

<b>Institution:</b> University of Sheffield		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> D-33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Building audience engagement strategies for small arts organisations through qualitative research		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2005–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Stephanie Pitts	Professor of Music Education	2000–present
Jonathan Gross	Postdoctoral Research Associate	Oct 2014–May 2015
Sarah Price	Postdoctoral Research Associate	May 2017–present
Melissa Dobson	Postdoctoral Research Associate	Oct 2006–May 2011
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014–2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Pitts's research into arts audience engagement has produced insights which have supported musical and other arts organisations across England to change the way they promote and market their events, enabling them to maximise, rejuvenate and sustain their audiences. Using distinctive qualitative approaches, Pitts has helped organisations to improve their methods of engaging with younger audiences, infrequent attenders, and cross-arts audiences. She has also devised networking methods for contemporary organisations to enhance their audience engagement, an approach that was piloted successfully in Birmingham and has since had impact on the cultural landscape of five major British cities.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>In contrast to traditional arts marketing research, Pitts's work has established principles founded on novel, in-depth qualitative research to support arts organisations in attracting, retaining, and understanding new audiences. Her initial research with the leading national promoter of chamber music, Music in the Round (MitR), revealed that engaged audiences see themselves as active participants in a performance, making their own contribution to the event and to the flourishing of arts organisations that they value [R1].</p> <p>Understanding the potential significance of this work for arts organisations, Pitts established the Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre (SPARC) in 2010, to further this work. She has collaborated with colleagues, doctoral students and postdoctoral research assistants (PDRA) on a series of projects that have made SPARC an internationally recognised voice in understanding audience engagement with live arts events.</p> <p>Her continued research with MitR between 2008 and 2011 [R2] addressed the challenge of how to sustain audiences in the face of an ageing audience demographic. Pitts and Spencer looked at how organisations can build community and loyalty amongst audiences whilst also attracting new members crucial for sustainability. A key finding of this research was the importance of conversation amongst audience members to help new audiences feel a sense of belonging, reduce anxiety about the 'right' kind of behaviour and build confidence about how to listen [R2]. Pitts and Dobson invited newcomers in the hard-to-reach under-35s group to attend with friends, and then to reflect on their expectations and first impressions through group and individual</p>		

interviews. From these, they identified novel strategies for engaging younger audience members and irregular attenders, including marketing materials that describe the power and impact of live music, rather than the status of the performers or the programme. A subsequent AHRC Cultural Value project (2013-14) extended this idea to investigate attenders' first-time experiences of unfamiliar artforms, shedding new light on the experiences of non-attenders through Pitts's pioneering research method of 'audience exchange', encouraging audiences of one art form to try another [R3].

Between 2010 and 2015 Pitts extended this work with arts organisations in Birmingham, Edinburgh, and Oxford, broadening to multiple artforms and addressing questions of the cultural ecology and audience loyalty present in different cities. Pitts identified an absence of research regarding audience crossover in contemporary art forms and embarked on a pilot study (PDRA: Gross) involving life history interviews with 56 audience members, conducted in partnership with Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG) and four other contemporary arts organisations. Further use of the audience exchange method confirmed the value of peer-to-peer conversation for processing unfamiliar arts experiences, and initiated networking between organisations that continued beyond the research project [R4].

Pitts discovered two main factors in developing audiences: facilitative organisation conditions and facilitative audience conditions. She showed that organisations doing this successfully provided access to the creative process and acted as trusted gateways to stimulate crossover between art forms. Pitts also identified a key difference in the motivations of classical and contemporary music audiences, with the latter being more open to experimentation and challenge, and more willing to form opinions about their experiences [R5, R6]. BCMG adopted her recommendation to foster these attitudes in new concert attenders with the continuation of post-concert facilitated conversations after the research project concluded.

This successful pilot study led to an AHRC-funded national study (PDRA: Price). With 15 additional partners in Bristol, Liverpool, and London engaged in collaborative research to implement findings and expand the scope and scale of the project to multiple art forms, larger networks and on a national scale. New findings included evidence of audience loyalty through ethical consumption, multiple routes into contemporary arts engagement, and the effect of issue-driven content on diversifying audiences. These have now become important factors for re-engaging audiences after the COVID-19 lockdown, and are informing an ongoing multidisciplinary UKRI project on cultural recovery for the Sheffield arts sector, involving Pitts and Price. This project is working with Sheffield organisations to address the impact of the pandemic lockdown on venues, audiences, and freelancers. Pitts is also using her expertise in her role as an Associate Director of the AHRC/Paul Hamlyn/ACE funded Centre for Cultural Value (2019-2024). She is leading the academic engagement strand, sharing her knowledge of collaborative research with arts sector partners and early career researchers.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Pitts, S. E. (2005). What Makes an Audience? Investigating the Roles and Experiences of Listeners at a Chamber Music Festival. *Music and Letters*, 86(2), 257–269. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/qci035>
- R2.** Dobson, M. C., & Pitts, S. E. (2011). Classical Cult or Learning Community? Exploring New Audience Members' Social and Musical Responses to First-time Concert Attendance. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 20(3), 353–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2011.641717>
- R3.** Pitts, S. E. (2016). On the edge of their seats: Comparing first impressions and regular attendance in arts audiences. *Psychology of Music*, 44(5), 1175–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735615615420>

