

CIVIS OPEN LAB · MUSIC ENSEMBLES

Designing Relaxed Concerts

The All Year Long CIVIS Open Lab Music Ensembles Project Experience



*A practical guide for relaxed concerts
for people with dementia and their carers*



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



Universidad Autónoma
de Madrid



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens

civis
Europe's Civic University Alliance



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Authors

CHRISTIANA ADAMOPOULOU

Special Educational Staff, Department of Music Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

CHRISTINA ANAGNOSTOPOULOU

Associate Professor, Department of Music Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

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13 Ippokratous str. · Opera Arcade · 10679 Athens · Greece

tel: 210-3232174 · fax: 210-3232175 · e-mail: info@music-house.gr



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01

Introduction

This guide is the culmination of a series of activities developed within the framework of the All-Year-Long CIVIS Open Lab Music Ensembles project, an initiative focused on Relaxed Concerts for people living with dementia and their carers. The concerts were performed by the CIVIS Chamber Orchestra, an ensemble of students from three universities within the CIVIS Alliance, who collaborated to perform a shared repertoire in Rome, Athens and Madrid, the home cities of the three participating institutions: Sapienza Università di Roma, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

The concerts took place in accessible venues across all three capitals, ranging from concert halls and theatres to residential care homes and day centres for people living with dementia. Beyond delivering high-quality performances, the project aimed to raise awareness amongst students, cultural professionals and the wider public about the importance of concerts that are responsive to the needs of people living with dementia. By bringing together universities, cultural organisations and health-sector bodies, the project sought to contribute to the development of good-practice principles for the design and implementation of similar concerts, offering useful points of reference for other institutions wishing to develop related initiatives.



The CIVIS Chamber Orchestra performing in Rome.

In designing the concerts and their accompanying material, the research team chose to follow the Relaxed Concert approach: live musical performances designed to create a more flexible, welcoming and accessible environment for audiences with diverse needs. Relaxed Concerts belong to the broader field of Relaxed Performances (Collins et al., 2022). This approach may not yet be widely established in Southern Europe. By contrast, in countries such as the United Kingdom, Relaxed Performances are increasingly common practice, as they reflect not only a commitment to improving access to cultural life, but also a broader effort to create an atmosphere that welcomes the diversity of any given audience during a performance or concert. Such diversity may encompass sensory difficulties, as experienced by people on the autism spectrum; different developmental stages, as with babies and young children attending with their parents; or a need for movement, as with people living with dementia, anxiety or hyperactivity.

The CIVIS Open Labs provided an ideal framework for this initiative, as it envisions the university not simply as an institution that produces knowledge, but as a space where knowledge is co-created in partnership with society (CIVIS Alliance, n.d.). This enabled us to organise concerts in three Mediterranean countries where Relaxed Performances do not yet have a strong tradition. In this sense, the project functioned as a living laboratory in which musical practice, research and social engagement converged.

The Greek research team from the Music, Cognition, Computation, Community Lab, Department of Music Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens — who also authored this booklet — drew on experience gained during 2024-25 in designing concerts for people living with dementia and their carers, in collaboration with the music ensembles of the music department and Megaron, The Athens Concert Hall. Embedding this initiative within the CIVIS Open Labs programme in Greece further enabled the Laboratory to partner with organisations including the Athens Alzheimer's Association, the Friendship Clubs of the Municipality of Athens, and the Olympia Municipal Music Theatre “Maria Callas”, the venue for the Athens concert.

This booklet has been written as a reflective practical handbook: a document that shares experience, offers guidance and raises questions for future work. Rather than presenting a fixed model to be reproduced, it gathers what was learned through the preparation, training, performance, observation and feedback that accompanied the CIVIS concerts. It begins by introducing the idea of relaxed concerts and their importance for inclusive cultural participation; it then considers the relationship between music and dementia, presents examples of orchestral work in this field, and reflects on the practical experience of the CIVIS concerts in Athens and Madrid. It aims to support artists, students, cultural organisations, universities and community partners who wish to create musical events that are accessible, welcoming and responsive to the different ways in which people listen, move, respond and participate. At the end, a checklist is included as a practical starting point for institutions wishing to develop relaxed concerts in the future.

02

Why Relaxed Concerts?

