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# Audience Engagement through University Programmes. A Case Study of Opera in Bilbao

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## Audience Engagement through University Programmes. A Case Study of Opera in Bilbao

Envolvimento do Público através de Programas Universitários. Um Estudo de Caso de Ópera em Bilbao

Desarrollo de Audiencias através de Programas Universitarios. Estudio de Caso de la Ópera en Bilbao

Engagement du Public à travers les Programmes Universitaires. Une Étude de Cas de l'Opéra à Bilbao

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### ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this research was to explore how university programmes for older adults can contribute to the engagement of cultural audiences. To achieve this aim, a qualitative research approach was employed. The university programme for older adults called "Enjoy the arts", organised by the University of Deusto (Bilbao, Spain), was taken as a case study and an analysis of in-depth interviews with 10 participating students was conducted. We focused our interviews on the opera experiences of our interviewees before and after participating in the university programme, and aimed to capture the following changes produced: (a) changes in the duration of the opera experience; (b) changes in the intensity of the opera experience; and (c) changes in the individual. We conclude that university programmes for older adults can contribute to the engagement of cultural audiences by facilitating a path to the enjoyment of cultural experiences, transforming them into high-quality arts experiences. Due to the limited number of interviews, this paper should be considered as an exploratory research that could inspire cultural managers in their practice or that could be the seed for an advanced research.

**KEYWORDS:** arts, cultural audiences, opera, education, university, older adults.

### RESUMO:

O objetivo desta pesquisa é explorar como programas universitários para adultos mais velhos podem contribuir para o envolvimento do público cultural. Para alcançar esse objetivo, foi utilizada uma abordagem de pesquisa qualitativa. O programa universitário para idosos denominado "Disfruta las artes", organizado pela Universidade de Deusto (Bilbao, Espanha), foi realizado como estudo de caso, e foram realizadas dez entrevistas em profundidade com alunos participantes. As entrevistas focaram as experiências de ópera dos entrevistados antes e depois de participar do programa universitário. Os resultados da análise revelaram as seguintes alterações: (a) alterações na duração da experiência de ópera; (b) alterações na intensidade da experiência de ópera; e (c) alterações no indivíduo. Conclui-se que os programas universitários para adultos mais velhos podem contribuir para o envolvimento do público cultural, facilitando uma via para o usufruto das experiências culturais, transformando-as em experiências artísticas de alta qualidade. Apesar desta análise, tendo em conta o limitado número de entrevistas, ser considerada meramente exploratória, os resultados nela obtidos poderão ser bastante úteis aos profissionais do setor cultural e inspirar análises mais aprofundadas no futuro.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** artes, público cultural, ópera, educação, universidade, adultos mais velhos.

### RESUMEN:

El propósito de esta investigación fue explorar cómo los programas universitarios para personas mayores pueden contribuir al desarrollo de audiencias culturales. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se empleó un enfoque cualitativo, tomando como estudio de caso "Disfruta las artes", un programa universitario para personas mayores organizado por la Universidad de Deusto (Bilbao, España). Se llevaron a cabo 10 entrevistas en profundidad con estudiantes participantes, que se centraron en el relato de la experiencia operística de los entrevistados antes y después de participar en el programa universitario. El análisis posterior reveló los siguientes cambios producidos: (a) cambios en la duración de la experiencia operística; (b) cambios en la intensidad de la experiencia operística; y (c) cambios en el individuo. El artículo concluye que los programas universitarios para personas mayores pueden contribuir al desarrollo de públicos al facilitar el camino hacia el disfrute de las experiencias culturales, transformándolas en experiencias artísticas de alta calidad. Esta investigación es de naturaleza exploratoria debido al número limitado de entrevistas realizadas.

A pesar de ello, puede resultar de gran interés para la práctica diaria de los profesionales culturales o para inspirar una futura investigación de mayor alcance.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** artes, audiencias culturales, ópera, educación, universidad, personas mayores.

## RÉSUMÉ:

Le but de cette recherche était d'explorer comment les programmes universitaires pour les personnes âgées pouvaient contribuer au développement des audiences culturelles. Pour atteindre cet objectif, une approche qualitative a été utilisée. Le programme universitaire pour personnes âgées «Disfruta las artes», organisé par l'Université de Deusto (Bilbao, Espagne), a été utilisé comme étude de cas et 10 entretiens approfondis ont été menés avec les étudiants participants. Les entretiens ont porté sur les expériences à l'opéra des interviewés avant et après leur participation au programme universitaire, et l'analyse a révélé les changements suivants: (a) des changements dans la durée de l'expérience de l'opéra; (b) des changements dans l'intensité de l'expérience de l'opéra; et (c) des changements à niveau individuel. L'article conclut que les programmes universitaires pour personnes âgées peuvent contribuer à l'engagement des audiences culturelles pour simplifier le chemin vers le plaisir des expériences culturelles, les transformant en expériences artistiques de haute qualité. A cause du nombre limité d'interviews, cela devrait être considéré comme une recherche exploratoire qui pourrait inspirer les gestionnaires culturels dans leur pratique ou qui pourrait être le début d'une recherche avancée.