- R4.** Pitts, S., & Gross, J. (2017). "Audience exchange": cultivating peer-to-peer dialogue at unfamiliar arts events. *Arts and the Market*, 7(1), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.1108/aam-04-2016-0002>
- R5.** Pitts, S. E. & Price, S. M. (2021). *Understanding audience engagement in the contemporary arts*. Abingdon: Routledge. [Publication date 24th September 2020]. ISBN: 9780367358884. Available from HEI on request.
- R6.** Pitts, S. E., & Spencer, C. P. (2008). Loyalty and Longevity in Audience Listening: Investigating Experiences of Attendance at a Chamber Music Festival. *Music and Letters*, 89(2), 227–238. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcm084>

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Pitts has worked with arts organisations in major cities across the UK to use her research findings to direct audience experience, engagement, and networking activity, with organisations such as MitR and BCMG. As a result of this work, she has been invited onto the boards for arts innovation research projects, including the Maastricht Centre for the Innovation of Classical Music and others in Germany and the UK.

By developing and testing her novel concepts through a large-scale pilot networking project in Birmingham, Pitts has shown that qualitative approaches can lead to more effective models for audience engagement, which have been successfully implemented by other organisations across the UK.

As well as working directly with organisations, Pitts has been sharing these key messages through workshops and talks linked to a freely downloadable handbook [S1]. The handbook summarises the findings published in *Understanding Audience Engagement in the Contemporary Arts* [R6]. The handbook has been downloaded 239 times (as of 26/11/20) reaching organisations of varying artform and size, across the world. This has impacted directly on individual organisations and been promoted through events including launches in five cities and an online workshop on brand marketing (attended by over 150 people in total).

#### Increasing engagement in Sheffield and Birmingham through insights into audience experience

At MitR, research findings [R2] directly impacted on how the organisation approached their event ticketing and marketing. Pitts recommended replacing discounted student tickets with an Under-35s (U35) ticket, informed by findings that as well as students, younger adults needed to be encouraged by a low-risk ticket price that made attendance more attractive and affordable. Research findings showed that an authority-driven focus on a named composer, piece or performer was not necessarily meaningful to this audience, so marketing strategies were altered to emphasise enjoyment and promote the experience of the concert.

These changes demonstrated a positive impact at the 2018 Sheffield Chamber Music Festival: ten events with a U35 ticket option sold 230 tickets to this age group, representing nearly a four-fold increase in ticket sales compared to 2017 [S2]. This outcome indicated that younger audiences are willing to engage with traditional concerts of all types, with the right approach. Other changes put into practice include an online Friends membership option for those that did not want the social participation of Friends' events, but who wanted to support the organisation. At BCMG Pitts used qualitative audience data to recommend significant changes in marketing and programming that were quickly implemented, as well as promoting deeper engagement with donors [S3]. Initially, BCMG's Marketing Manager had envisaged the collaboration with SPARC as a market research exercise but soon recognised that "very rarely does market research find the level of insight that this research project gave us", adding that the data went "far beyond what was known about the audience... [This] enabled real engagement and rich conversations

*across the organisation which led to changes in marketing and programming” [S3]. As a result of the research, BCMG introduced post-concert conversations to their programming due to Pitts’s finding that peer-to-peer discussions fostered the attitudes of open-mindedness characteristic of high audience engagement and repeat attendance [S3].*

Work with the University of Sheffield Concerts Series on diversifying audiences led to the launch of thematic strands aimed at different potential audiences. This enabled the development of new audiences and partnerships and brought in funding from the University’s Trusts and Foundations fund to develop an artist in residence programme. Also in Sheffield, Pitts’s research was *“crucial in persuading members of Classical Sheffield that offering free mini concerts around the city on one weekend of the year would be beneficial to them” [S4].* 10,000 people attended these concerts in 2019 with many attending ‘accidentally’ and 18% were experiencing classical music for the first time [S4]. Pitts’s research has also been used with Oxford Lieder, prompting new digital content [S4].

