CultureCase

People can develop a taste for classical music and opera throughout their lives

This research was conducted by **Loretta Ho, Blair Wheaton** and **Shyon Baumann** at the **University of Toronto, Canada**

Summary

This paper seeks to understand how people acquire the tastes and habits that lead to an appreciation of classical music and opera. The researchers looked at people who had music lessons during their pre-teen years, their teenage years, as young adults, and as adults past their mid-twenties. It uncovered the impact of those lessons on later behaviours and whether the time-of-life and duration of that exposure made a difference. The results show that exposure to music at any time in life increases the likelihood of developing a taste for classical music and opera. The likelihood of acquiring that taste increases with the duration of exposure someone has had in life, even if the exposure is interrupted at some point. Importantly, early childhood exposure to music ‘does not have an outsized influence’ relative to exposure in other periods of life.

The data for the study comes from the 1997 wave of the US Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

The researchers took the responses of just under 5,000 people to questions about arts attendance in the last 12 months and whether they liked listening to classical music or opera. The survey also captured data on whether people had music lessons as children aged under 12, between the ages of 12 and 17, between the ages of 18 and 24, or after the age of 25.

The picture is complicated by the levels of education and income of the respondents

These two demographic factors (also captured in the survey) allowed the researchers to tease out whether people attended highbrow concerts in order to reaffirm their status as social elites or whether they genuinely liked the aesthetic experience involved. The paper concludes that attending concerts is not just a sign of high status and ‘attendance is contingent upon a process of taste development that occurs through socialisation in musical training’.

Keywords

opera **USA** **survey** **music** **Classical Music**

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