**MOTS CLÉS:** arts, audiencias culturales, ópera, educación, universidad, personas âgées.

Although concern for widening access to culture is not new, it seems to remain a challenge and interest in audience development has risen dramatically in recent years. Evidence of this interest includes the fact that the European Commission has not hesitated to include it in their Creative Europe Programme for the period 2014-2020. As Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, stated: "Engaging the public with European culture is a paramount priority for the European Commission, and it is why we have decided to focus on audience development in the proposal for the Creative Europe Programme" (European Commission, 2012, p.1). This line of work fostered by the European Commission has indeed started to produce some results, for instance the recently published study on audience development – how to place audiences at the centre of cultural organisations (Bollo, Da Milano, Gariboldi & Torch, 2017).

At the same time, older adults are becoming an increasingly important group, as the relative weight of this segment in the total population has increased due to the decrease in birth rate and the increase in lifespan (Eurostat, 2012). Although demographic ageing is a challenge, encouraging older people to remain active is considered the key to tackling this issue (TNS Opinion & Social, 2012, p.3). Hence, active ageing is an essential part of the Europe 2020 strategy, and, therefore, "older people have to be empowered to remain active as workers, consumers, carers, volunteers and citizens" (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion European Commission, 2012, p.3). Within the policy framework for active ageing suggested by the World Health Organization, lifelong learning is a key policy proposal (WHO, 2002). In this context, university programmes for older adults have multiplied in recent decades to become a global movement (Villar et al., 2010).

Many studies have been conducted on this type of university programme (AEPUM, 2011; Villar et al., 2010) and on the positive influence of these programmes on their participants (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013). However, none has focused on audience development, most likely because of the scarcity of programmes that are linked to the offer of actual cultural experiences. Attending university in later life due to intrinsic motivation is a leisure experience itself (Gómez & Martínez, 2002), but it could also contribute to enhancing other leisure experiences such as cultural leisure experiences.

From this perspective, the aim of this study is to explore how university programmes for older adults can contribute to the development and engagement of cultural audiences. We studied students' experiences with opera performances, using the innovative university programme for older adults called "Enjoy the Arts",

located in the city of Bilbao (Spain), as a case study. Our findings contribute to the body of knowledge about audience experience and note the important role that collaboration between cultural institutions and universities can play in the process of audience development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### From Audience Development to Audience Engagement

The concern for developing cultural audiences has existed for many years and has traditionally been closely related to the marketing function. Peterson (1980) stated that the goal of arts marketing is to build an audience and that this can be achieved via attraction and retention strategies. However, the starting point of any audience development strategy is knowledge of the market and its segmentation (Hill, O'Sullivan, O'Sullivan & Whitehead, 2018; Nantel, 2012; Peterson, 1980; Scheff, 2014).

Demographic and geographical factors have been traditionally used by arts organisations as segmentation variables. However, already some years ago, Kangun, Otto and Randall (1992) warned that demographic variables provide less insight into the significant factors affecting attendance at fine arts events than do attitudinal, interest and life-style variables. Recently, subjective variables have increased in their importance, and efforts have been made in measuring attendance goals (Bouder-Pailler, 1999; Cuadrado & Mollá, 2000) or even the audience experience (Brown & Novak, 2013; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras & Brooks, 2004; Radbourne, Glow & Johanson, 2013). Nevertheless, the cultural organisation is not restricted to only segmenting their audience by a single method (Kolb, 2000), and, apart from other criteria, as McCarthy and Jinnett (2001) underscored, arts participants are usually grouped into three basic categories: rare (if at all), occasional and frequent.

Once the audience has been segmented and target segments have been identified, audience development strategies are defined. According to Kawashima (2000), there seem to be four different types of audience development strategies: Cultural Inclusion, Extended Marketing, Taste Cultivation and Audience Education. The last two types refer to the existing audience, whereas the first two types try to expand the market either by targeting groups of people who are least likely to attend the arts (Cultural Inclusion) or by focusing on potential attendees who are not yet in the customer group (Extended Marketing). Two different approaches to targeting new audiences are what Kolb (2000) called market depth (i.e., attempting to attract more members of the current audience segment of the cultural organisation) and market breadth (i.e., attempting to attract consumers from new target segments who are currently not attending).