Music, like all the arts, is a fundamental cultural good and an essential part of social and cultural life. Yet the conventions governing concert attendance do not always accommodate the diversity of contemporary audiences. This is particularly true of classical music concerts, where expectations of stillness, silence, dim lighting, and formal audience behaviour may inadvertently create barriers for people living with dementia, neurodivergent individuals, people with learning disabilities, young children, and others who experience or engage with music in ways that do not follow the usual conventions of performance etiquette (Collins et al., 2022). Relaxed Concerts seek to rethink these conventions by creating an environment in which everyone can feel welcome, comfortable, and able to experience live music on their own terms. As noted earlier, the diversity of listening needs that Relaxed Concerts seek to accommodate is broad — from sensory sensitivity to the need for movement and vocal expression. Relaxed Concerts are designed to respond to these diverse needs at every stage of the venue's preparation and delivery. This may involve:

— A. THE LISTENING ENVIRONMENT

- careful management of sensory load, through the avoidance of sudden changes in lighting and sound levels;
- lighting arrangements that allow people to move safely within the concert space;
- training for ushers, production staff and musicians on the specific needs of audience members;
- additional ushering staff to assist people who may need to stand, move about or leave and re-enter the hall during the concert;
- accessible toilets and quiet areas where people can withdraw if they need to;
- the provision of sensory objects to support self-regulation, such as earplugs, tactile objects, noise-reducing headphones and similar resources;

- audio description of the programme for audience members with visual impairments, sign language interpretation, and surtitles providing contextual information about the performance.

— B. REPERTOIRE SELECTION AND PROGRAMME DESIGN

Repertoire selection and programme design should be guided by the audience profile, considering:

- the start and finish times of the concert;
- the audience's attention span, both within individual works and across the programme as a whole;
- the degree of familiarity audience members may have with the repertoire;
- the musical style, with particular attention to dynamics, tempi and the size of the orchestra;
- acoustic considerations, including the relationship between the repertoire presented and the performance space;
- the order of the pieces, the transitions between pieces and the intervals allowed between them.

— C. ADDITIONAL PARTICIPATION SUPPORT

Additional support for audience participation may include:

- the involvement of professional musicians who act as mediators between the audience and the performers, offering spoken introductions to the music, or encouraging active participation through clapping or singing;
- opportunities for direct interaction between musicians and audience members, in which case, the concert space allows easy and unobstructed movement between the stage and the seating area.

As the points above suggest, producing a Relaxed Concert might not simply be a matter of ensuring accessibility provisions, such as sign language interpretation or access for wheelchair users. Rather, it involves creating an overall relaxed and welcoming environment — one that is attentive to how each audience member experiences the music.

03

The Project

As outlined in the introduction, the All-Year-Long CIVIS Open Lab Music Ensembles project was closely aligned with the philosophy of the CIVIS Open Labs, which seeks to create collaborative spaces between the university and society for the development of innovative initiatives that address challenges such as social inclusion and the Sustainable Development Goals (CIVIS Europe's Civic University Alliance, 2025).

More specifically, the project aimed to:

- familiarise the participating students — the orchestra members and volunteers — with performance practices designed for a wide range of listeners, with particular emphasis on the needs of people living with dementia;
- raise awareness and provide training for organisations and professionals involved in concert production, on how to create an environment that supports the participation of people living with dementia as audience members;
- promote collaboration between universities across different countries and build networks dedicated to advancing inclusive performances;
- produce original material to support the dissemination of experience gained through the project, of which this guide forms a part.



Members of the CIVIS Chamber Orchestra.

With the artistic creation and performance of high-quality concerts by the CIVIS Chamber Orchestra at the centre of the initiative, students from three countries had the opportunity to engage with Relaxed Performances firsthand. By bringing together academic knowledge, artistic practice, and the lived experience of the communities it served, the project became a space for co-creation, learning, and the exchange of good practices. The Relaxed Concerts were therefore not only a series of artistic events but also a laboratory for developing new approaches to musical experience, one that is more open, inclusive, and genuinely accessible.

04

Music and Dementia

Dementia is an umbrella term for a group of neurodegenerative conditions primarily associated with ageing. These include Alzheimer's disease as well as other forms of cognitive decline, such as vascular dementia and frontotemporal dementia. In 2025, the number of people living with dementia was estimated at 9,065,706 in EU27 countries and 12,122,979 across EU and non-EU countries combined. By 2050, these figures are expected to increase by 58% in EU27 countries and by 64% across EU and non-EU countries combined (Alzheimer Europe, 2026).

