

Values and traditions slow transition to sustainability in classical concert industry, finds study

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There is a growing interest in sustainability among orchestras, ensembles and concert halls in Germany, in terms of reducing their environmental

impacts, and in relation to programming, such as creating concert formats that engage with sustainability on a thematic level. Is the classical concert industry contributing to the broader transformation of society towards sustainability? RIFS researchers see room for improvement, finding that many institutions and orchestral musicians are not sufficiently self-critical in their approach to sustainability issues.

For their study, Gina Emerson and Manuel Rivera conducted interviews with 25 members of a German orchestra, analyzed 13 interviews published on the blog of the Orchestra of Change—a well-established sustainability initiative—and compared this material with six "examples of discourse," such as public statements, position papers and descriptions of institutional projects.

This analysis, [published](#) in *Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit (Sociology and Sustainability)*, revealed significant barriers to change, with both the musicians and institutions primarily interested in specific aspects of sustainable development and largely uncritical of many industry practices.

Self-criticism as a prerequisite for change

According to the researchers, expressions of self-criticism are indicative of a transformative outlook. "The capacity for [self-criticism](#) is important as it enables actors to engage with the structures that shape their practice with the aim of contributing to complex change processes. The more self-critical actors are, the greater their awareness of their routines—and the more likely it is that they can facilitate transformations within their institutions," explains Emerson.

While self-critical statements were rare in most of the institutional publications examined, the interviews with orchestral musicians revealed a broad range of thinking. The researchers identified three types: the

Critically Motivated, the Willing and the Attentive.

Core aspects of contemporary sustainability discourse were identified in all 25 interviews, albeit to varying degrees. Ecological limits figured in many of the interviews, but were rarely explicitly mentioned as "planetary boundaries" or "tipping points." Very few respondents mentioned the global implications of overshooting these boundaries. Aspects of justice, such as references to inequalities between different parts of the world or different generations, came up frequently among Critically Motivated and Attentive respondents.

Overall, Critically Motivated respondents referred more frequently to global examples of climate change phenomena and were well-informed about both the core and more marginal aspects of sustainability. They were also more likely to question practices common in the classical [music](#) industry in relation to touring, for example. The Willing rarely voiced criticism of this kind and instead emphasized the social value of orchestral performance. When questioned about [climate change](#), they frequently referred to their sadness at the destruction of nature.

The Attentive differ from the Critically Motivated in two respects. They tend to have less pronounced feelings about the social mission of classical music, and they did not clearly affirm their own implication in the climate crisis or did not relate this responsibility to the orchestra, but to their roles outside the orchestra—for example as a parent or consumer.

Social dimension of sustainability often neglected

In the publicly accessible blog interviews, there was an even stronger tendency to reduce sustainability to environmental issues, while issues of justice were only addressed by a single interviewee. Respondents often emphasized the positive impact of classical music.

"Overall, a desire for the classical music business to act as a role model was expressed in many of the interviews and documents. But this also reveals a certain dichotomy with respect to the societal relevance of classical music and performance: On the one hand, we see a certain commitment to sustainability—even if this is only in principle and in order to defend one's societal *raison d'être*.

"On the other hand, the priority afforded to musical excellence and 'high performance' is indicative of an impulse to withdraw from society and focus on the arts—a sphere often assumed to be somehow inherently sustainable. And this contradiction hinders the emergence of a deep and transformative [sustainability](#) movement within classical music," says Rivera.

According to the researchers, the historically established value of excellence and the aim of preserving a particular cultural tradition tend to perpetuate the status quo and hinder efforts to establish more sustainable practices in the classical music industry.

More information: Gina Emerson et al, *Selbstbestätigung und Selbstkritik durch Nachhaltigkeit im klassischen Musikbetrieb, Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit* (2023). [DOI: 10.17879/sun-2023-5255](https://doi.org/10.17879/sun-2023-5255)

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