. The German Federal Cultural Foundation’s *tuned – Network for Contemporary Classical Music* programme is currently funding six classical music festivals in Germany for a period of three years (from 2023 to 2026, P14 is the Programme Director). The network aims to foster the exchange of ideas and a culture of mutual learning between classical music institutions seeking to transform the classical concert: “We want to bring the festivals together as a network on a regular basis to enable an exchange of experiences between these very different festivals” (P14).

RQ4: What are barriers to change and transformation in classical concert formats?

We identify two main types of barriers to change from our data. Firstly, given that unconventional formats usually require significant resources, structural barriers relating to organisations’ “capacity to change” (Tokarski et al., 2024) represent a central issue. In comparison to the standard classical concert format, which was made more efficient to produce through processes of standardisation over the 19th century (Höhne, 2018), unconventional concert formats are generally more time and cost-intensive: “this simply requires different attention, different planning horizons and different funding” (P10).

Secondly, as existing research on transformation processes in classical music has identified (e.g. Emerson & Rivera, 2023), the values of “Western” classical music culture represent a significant barrier to change. In our interviews, this emerged most distinctly around the topic of audience behaviour and new social conventions in uncon-

ventional concert formats. Many interviewees viewed the relaxing of concert conventions as, in principle, being a positive outcome (e.g. “When concerts break free from conventions, we see that audiences also break free from conventions. People feel uninhibited and that’s a good thing.” (P10) and yet a conflict in values emerged around still wanting to prioritise a concentrated listening experience:

“In these hectic times, when do we ever take the time to sit down, put our mobile phones aside and focus on one thing? And that is becoming increasingly valuable.” (P12)

“As an institution, we also consciously send out signals that concentration and genuine listening are important to us.” (P3)

“[...] more and more people are listening to music by themselves, so music is everywhere but by being everywhere we just have to be careful about the sacred, deep listening in a way that you not only hear a concert, but that you really listen to it. [...] So, I think this is what concerts can provide, a cultural and social exercise of listening.” (P6)

It becomes apparent in the interviews that musical autonomy and the valuing of this specific type of listening (concentrated, still and silent) still loom large in classical music culture. The idea of concerts acting as a “cultural and social exercise” connects classical music again to a moral imperative, as having edifying, educational value in wider society (Bull 2019). The reproduction of such values could stand in the way of more radical changes in concert formats, though there is evidence from audience research suggesting that concentrated listening in communal settings is still also valued by some audience members of live performances (Burland & Pitts, 2010). One interviewee, while “personally a fan of contemplative listening at an orchestral concert” calls for a range of different forms of attention in concerts:

“I advocate for diversity [of events that also tolerate unconventional behaviour] and then the audience can choose which formats they want to attend.” (P9)

Alongside the topic of applause, conflicts around attention particularly came to the fore in examples concerning the use of smartphones in events, especially with regard to formats with striking visual effects:

“A lot of people took out their phones to take pictures and videos of the installation during the concert and at first, I was furious. And then I realised that now they are the owners of the project and it’s not just a concert anymore. [...] So if they feel it’s unconventional, we can’t ask them to be conventional.” (P4)

In addition to describing a transformation in the perception of the event – with the focus shifting to the installation that the audience wants to capture photographically – this example brings out the necessary value shift as identified by Bishop (2024), that increasing experimentation in performance formats will mean needing to be open to forms of “hybrid attention”, in which audience members move around, chat and share online what they are experiencing.

Summary of Results and Conclusion

Through the analysis of our interview data, we identify a wide range of current terminology for describing unconventional concert formats. This broad terminology with varying nuances reveals a tendency among practitioners to demarcate and conceptualise unconventional formats against the blueprint of the standard classical format. This continues to provide the central reference point around which change is articulated and negotiated in this field, illustrating the normative capacity of formats (Fahle et al., 2020). We found that practitioners tended to conceive of their work as modifying parameters of the standard concert, rather than pushing towards more fundamental transformations of the larger “concert paradigm”. Imagining what transformation would look like in this area remains a future task, but our results imply that practitioners see this occurring in the breakdown of conceptual boundaries between formats, when it is no longer clear whether an event is still perceived as a classical concert.

We identify five common types of change in concert formats, encompassing the inclusion of spoken or other types of mediating elements, of further musical genres, of other artistic disciplines or of technical effects aimed at a multisensory experience, of participatory elements and of changes of the concert setting or spatial arrangement, confirming trends noted in existing literature (Lüdke, 2011; Uhde, 2018; Vang-Pedersen, 2017; Wald-Fuhrmann et al., 2021; Wild, 2025; Leba & Paulus, 2025). In reflecting on terminology, practitioners showed some awareness of implied cultural hierarchies, coming through in terms such as ‘popular’ (Price, 2022). When communicating about new formats to audiences, practitioners take care to manage audience expectations, employing strategies to prime audiences for the experience. Formats can come to have a certain recognisability and familiarity (Endres, 2024), in some instances taking on an identity beyond their content.