In Greece alone, an estimated 200,000 people are living with dementia. The true scale of the condition's impact is even greater when the broader caregiving network is taken into account. People living with dementia often depend on the support of more than one carer, as primary carers typically rely on assistance from family members, friends or professional care providers to meet daily needs and manage everyday tasks (Alzheimer Athens, 2017).

People living with dementia commonly experience a range of symptoms and challenges, including:

- impaired cognitive function;
- short-term memory loss and, gradually, long-term memory loss;
- difficulties with language comprehension and expression;
- spatial and temporal disorientation;
- difficulties with movement;
- impaired visuomotor coordination.

Increased stress, anxiety and wandering behaviours are also commonly observed in people living with dementia. These symptoms can significantly affect how they perceive, process and respond to environmental stimuli. Although dementia is a progressive condition, timely and appropriate interventions can help slow its progression or support quality of life, depending on the type and stage of dementia and the individual's overall clinical profile.

Since there is currently no cure for dementia, and pharmacological treatments have shown limited effectiveness (Hofbauer et al., 2022), growing attention has turned to non-pharmacological approaches, including arts-based interventions. Given that the majority of people affected by dementia live in the community, the World Health Organisation (2021) has issued guidelines on equal participation in socio-cultural activities, encouraging initiatives that aim, among other things, to improve the quality of life of people living with dementia and their families, strengthen dementia-friendly communities and reduce stigma.

Music can play an important role in supporting quality of life for people living with dementia. Musical engagement in its many forms — listening, performing, singing, movement or dance — has been shown to offer wide-ranging benefits. As music engages “an extensive network of auditory, cognitive, motor, and emotional processing regions in the brain,” and as the emotional and cognitive impact of music is often relatively well preserved in ageing and dementia, it can become “a powerful tool in the care and rehabilitation of many ageing-related neurological diseases” (Särkämö, 2018, p.670). In later stages of dementia, some people may no longer be able to communicate verbally; yet even when speech is limited or absent, they may still be able to hum, sing or move with music (van der Steen et al., 2025).

05

Orchestral Music Initiatives for People Living with Dementia

This section briefly presents a selection of exemplary orchestral initiatives in Europe and the United States, while also highlighting the different approaches adopted by cultural organisations in designing and delivering such activities.

— ORCHESTRAL ACTIVITIES IN CARE HOMES

Perhaps the most common approach is to bring live performances directly to care homes, day-care centres and hospitals where ensembles offer high-quality, carefully prepared performances.

For example, musicians from the City of London Sinfonia have toured for more than a decade to care homes for older people with a string quartet, offering interactive performances that combine pre-composed repertoire, improvisation and creative music-making with residents. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic similarly present chamber music performances for people living with dementia and their carers (Derbyshire & Swann, 2019).

— RELAXED CONCERTS

As noted earlier, only a small proportion of people living with dementia reside in residential care; the vast majority continue to live in the community. Relaxed Concerts can therefore offer access to people who might otherwise be excluded from cultural life, particularly when careful consideration is given to the venue, location, timing, duration and overall atmosphere of the event. In doing so, they provide much-needed opportunities for cultural participation and wellbeing among a group of people who are still too often overlooked.

Organisations that have delivered Relaxed Concerts for people living with dementia include the Aurora Orchestra, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra and the Musikverein in Vienna, among others (Derbyshire & Swann, 2019).

— COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS AND MUSIC THERAPISTS

Music therapy is an evidence-based intervention delivered by certified music therapists, trained to work with individuals or groups through music to address non-musical goals relating to a person's physical, psychological or social needs, including those living with dementia. It is, however, important to distinguish between music therapy and Relaxed Concerts. Music therapy is a clinical intervention, usually taking place in settings such as care homes or day centres, and is designed around individualised therapeutic aims. Relaxed Concerts, by contrast, are performances given by professional musicians and designed with the needs of the audience in mind. They should be understood as cultural and artistic experiences rather than clinical interventions. They do not replace music therapy or other forms of care; rather, they seek to make live musical performance more accessible, flexible and welcoming for people whose needs are not met by conventional concert settings.

