Who Gets Heard?

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Background

The purpose of this research project is to compare how the musical canon is represented in live instrumental classical performances in Florence, Italy, and Kansas City, Missouri. Focusing on the works programmed, composers represented, and cultural contexts of each performance, this study explores how history, tradition, and local identity influence which music continues to be performed and valued. Florence's historical connection to Western European art music offers a point of comparison with Kansas City's orchestral and community music traditions. By examining similarities and differences in programming across the two cities, this research considers how the established Western classical canon is maintained, expanded, and challenged in contemporary performance. Ultimately, this project contributes to broader conversations about cultural identity, musical tradition, and whose music is represented on the concert stage.

Research Question(s)

How does concert repertoire differ between Florence and Kansas City across large ensemble, chamber ensemble, and solo performances? What trends appear in the age of composers, conductors, performers, and audience members in each location? What do these trends suggest about how the musical canon is maintained in Italian versus American contexts?

Methods

This study used qualitative observations to compare classical music performance culture in Florence, Italy, and Kansas City, Missouri. Nine live concerts were documented in 2026, including five in Florence and four in Kansas City. Observations focused on repertoire, composer nationalities, performers, audience demographics, venue accessibility, and concert etiquette.

Findings

1. **Repertoire and Composer Nationality**
   - **Florence:** Programs included European composers such as Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Albinoni, and Marcello.
   - **Kansas City:** Programs featured European composers alongside American composers, including Samuel Barber, Amy Beach, Eric Whitacre, and Viet Cuong.
2. **Audience Demographics**
   - **Florence:** Audiences at several professional concerts appeared predominantly older.
   - **Kansas City:** Audiences varied by event. The Modigliani Quartet attracted a primarily middle-aged and older audience, while the Mid-America Freedom Band audience appeared more casual and predominantly female.
3. **Performers and Ensemble Types**
   - **Florence:** Observations included professional orchestras, conservatory musicians, and a community wind band.
   - **Kansas City:** Performances ranged from the professional symphony and chamber musicians to an approximately 80-member community wind band.
4. **Concert Etiquette and Audience Experience**
   - **Florence:** Concerts generally followed traditional etiquette, with extended applause and fewer observed standing ovations.
   - **Kansas City:** Responses ranged from standing ovations at professional concerts to audience participation during a Sousa encore. The Mid-America Freedom Band featured a drag queen MC and LGBTQIA+ advocacy.
5. **Venue and Community Engagement**
   - **Florence:** Performances took place in concert halls, conservatories, churches, and smaller venues; some included bilingual introductions.
   - **Kansas City:** Concerts included major performance venues and community spaces. The Mid-America Freedom Band incorporated library outreach and LGBTQIA+ community engagement.

Conclusion

My research suggests that the musical canon is still central to classical music in both Florence and Kansas City, but there are different ways to connect it with the community. In Florence, the only concert I observed that moved outside the traditional canon was a community wind band pops concert, while Kansas City performances included more American composers, contemporary works, and community-centered programming. The Mid-America Freedom Band stood out for using music to bring people together through LGBTQIA+ advocacy and outreach, challenging the idea that classical music has to be formal or exclusive. These observations made me wonder how much access to music education in public schools shapes our relationship with classical music later in life. Future research could explore whether differences in music education and access to live performances influence concert attendance and engagement, especially among young people. Although this study was limited in scope, it suggests that preserving classical music traditions and making concert spaces more welcoming do not have to be mutually exclusive. Expanding access to music education and creating more ways for communities to connect with live music may help classical music reach future generations.