A central finding of the study is the key role that festival formats play in driving change, serving as out-of-the-ordinary experimental platforms (cf. related literature on the exceptional nature of festivals across the performing arts e.g. Mair, 2019). In our sample, the *detect classic festival* constitutes a unique case and comes closest to a transformational shift, presenting classical music within a pop festival paradigm. Building on Barber-Kersovan and Kirchberg (2021), who identify free ensembles and (chamber)

orchestras as “innovation engines” (p. 300), we additionally propose that festivals currently function as similar hubs of organisational and artistic change in the classical music sector.

We propose three main categories of motivations for developing unconventional concert formats on the basis of our analysis: 1) a sense of societal responsibility to programme broadly as the representatives of publicly funded institutions, 2) an expansion of more traditional audience development aims into cultivating openness and connection through concert formats as well as 3) individual-level motivations associated with beliefs about the importance of classical music and personal artistic aims. These insights build on Fein’s (2011) framework and on Leba and Paulus’ (2025) recent study on interdisciplinary concert formats, which both highlight a mix of organisational or arts management motivations alongside more artistic or altruistic ones. Interestingly, innovation or absolute novelty did not seem to be a primary motivation for most practitioners in their work with concert formats.

Developing unconventional concert formats has the potential to transform organisational structures and processes within institutions. Even if larger-scale transformations to the classical concert format itself are not often achieved, it appears that attempting to change does result in the transformation of organisational processes. As these formats often require new processes and routines, cross-functional roles and more intensive communication, they enhance collaboration and trust within institutions. Change takes place through individual agency, particularly from artistic directors, combining with the readiness of employees to engage in adapting existing processes. Optimal conditions occur when leadership initiatives align with staff willingness, boosting the institution’s overall capacity for change. Once again, whether embedded into seasonal operations or organisations that are festivals in their basic structure, festival formats stand out here, producing the greatest shifts in organisational routines.

Alongside barriers to change and challenges identified by existing research, such as time and financial resources (Leba & Paulus, 2025), our findings highlight how value conflicts act as limits to change and potential transformation in the development of unconventional concert formats. This came through most clearly in discussions of unexpected audience behaviour in formats that allowed different forms of engagement beyond still and silent audiencing. Here, a number of interviewees expressed the view that the classical concert ought to preserve and prioritise a certain form of engaging with music, reproducing ideas of classical music as playing a wider educational role in society (Bull, 2019). Other interviewees more openly talked about the need to shift these values and embrace the “hybrid attention” of contemporary audiencing (Bishop, 2024). These conflicts represent an example of how practitioners are grappling with the consequences of change in classical concert formats.

Where do we stand in terms of changing or potentially transforming the classical concert format and how does aiming for this relate to the larger situation of “Western” classical music? To return to Fahle et al.’s (2020) idea of formats as providing norms

and standards, the question that emerges is when will we see the establishment of new norms in this field. Given our observations here about the future of audience behaviour (in connection to Bishop, 2024), it is possible to conceive of a future in which the “standard” concert format, as we still know it, does not exist and current understandings of the standard vs. non-standard/unconventional dichotomy will become obsolete. Will there still be a continued demand for a “without frills” (P1) version of the symphonic concert or will the “frills” no longer be considered as “frills”, as being at all “extra” to the main event? In particular, it remains to be seen how the value of silent, “concentrated” listening will change over time: it is possible that it continues to be valued but realised in different ways from the standard classical concert format. To reach more fundamental shifts in norms, our findings suggest that practitioners need to look to different paradigms (such as in the case of the *detect classic festival*), going beyond changing specific parameters of the standard format. These developments must also take place in step with pushes to diversify and expand the classical repertoire (Bull et al., 2023; Kolbe, 2024). The interview participants only on occasion mentioned the need to confront exclusionary practices or redress structural imbalances in classical music culture (e.g. practices that “were shaped by a world and a way of thinking that was guided by patriarchy and Eurocentrism”, P15). Putting the same content of canonical repertoire into different “boxes” or formats is unlikely to bring about larger changes for the classical music scene, these changes must be thought together. In this regard, it is naive to see the wider “crisis” of classical music “more as a crisis of format” (Tröndle, 2011, p. 10), it touches both on presentational form and content. In these questions, the tension between calls for change and the preservational values of classical music culture continues to be felt (Emerson & Rivera, 2023).

In future research, it would be fruitful to examine long-term shifts of meso- and macro-level structures, including changes in professional roles and funding logics as well as using audience research perspectives to study shifts in audience behaviour as facilitated by unconventional concert formats. As our study focused primarily on German institutions, it would be worthwhile for future studies to explore trends in terminology and conceptualisation across a broader geographical scope. Such research could help determine the extent to which changes brought about by unconventional concert formats are contributing to larger shifts on the level of international classical concert sector. Certainly, we observed here an overall atmosphere of optimism and a collective drive for change among our interviewees and across the scene – or as one participant put it: “The goal is a friendly revolution” (P10).

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Appendix: Interview Questions

- 1) How are these formats communicated and named (internally and externally)?
- 2) How are such concert formats organizationally embedded within Institution XY?
What are possible transformations of these processes?
- 3) What are your observations regarding changes in audience behaviour?
- 4) What are the main motivations and goals behind programming these formats?

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