Acoustic to Electronic and Public to Private: An Introduction to Music in the Great Expansion (1700–2100 CE)

This essay, first published in the spring of 2020, provides a beginner’s overview of musical performance practice during the centuries known as the Great Expansion (roughly 1700–2100 CE). Changing understandings of human proximity and the role of technology in mediating experience dominate this period and bias our understanding of this fascinating time when humanity was at its peak in many ways. Through transformations of thought regarding mediation and human agency, music in the Great Expansion serves as a good tool for understanding changing modes of culture and interaction that would form the core of modern practice.

Most casual listeners today would be hard pressed to differentiate meaningfully between any two pieces of Western concert music composed between 1700 and 2100 CE. Music from across this period tends to be used indiscriminately to depict the bountiful riches of the Great Expansion era, and anachronisms in usage belie the deep and rapid transformations that were taking place during that time. Beloved, reviled, romanticized and easily misunderstood, the Great Expansion represents the culmination of a sweep of human transformations that were taking place during that time. Beloved, reviled, romanticized and easily misunderstood, the Great Expansion represents the culmination of a sweep of human history beginning with the settling of the first cities 11,000 years ago.

At a very basic level, the concept of music would have been understood very differently by listeners during the Great Expansion, with the term “concert music” widely used to describe sonic artworks created to be meditated upon for their aesthetic qualities. However, the very idea of a concert during this period would have implied a physical gathering of people in a way that is virtually unthinkable today, and the anachronistic word itself suggests shared experience as a core principle. Because of this, an important element of a concert experience would also have been intellectual and social status as groups of listeners physically observed one another congregate.

The role of music in European society had changed rapidly in the centuries prior to this period—in the feudal chaos following the fall of the Roman Empire—and in that change we can mark the patterns of growth and expansion that characterized society of the time. The Great Expansion was typified by exponential population growth, progressive mechanization and technological advancement, depletion of the natural world and increased population density in cities, paralleled socially by a natural weakening of religious institutions in favor of secular ones and the eventual abandonment of religious institutions altogether in their earlier sense. The earliest preserved European music traces its roots back to the post-Roman church over 2,000 years ago, where worship music was first notated. As technology developed and religious institutions gradually ceded cultural ground to secular ones, this idea of music as a cultural commodity flowered for several hundred years, bringing with it many of the trappings of earlier religious observation into secular institutions.

Globally, for 400 years, concert halls and performance arenas were built and designed for the public performance of concert music. It was not uncommon at the time for major cities to build huge performance arenas capable of holding over 100,000 audience members. These arenas could have been used for either musical performances or gladiatorial sports that simulated clannish warfare, satisfying a very deep need for identity in the postmedieval world (see also World History Cultural Archives [WHCA] archive subdomain “Team Sports” on the role of organized sports during the Great Expansion and their important but vestigial relationship with historical clan warfare). Performance spaces of this type were a kind of status item for cities as well, taking on a role similar to that which grand cathedrals had filled five centuries prior.

Sensorial recreations of ancient cities offer the opportunity to tour models of some of these massive performance facilities, whose scale was intended to subsume the individual consciousness of attendees and induce a sense of participatory group identity. The experiences of these events can be disorienting due to the overwhelming sense of intimate human proximity with strangers, but at the time this was the status quo of life in cities. The effect of musical experience is profoundly changed by experiencing it in this environment, in which the entire anonymous audience is entrained upon and immersed in a single musical performance together, sharing in the sonic and emotional perturbations of the event. Historical records also indicate that the effect of these concert experiences was routinely heightened by the systematic use of euphoria-inducing and sensation-heightening chemicals.

Musical performances during this time were the largest physical social gatherings of humans in history (keeping in mind that some major cities during the Great Expansion reputedly had populations in the millions). Records suggest that major performances effectively shut down all other
commerce in cities for days at a time. In some cases, records seem to suggest the continuous performance of music for days on end, with casual nudity among the intoxicated audience members, although these records may be distorted or entirely apocryphal and seem to conflict with other sources (see also WHCA archive subdomain "Music Festivals" to explore the folklore of extraordinary extended musical events late in this period).

Regardless of possible errors in details, it is important to emphasize that attending a concert during this period definitely required the physical presence of all audience members, presenting massive logistical challenges in a way that would not be seen following the year 2100 with advancements in sensory sharing technology and interconnectedness. The history of sensory augmentation is a fascinating subfield of study that begins late in the Great Expansion period, after the year 2050. Most historians cite this innovation as the cultural inflection point ending the Great Expansion, leading culturally into humanity’s contraction during the following centuries of climate change (see also WHCA archive subdomain "Sensory Sharing" on the history of technologies of interconnectedness).