### **Expanding and enhancing audience engagement in Birmingham through networks**

Evidence produced by Pitts’s pilot study with contemporary arts audiences [R4] suggested that working collaboratively and sharing audiences led to higher attendance for everyone and did not, as had been previously thought, split their audiences. As a result, the five organisations involved in the research in Birmingham invited others to join them in a new regional network, Birmingham Contemporary Arts Network (BCAN), to continue working together.

BCAN initiated Culture Feast in 2017, which based its marketing, audience engagement strategy and the idea of ‘audience exchange’ directly on SPARC’s research findings [R4]. It offered attendees a joint ticket for access to six theatre, dance, music, and art events for £25.

This event was a first for the city, and a significant change to ways of collaborating between arts organisations. It was directly encouraged by Pitts’s research demonstrating that festival conditions are useful gateways for encouraging people to experience new events, as well as revealing that organisations planning collaboratively and sharing audiences leads to higher attendance for everyone. Audience gains, even with small numbers, represented a positive change for these organisations in Birmingham and *“whilst larger organisations were not interested in the first instance, once the first set of results were available, they came knocking and asking to be part of the network” [S3].* For example, Birmingham Rep Theatre joined the network when they saw its effectiveness [S5]. The impact on audience participation, broadening access and inclusion is clear from audience feedback such as: *“...even though quite a few, if not most, were things I might not have otherwise done, it was sampling them at a very low-cost basis” [S6].*

Participation in Culture Feast raised the profile of smaller organisations and enabled them to make much better use of their marketing budgets. It also put into practice research that showed the importance of contemporary arts organisations, beyond audience size. Audiences for these performances are relatively niche and there is a natural limit to their size. The goal is to reach as much of the potential audience as possible. Moreover, this vital work perpetuates art forms that would otherwise disappear and is of great value to the wider cultural landscape. This, along with BCAN, has had a huge impact on smaller arts organisations, *“...arts organisations are sometimes made to feel inadequate for having difficulties attracting audiences. Other people talk about quantities of shows, audience numbers and amounts of money that are alien to us. Here, everyone is in the same situation, we’re a similar scale....”* Marketing and Press Manager, DanceXchange [S7].

Smaller organisations now have a stronger voice in the city’s arts scene: *“BCAN has evened the playing field... we just want to work together to make our agendas impact across the city.*

*Having a neutral and level-headed research element made that easier... Big organisations have realised there is a lot of value in talking to us” BCMG Executive Director [S3, S7].*

### **Successful creation of audience networks beyond Birmingham**

Similar initiatives, based on research by Pitts and her team, have been started in Sheffield and Bristol. In Sheffield, the recognition that amateur organisations were competing for both players and audiences led to the formation of Classical Sheffield. This collective coordinates activity across the city and launched the annual Classical Sheffield weekend of pop-up concerts to address the need for new audiences to encounter classical music without risk or commitment [S4]. In Bristol, a research-led approach enabled Spike Island to expand its own Visitor Panel, which was becoming unmanageable, to collaborate with other organisations in the city. Bolstered by Pitts’s findings that this approach had worked in other cities, their Communications Manager was able to advocate for this approach in Bristol, thus sharing the workload and making the group more sustainable as well as more effective [S8].

The key to enhancing the reach of the impact of this research has been the creation of networks which build on the research and put it into their own contexts. The Head of Audience Development and Marketing at Lakeside Arts in Nottingham brought his experience working with Pitts when he was Marketing Manager at BCMG to his new role, adapting the findings to a multi-arts centre [S3]. SPARC has additionally inspired similar networks in London and Liverpool, which continue to strengthen and gain traction. This has become a proven model for spreading evidence-based strategies amongst small organisations. Pitts and Price acted as consultants to Bluecoat, Liverpool, providing guidance for the redesign of their foyer/cafe space to make gallery visitors feel welcome and encourage them to also engage with their art, instead of just using the cafe [S9].

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. Pitts, S. E. & Price, S. M. (2019) *Understanding audiences for the contemporary arts*. Retrieved from: <http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/uaca/handbook/> and spreadsheet indicating the number and reach of the downloads.
- S2. MitR evidence report - Executive Director and Marketing Manager, Music in the Round.
- S3. Testimonial, Head of Audience Development and Marketing, Lakeside Arts, Nottingham (and former Executive Director, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group)
- S4. Testimonial, Former University of Sheffield Concerts Director, Founder, Classical Sheffield, PhD researcher, Oxford Lieder Festival
- S5. Larger organisations joining the BCAN network. <https://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/news/culture-feast-a-seven-course-menu-of-contemporary-arts.html>
- S6. ‘Impact on Participants of Culture Feast’ document.
- S7. Contemporary Arts Networks .pdf.
- S8. Testimonial, Communications Manager, Spike Island, Bristol
- S9. Testimonial from Chief Executive, Bluecoat (Liverpool’s centre for the contemporary arts).