It is not uncommon, however, for orchestras and music therapists to collaborate, particularly on short-term participatory workshops or community-based projects. A successful example is *Together in Sound*, a collaborative project between Saffron Hall Trust and the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research at Anglia Ruskin University (Molyneux et al., 2020). The project brings together music therapists and professional musicians, including members of Britten Sinfonia, to work with people living with dementia and their carers.

Finally, it is also worth highlighting the approach adopted by the City of London Sinfonia (CLS), which is built on collaboration between CLS musicians, older people living with dementia and their families. This model seeks to provide person-centred musical experiences for people attending day centres who may be experiencing growing isolation. This approach clearly requires appropriate training and specialist preparation for the musicians involved. The skills required go beyond musical performance alone: they encompass improvisational, communicative and empathetic abilities, all of which are essential for carrying out this kind of work (Warran & Welch, 2019).

06

Designing Relaxed Concerts: The Athens and Madrid Experience

This section presents the challenges, possibilities, strengths and limitations encountered during the design and delivery of the concert held in Athens, while also drawing on field observations from the concert held in Madrid. In Madrid, the writing team was present to document the event but was not involved in its organisation. Rather than focusing solely on the positive aspects of the initiative, this section also reflects on omissions, difficulties and constraints, in the hope that these observations may prove useful to organisations, artists and cultural professionals wishing to develop similar initiatives.

One of the most significant challenges was identifying a suitable venue in Athens. The venue needed to accommodate the CIVIS Chamber Orchestra, approximately 40 musicians, while allowing audience members to move freely when entering and leaving the space before, during and after the concert. Tiered seating in the auditorium can restrict movement for people with limited mobility, impaired orientation, or balance difficulties, as is often the case for people living with dementia.

The venue eventually selected was the Olympia Municipal Music Theatre “Maria Callas”, made available free of charge by the Municipality of Athens. The theatre met most of the requirements: the stalls had no steps between rows, access to the toilets was unobstructed, and the foyer was easily accessible, meaning that it could serve as a quiet space for rest or withdrawal if needed.



ΠΡΟΓΡΑΜΜΑ

Εισαγωγή *Le Nozze di Figaro* K. 492 (1785) /
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

"Che Soave Zeffiretto" (*Le Nozze di Figaro* K. 492) /
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

"Bei Männern welche Liebe fühlen" (*Die Zauberflöte* K. 620) /
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

"La ci darem la mano" (*Don Giovanni* K. 591) /
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Εισαγωγή *Egmont* Op. 84 (1810) / Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Danzon No. 2 (1994) / Arturo Márquez (1950-)

Por Una Cabeza (1935), μεταγραφή για σύμφ. ορχήστρα Νίκος Μαλιάρος /
Carlos Gardel (1890-1935)

Βαλς No. 2 Op. 99 (1955-6) / Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Χοροί 1 & 5 από τους *21 Ουγγρικούς χορούς* WoO 1 (1869) /
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Επιλογές από γνωστά τραγούδια των Μίκη Θεοδωράκη (1925-2021)
και Μάνο Χατζιδάκι (1925-1994) σε μεταγραφή για συμφωνική ορχήστρα

ΣΥΝΤΕΛΕΣΤΕΣ

ΒΙΟΛΙ
Danielle Gorla, Dafne Restivo, Chiara Amatucci,
Beatrice Fabbizi, Διονύσης Πυλαρινός, Ελένη Φίλιππα,
Θεοδώρα-Δανάη Παπάς-Σαγγαλιού, Θωδωρής Αλτόγλου,
Λεωνή Αλυφαντή, Έλντα-Μαρία Λουκά, Μαρία Ιωαννίδη,
Στεφανία Ευαγγελιστή, Φωτίος Ασημάκης

ΒΙΟΛΑ
Άγγελος Αραβίδης, Dario Masoni

ΒΙΟΛΟΝΤΣΕΛΟ
Ανα Fondevila Eckart, Αστέριος Θεοδώρου, Δήμητρα Κεκεδάκη,
Μαρία-Ζωή Τζόκου, Μαρία Μπιτσιώκου, Οδυσσέας Ντόρλας