The best suitable strategy will depend on the targeted segment. McCarthy and Jinnett (2001) considered that efforts to diversify participation are most appropriate for individuals who are not inclined to participate; efforts to broaden participation are most appropriate for individuals who are already inclined to participate but are currently not doing so; therefore, efforts to deepen participation are most appropriate for individuals currently participating.

These ideas are also linked to the decision-making process that these authors developed in 2001 and later refined (McCarthy et al., 2004). This model recognises that different stages are embedded in an individual's decision-making process. These include the following: a general consideration of whether to consider the arts a potential leisure activity (background factors and early arts experiences), the formation of an inclination towards the arts based on an assessment of the benefits and costs of participation and where to obtain those benefits (perceptual stage); an evaluation of specific opportunities to participate (practical stage); and the actual arts experience followed by a reassessment of the benefits and costs of the arts (experience stage). Therefore, according to these authors three strategies can be pursued depending on the intended outcome: if the strategy is to diversify participation, the relevant factors that should be taken into consideration are

perceptual; if the strategy is to broaden participation, the relevant factors are practical; and if the strategy is to deepen participation, the relevant factors are related to the experience. Moreover, only those who are capable of high levels of engagement in the arts experience become frequent participants (McCarthy et al., 2004). Brown and Novak (2013) suggested that in recent years there has been a shift from a marketing approach to an engagement approach, drawing audiences into the experience through a combination of education, outreach, marketing and interaction with artists.

## Arts Participation as Leisure Experience

In line with the model presented above but prior to the practical decision of whether to attend, and especially if we are referring to frequent attendees, arts participation must be considered a leisure experience by the beholder. Cuenca (2014) even discussed a valuable leisure experience. What, however, do we mean by a leisure experience? That is what we will attempt to clarify below.

Leisure has been defined in a number of ways: as time, as activity, as a state of mind, as a quality of action or as a dimension of life, among others (Kelly & Freisinger, 2000). However, some of these definitions have been rejected over time by researchers due to their limitations. For instance, neither all free time nor all non-work activities is leisure (Cuenca, 2014; Iso-Ahola, 1999; Kelly & Freisinger, 2000). Kelly and Freisinger (2000) suggested that the meaning of the activity for the individual is far more important than the activity itself. Furthermore, Iso-Ahola (1999) noted the motivational foundations of leisure, demonstrating that leisure participation is self-determined and intrinsically motivated, and Mannell (1999) focused on the satisfaction construct as an indicator of the quality of leisure styles. Cuenca (2014), in an attempt to outline the concept, considered that perceived freedom, autotelism and satisfaction are the main pillars of leisure. Although the subjective dimension of leisure plays a significant role, the social context is also an important factor (Kelly, 1992). Moreover, Kelly (1999) advised that in the revised approaches, leisure is a more complex phenomenon than either the earlier sociologists or psychologists proposed.

According to Stebbins (2008), leisure experiences can involve different levels of engagement, from relatively short-lived pleasurable activities requiring little or no special training to enjoy them (casual leisure) to systematic pursuit of an activity that results in a leisure career that in turn offers durable benefits to the participants and demands significant efforts related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills (serious leisure). The conclusion seems to be as follows: the more engagement, the more lasting the rewards. Csikszentmihalyi (1998, 2008) also highlighted this idea when he explained the concept of flow.

If we frame arts participation as a creative leisure experience, we should distinguish the creative from the re-creative dimension (Cuenca, 2014). The former focuses on the creative process that culminates in an artwork, whereas the latter refers to the inner process of the individual who contemplates the artwork and revives the process of the creation. Although creation addresses the expression of an object, re-creation addresses with the discovery of it. The active reception of art is considered creativity by different authors (Amigo, 2014; Dewey, 1949; Eco, 1979; López-Quintás, 2005). Dewey (1949) suggests that the aesthetic experience has a first passive and a second creative phase. During the first stage, we immerse ourselves in the artwork and collect the different details that are physically dispersed in it to create our own experience during the second stage, carrying out an act of abstraction. To be able to abstract the essence of the artwork, the spectator undertakes a process of organising the elements that is similar to the process undertaken by the creator.