In most concert venues during this period, music was traditionally performed for sedentary audiences who received it publically as a group. Varying degrees of bodily movement in entrainment with the music—or any audible expressions of approval—would have been permitted only in highly codified ways, or as ritual responses during key points in a musical service. Any movement or sound from listeners would have been expressly forbidden at most times. Audience members who violated these silence and stillness taboos—even due to illness—were publicly shamed into leaving performances. Radical limitations of entrainment in musical performances, and the division of aesthetic expression into different media, highlight the foreignness of Great Expansion culture to modern practice. This was necessitated perhaps by the psychological pressures of extreme human proximity coupled with private emotional experience.

Today we can simulate the sounds of Great Expansion-era concert music using archived recordings. Audio, video and holographic recording technologies were first developed during this time period. Although the vast bulk of data created at the time, in the first flowering of digital computing, has been lost, a significant body of data has been archived, re-created or retranscribed. Digital data storage media employed at the time were not designed for long-term archival storage and tended to degrade despite attempts at archiving. Because of this, virtually all recorded media prior to the year 2500 exists only in the form of transcriptions or remasterings of earlier recordings, many of which were subject to systematic interpretation, distortion and manipulation by revisionist actors of the Climate Change era and are of dubious historical accuracy. Because of the ease with which recorded media can be manipulated, it is difficult even for experts to assess whether a recording purporting to be from this period is authentic. The only audio recordings unequivocally found to have survived from the time are a very limited selection of exceedingly rare analog audio disks that were physically imprinted with sound recordings and were a popular distribution medium only in the century before the advent of digital media (1880–1980).

Despite the existence of period recordings, we cannot really appreciate this music as a listener of the time would have, because the aesthetic qualities were conjoined with the social ones, and the musical practices of the day carried a syntax that listeners could probably understand but not articulate. A listener of the day could have easily identified stylistic subtleties expressing social or classist cues through the music, and different pieces of music would have signaled inclusion or rejection of different social groups. In this way, it may be useful to think of concert music in this period as primarily serving the function of defining status within a society that was simultaneously stratified along economic, religious and “racial” lines. (See also WHCA archival subdomain "Race." The concept of race as a quasi-evolutionary defining property of human subgroups performed an important stratifying role in society during this period, although it has long been discarded as an artificial construction. To virtually everyone alive in the year 2000, “racial identity” based on ancestry and physical appearance alone would have been understood not only as a real and defining attribute of every person but also as a potential limiting factor for social advancement.)

Despite these subtleties, the primary marker of change from this period notable today is the gradual shift away from sound created directly by movement of the human body toward mechanically and electronically mediated sound, paralleling technological advances of the time in other industries. Art forms based completely on implanted technological enhancements and the stimulation of the mind’s ear alone would not have been much practiced before 2100 and the end of the Great Expansion, but in the century preceding, music’s cultural role shifted steadily from public to personal, leading inward and becoming individualized.

Although functional theories of acoustics predate this era by more than a thousand years, it was during this period that sound was first understood in terms of the propagation of pressure waves, with this new understanding opening the door for technical innovations. This archaic but functional theory can still be a useful way to conceptualize sound on a practical level. The development of electronically mediated and augmented sound during this time—as with the role of many other emergent technologies—facilitated an explosive growth in music. Massive concert performance spaces would not have been possible without the advent of electronic amplification systems.

As mentioned, the period 1700–2100 saw the invention of the first recorded media, allowing for the first time in history the possibility of experiencing music without being in the intimate presence of a living musician. The maturation of recording and remote sharing technology during this period quickly created a major shift in musical consumption away from events that were primarily driven by the performance of “live” musicians to music stored and reproduced by machine and, eventually, to music that existed only in the minds of listeners. A deeper study of this concept of “live” perfor-

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mance (intimate presence) offers a fascinating perspective on changing ideas of mediation, performative agency and human proximity tied to ideas of personal identity and artistic expression. In the year 1700, all music would have been produced by performers sharing a space with the audience and manipulating nonelectronic acoustic instruments. But even by the year 2000, experiencing an acoustic, live concert was probably already becoming a rarity, and by 2100 the practice was all but abandoned as physical human gatherings were increasingly shunned. The bulk of live concerts by the year 2000 were probably already heavily mediated by electronic technology, and by the year 2100, mechanical musical instruments were primarily viewed as grounding ideas about musical practice and timbre rather than actual devices for performance.

Many dimensions of human society were transformed during the pivotal historical window of the Great Expansion, redefining the role of individuals in society in a way that begins to look deceptively modern as the period progresses. Concert music and the cultural values associated with its transmission and consumption act as a useful indicator of these changes, and it is only as the Great Expansion ends in the dark centuries dominated by climate change that the last vestiges of medieval culture were finally stripped away from musical expression and thought.

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