ΚΟΝΤΡΑΠΑΣΟ
Παναγιώτης Αυγερινός, Ραφαήλ-Βασίλειος Κουκούλης

ΦΛΑΥΤΟ
Άλκηστι Μπρακουμάτσου-Τσώνη, Βασιλική Μπάρμπα,
Παρσσκευή-Παταλία Τζαναβάρη

ΚΛΑΡΙΝΕΤΟ
Δημήτριος Καντασιούλης, Ιωάννα Καραγιωργάκη, Ιωάννα Πλέσσα

ΟΜΠΣΕ
Μαρίζα-Γεωργία Μουμιτζόγλου, Φωτίος Χατζής

ΤΡΟΜΠΕΤΑ
Βαρβάρα Γκουράρου

ΚΟΡΝΟ
Πέτρος Γαλάνης

ΤΡΟΜΠΟΝΙ
Χριστόφορος Πιθαμούδης

The concert programme in Athens.

Unlike most concerts, which typically take place in the evening, this performance was scheduled to begin at 12:30 p.m. This time slot was chosen in consideration of the energy levels of people living with neurodegenerative conditions, which tend to be higher until midday and to decline as the day progresses.

Another issue that required careful thought was how to reach potential audience members. Collaboration with the Athens Alzheimer's Association and the Friendship Clubs of the Municipality of Athens proved essential in reaching people who might wish to attend. At least 50 attendees had learned about the concert through the Association, while more than 200 people came through the Municipality's Friendship Clubs. However, for people at more advanced stages of the condition, who require increased support, travelling to a venue outside their municipality of residence remained difficult. Several people who had expressed an intention to attend were ultimately unable to do so.

By contrast, the concert in Madrid took place in the performance space of the Colmenar Viejo Residential Home for Older People, also at midday. In this case, the access challenges described above were largely resolved. However, the audience remained within the

familiar yet confined setting in which they live year-round, without the opportunity to experience a dedicated cultural venue in their city, as the Athens audience had done.

A particularly sensitive question was how to promote the event without using the word “dementia” in any printed and promotional material. The decision was taken to describe the event as an inclusive concert, without explicitly naming specific audience groups, while reaching the intended audience through targeted channels. This approach sought to avoid stigmatizing language while also ensuring that the event felt welcoming to all, not only to those living with a specific condition.



...the universality and immateriality of the music language have a great impact on those people, too, and not only for the students who took part in the project. This focus added a deep and unique human experience for all the participants.

— DANIELE GORLA, PROJECT COORDINATOR

— REPERTOIRE AND PREPARATION OF MUSICIANS, CONTRIBUTORS AND VOLUNTEERS

The concert programme was developed jointly by the conductor and the research team to balance the educational and artistic needs of the student orchestra members with the specific needs of the audience. The programme included well-known works from the classical repertoire alongside less familiar pieces, and care was taken to ensure that the overall duration did not exceed approximately one hour.

Student volunteers from the Department of Music Studies also supported the concert, working alongside the venue’s ushering team. Rather than serving solely as ushers, the students were trained to support audience members throughout the concert: they were prepared to assist with movement in and out of the hall when necessary, respond with warmth and sensitivity to requests for help, and encourage participation during the performance, for example by inviting the audience to clap, sing or engage with the music in their own way.



Training workshop for musicians and volunteers ahead of the Athens concert.

A key element of the preparation process was the training of everyone involved. For this purpose, all members of the CIVIS orchestra, the volunteers and the Olympia Theatre staff took part in workshops and presentations on the design and delivery of concerts for people living with dementia, as well as on the broader practice of Relaxed Concerts. These workshops were led by Christiana Adamopoulou, drawing on her expertise as a music therapist.



Preparatory workshop held in Madrid.

— THE CONCERT

Close collaboration with the Olympia production team was instrumental in ensuring the concert ran smoothly. The adaptations included additional ushers both inside and outside the hall, soft but sufficient lighting maintained in the stalls throughout the performance, and doors left open so that anyone wishing to leave could do so freely. Together, these arrangements helped create an atmosphere of safety, care and trust.



Conductor Zoe Zeniodi and the soloists interacting with the audience during the concert in Athens.

As the stage at the Olympia is raised and set at some distance from the stalls, communication between the audience, the musicians and the conductor was not always straightforward. Similarly, in Madrid, the distance between the orchestra and the audience was considerable, limiting the potential for relaxed, spontaneous interaction. At the Athens concert, the conductor helped bridge this gap through her notably communicative approach, offering spoken introductions to the works and inviting the audience to participate by clapping or quietly singing along to familiar melodies in the programme.



The orchestra at the Olympia Municipal Music Theatre “Maria Callas” in Athens.



Conductor Zoe Zeniodi addressing the audience before the concert in Athens.

07

Impact and Feedback

Following the completion of the project, the student musicians and volunteers were invited to participate in a study exploring their experiences. They were asked to share their thoughts and suggestions on the concerts by completing a short questionnaire. In parallel, the authors gathered observational notes during the concerts in Athens and Madrid.

— AUDIENCE FEEDBACK

Feedback from the audience in Athens was overwhelmingly positive. Many audience members expressed their thanks repeatedly, spoke warmly about the music, and said that they would welcome more concerts of this kind. The response went beyond words: several people approached the organisers and volunteers after the concert, embraced them, and lingered in the hall, as if reluctant for the experience to end. In Madrid, direct verbal feedback was more limited owing to the language barrier. Nevertheless, the smiles, gestures, and visible engagement of audience members suggested that the concert had been received with warmth and appreciation. Taken together, these responses indicated a deep need for musical experiences that are not only accessible, but also generous, welcoming, and emotionally meaningful.



Audience members applauding after the concert in Athens.

“

My dear child, you welcomed us at the entrance with such a lovely smile — I loved that so much! May you always be well!

— MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE ADDRESSING A VOLUNTEER, AFTER THE ATHENS CONCERT



A carer and an audience member sharing an emotional moment during the concert in Madrid.

— REFLECTIONS FROM PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

The reflections presented below illustrate how the project was experienced by those involved in its delivery, while also pointing to practical considerations for the design of future relaxed concerts.

The Relaxed Concerts had a lasting impact not only on the audience, but also on the student musicians who participated in the project. Questionnaire responses indicated a high level of satisfaction with the concerts and, more importantly, revealed a meaningful shift in how the students perceived their role as performers in relation to a more diverse audience.

Most participants reported that their involvement in the project had significantly enhanced their understanding of both the philosophy of Relaxed Concerts and the needs of people living with dementia as audience members. At the same time, they expressed a strong willingness to participate in similar initiatives in the future, suggesting that the experience had served not only as a rewarding artistic experience, but also as a process of professional and personal growth.

It is worth presenting some of the participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions. Alongside concerns about limited rehearsal time and logistical difficulties related to transporting instruments and ensuring their availability, the students offered suggestions that extended beyond the performance-related and organisational aspects of a concert. Their reflections addressed the space, the repertoire, and the interaction with audience members, showing how they had begun to envision what an even more inclusive concert might look like.



It would be nice to make it even more inclusive, for example playing not on a stage but at a lower level, closer to the people, and explaining more about the music (what it represents or something about the composer or fun facts) and allowing them questions, even only “Can I hear more the sound of a specific instrument?”

— STUDENT, MEMBER OF THE ORCHESTRA

Having performed in more than one concert and in different settings — a concert hall and a residential care home — the students were able to compare their experiences. Even the limitations they encountered became opportunities to ask further questions and learn through first-hand experience. This is of particular value and entirely consistent with the philosophy of the Open Labs.

The reflections of the student volunteers complemented this picture by offering insights from those who supported the audience throughout the concert. In the reflective diaries, the volunteers expressed their satisfaction and described how profoundly the experience had affected them. They noted that their contact with audience members at every stage of the concert had made them acutely aware of the need for similar initiatives. Some volunteers, like the orchestra musicians, offered observations on possible improvements that could make the concert space even more welcoming for audience members, particularly in relation to ease of movement within the venue.

“

I appreciated playing in an unconventional venue (especially Madrid) as it made it clearer that it was a Relaxed Concert. [...] I also liked the attention to the repertoire chosen in Athens to better engage with the public, with popular folk songs and short pieces which make the concert easier to follow (as a musician I enjoyed playing the music that was chosen in Madrid, but for the sake of the project and the attention that should be dedicated to the public I'd suggest an easier range of music pieces to choose from).

— STUDENT, MEMBER OF THE ORCHESTRA



Concert at Colmenar Viejo Residential Home for Older People, Madrid.

It is important to acknowledge the positive attitude and adaptability the production team at the Olympia Theatre in Athens showed, as well as the nursing and administrative staff at Colmenar Viejo Residential Home for Older People in Madrid. In both cases, there was a clear recognition of the value and necessity of such initiatives. At the same time, however, the project highlighted a notable absence: the lack of similar initiatives originating from cultural organisations themselves.



For the first time, as a student of music, I realise how many different dimensions music holds. It is both an art and a science, capable of expressing generosity and compassion. I feel grateful to have been part of this experience.

— THANOS ECONOMOU, STUDENT-VOLUNTEER

08

Future Directions

The positive response from everyone involved in this initiative provides a strong foundation for developing similar labs in the future. The questionnaires completed by the student musicians, the student volunteers' suggestions, and the observational notes all pointed to a shared desire for concerts that place greater emphasis on interaction with the audience.

The initiative demonstrated that it is possible to create a welcoming and genuinely accessible listening experience. At the same time, it suggested that accessibility should not stop at adapting the concert setting, timing or the repertoire. A possible next step would be to involve audience members more in the artistic design itself, for example, by learning more about their musical memories, preferences, needs and responses before the concert, or by creating opportunities for more direct interaction during the performance.

Achieving this would require time, continuity and the gradual cultivation of a collaborative culture that gives equal care to both the artistic and participatory dimensions of the concert. It seems that many of the students were not only receptive to this possibility but actively called for a more participatory model of live music listening.



Conductor Zoe Zeniodi interacting with the audience during the concert in Athens.

A further direction concerns the place of this knowledge within university curricula. The students' responses suggest that there is both a need and a desire for music education that addresses not only artistic excellence and technical skill, but also inclusion, accessibility and social responsibility. Learning to make one's art and research more inclusive should be regarded as part of contemporary musical training, particularly for students who will go on to work as performers, researchers, educators or cultural professionals.

“

You could also bring us in contact with people with dementia to build a relationship with them and make them feel more comfortable.

— STUDENT, MEMBER OF THE ORCHESTRA

09

Some Concluding Reflections

For much of their lives, musicians are preoccupied with achieving the highest performance standards, often navigating intensely competitive educational and professional environments — particularly in Western art music. In doing so, they may gradually lose sight of a simple yet essential question: “For whom, and for what purpose, do we perform?”

This project grew out of a need to gently challenge this perspective. Rather than focusing solely on the musicians, it sought to shift attention to the relationship between performers and audience. The initiative was designed to explore how familiar the students were with Relaxed Concerts and to raise broader questions: What forms of awareness, sensitivity and skills do musicians need to cultivate so they can meaningfully respond to the diverse needs of those they play for?



Conductor Zoe Zeniodi interacting with the audience during the concert in Athens.

Student musicians, volunteers, production team members, nursing and administrative staff, teachers, family members and carers were all invited, each in their own way, to engage with this shift in perspective. For many, this may have been their first encounter with the idea of music not only as performance, but as a relational and inclusive experience.

The research conducted alongside the concerts, together with the authors' direct experience of the project, suggested that everyone involved, including the audience, became familiar with a more inclusive approach to musical practice. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect was the shift observed in the student musicians' approach. For many, there was a discernible shift from the question "How well will I play today?" toward a more holistic way of thinking, which included questions such as:

"Who has access to our music and who might be excluded? How can the repertoire truly meet listeners where they are? What changes might concert spaces need to become more welcoming and accessible?"

The fact that the students who participated, both musicians and volunteers, developed suggestions, observations, and ideas that engaged with these questions gives reason to hope that, beyond the successful delivery of concerts of a high artistic standard, this project also contributed to a lasting shift in how they think about their practice. It demonstrated that an inclusive approach to the design of cultural events can transform not only the audience experience, but also artistic practice itself.



The Orchestra and the soloists on stage at the Olympia Municipal Music Theatre “Maria Callas” in Athens.

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Practical Checklist for Designing a Relaxed Concert

1. Define the purpose of the concert

- Clarify who the concert is for and what kind of experience it aims to offer.
- Consider whether the concert is addressed to a specific audience, such as people living with dementia and their carers, or to a broader audience with diverse needs.
- Remember that the aim is not only to make the concert accessible in technical terms, but to create a welcoming, flexible and respectful listening environment.

2. Choose an appropriate venue

- Select a venue that allows easy access before, during and after the concert.
- Check whether audience members can move safely and freely in and out of the hall.
- Avoid, where possible, spaces with many stairs, narrow corridors or multiple levels.
- Ensure that accessible toilets are available and easy to reach.
- Identify a quiet space where audience members can withdraw, rest or self-regulate if needed.
- Consider the spatial relationship between the audience and the musicians: a layout that allows proximity and visual contact can support communication and participation.

3. Plan the timing and duration

- Choose a time of day that suits the energy levels and routines of the intended audience.
- For people with dementia or older adults, late morning or early afternoon is likely to be more appropriate than evening.
- Keep the overall duration short and manageable.
- Allow time for arrival, settling in, moving around, and leaving without pressure.
- Avoid long pauses or overly complex transitions between musical pieces.

4. Prepare the audience in advance

- Communicate clearly what kind of concert this will be.
- Explain that movement, quiet vocal responses, clapping, singing along, or leaving and re-entering the hall are all welcome.
- Avoid language that may stigmatise the intended audience.
- Work with trusted partner organisations, such as community groups, care organisations, day centres or carers' associations, to reach the people who may benefit from the event.
- Provide practical information in advance, including venue access, toilets, duration, lighting, sound levels and available support.

5. Select and shape the repertoire carefully

- Choose repertoire with the audience profile in mind.
- Consider familiarity, emotional tone, duration, dynamics, tempo and instrumentation.
- Balance recognisable works with less familiar ones where appropriate.
- Avoid sudden extremes of volume, lighting or atmosphere unless carefully managed.
- Think about the order of the pieces and the transitions between them.
- Where possible, include moments that allow for gentle participation, such as clapping, humming, singing or movement.

6. Prepare musicians, volunteers and staff

- Provide training or briefing for everyone involved, including musicians, conductors, ushers, volunteers, production staff and venue staff.
- Explain the principles of Relaxed Concerts and the specific needs of the intended audience.
- Clarify that audience members may move, vocalise, react visibly, leave the hall or need assistance.
- Prepare staff and volunteers to respond with calmness, respect and warmth.
- Ensure that everyone understands their role before, during and after the concert.

7. Design the concert environment

- Maintain soft but sufficient lighting for safe movement.
- Avoid sudden changes in lighting or sound levels.
- Keep doors open or make it easy for people to leave and re-enter freely.
- Station additional ushers or volunteers both inside and outside the hall.
- Make sensory resources available where possible, such as earplugs, tactile tools or noise-reducing headphones.
- Ensure that the space feels welcoming rather than restrictive or overly formal.

8. Support participation during the concert

- Use spoken introductions to help the audience engage with the programme.
- Encourage gentle forms of participation where appropriate, such as clapping, singing along or responding to familiar melodies.
- Allow audience members to engage in different ways: listening quietly, moving, smiling, vocalising, singing, or simply being present.
- Facilitate direct interaction between musicians and audience members when possible.
- Do not treat unexpected audience responses as disruptions — they are part of the experience.

9. Work with carers and companions

- Recognise the role of carers, family members and companions — including staff members in healthcare settings (nurses, therapists, etc.) — as integral to the concert experience.
- Make them feel welcome and supported, not responsible for enforcing conventional concert behaviour.
- Provide clear information about exits, toilets, quiet spaces and available help.
- Allow carers and companions to decide what level of support is needed during the concert.

10. Observe, listen and adapt

- Observe how the audience responds during the concert.
- Pay attention to moments of engagement, discomfort, fatigue, enjoyment, confusion or withdrawal.
- Gather feedback from audience members, carers, volunteers, musicians and staff.
- Hold a debrief with the team after the event.
- Use the feedback to improve future Relaxed Concerts.

11. Reflect on the wider purpose

- Consider what the concert revealed about access, inclusion and participation.
- Ask what could be improved in the relationship between musicians, audience members and the concert space.
- Reflect on how the experience might inform future artistic planning, training and university curricula.
- Treat the Relaxed Concert not as a simplified version of a conventional concert, but as a different way of thinking about live music as a shared human experience.

Note:

The above checklist is not intended as a fixed model, but as a practical starting point. Each relaxed concert will need to be adapted to the specific audience, venue, artistic team and local context.



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