Considering the aforementioned ideas, arts participation as leisure experience can differ significantly from one individual to another. For example, some people may experience flow when attending an opera performance and others may not; some may feel that visiting an exhibition is casual leisure for them, whereas others consider doing so serious leisure; and some may achieve the creative phase of the aesthetic experience, whereas some may remain in the passive stage. However, there is a common element: the idea of process. Kelly and Freisinger (2000) stated that leisure experience is a complex process that consists of



anticipation, perception, response, interpretation, evaluation and recall. Cuenca and Goytia (2012) declared that a cultural leisure experience not only is limited to the moment when the cultural activity takes place but also refers to the previous time (of preparation and setting up of expectations) and the subsequent time (of recalling and assimilation). Therefore, in the next paragraphs, we will explore how the pre- and post-phases of cultural leisure experiences may positively affect the audience experience, increasing the levels of engagement of the individuals.

## Achieving Audience Engagement through High-quality Arts Experiences

McCarthy et al. (2004) noted that engagement seems to be a condition to become a frequent arts participant and that those individuals who are most engaged are those who enjoy high-quality arts experiences characterised by enjoyment, a heightened sense of life, and imaginative departure. Thus, high intrinsic benefits are derived from high-quality arts experiences, and individuals who have such experiences seek more of these experiences. Therefore, increasing numbers of researchers have focused their research in the audience experience, defining what the intrinsic benefits are (McCarthy et al., 2004), measuring how audience members are transformed (Brown & Novak, 2013) and even conceiving an Arts Audience Experience Index (Radbourne et al., 2013). Other researchers have concentrated on arts education as a powerful tool for increasing participation in the arts (Bergonzi & Smith, 1996) and for improving the aesthetic experience (Amigo, 2014; Amigo & Cuenca-Amigo, 2014; Zakaras & Lowell, 2008).

McCarthy et al. (2004) distinguished three sets of intrinsic benefits: (a) the immediate and direct effects of aesthetic experiences (captivation and pleasure); (b) the effects of recurrent experiences on the sensibility and understanding of the individual (expanded capacity for empathy and cognitive growth); and (c) the public benefits (creation of social bonds and expression of communal meanings).

Brown and Novak (2013), building on this research, explored the relationships between their three indicators of readiness-to-receive the art (context, relevance and anticipation) and their six indicators of intrinsic impact: captivation; intellectual stimulation; emotional resonance; spiritual value; aesthetic growth; and social bonding. The findings of this study show that audience members who are confident that they will enjoy a performance (anticipation) do, in fact, report higher impacts, particularly in the Captivation Index. The findings also show that higher levels of context are associated with higher levels of intrinsic impact in four of our six categories.

Zakaras and Lowell (2008) reviewed the work of different thinkers who claim that arts education enables more-satisfying encounters with works of art. They also synthesised the main learning objectives into four categories: aesthetic perception, artistic creation, historical and cultural context, and interpretation and judgment.

Thus far, we have referred to the relationship between the moments before the art experience and the art experience itself, but the following moments are also significant. McCarthy et al. (2004) considered that the appreciation process has a first inner experience (the aesthetic experience) that is completely personal and private and a second outer experience (the interpretative experience) that is an attempt to express to others what that direct experience was like. According to these authors, the experience can have a continued effect when the individual reflects on it and shares his or her impressions with others. Moreover, Radbourne et al. (2013) considered opportunities to discuss the performance with other audience members and staff to be a quality indicator of the audience experience.

## METHOD

To meet our objective (to explore how university programmes for older adults can contribute to the development and engagement of cultural audiences), a qualitative research approach was employed in which in-depth interviews with 10 participating students of the university programme for older adults called “Enjoy the arts”, organised by the University of Deusto (Bilbao, Spain), were analysed.

According to Ruiz-Olabuénaga (2012), in the case of qualitative research, sampling is oriented to the selection of units and dimensions that ensure the amount (saturation) and the quality (richness) of the information. Therefore, a convenience sample was used in this case. In this type of sample, the population elements are selected according to the judgment of the researcher who uses his or her experience to select the elements included in the sample because he or she believes that they are representatives of the population of interest (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

## Informants and Data Collection

The number of students enrolled in the opera module of the programme “Enjoy the Arts” during the academic course 2012-2013 was 49; some of them had been attending the course for several years, whereas others had just started. The main criterion we considered was selecting a mixed sample of experienced and non-experienced students. In addition, gender was considered. Within the group of 49 students, seven were men (14%). In our sample, one of the interviewees was a man (10%), and nine were women. Table 1 summarises the selected sample. Real names have been replaced by fictitious names, respecting the participant’s gender, to maintain the confidentiality of the answers.

Fictitious name	Experienced/Non-experienced student	Gender	Employment situation
Elisa	Non-experienced	Female	Active
Mariana	Non-experienced	Female	Retired
Inés	Non-experienced	Female	Retired
Leire	Non-experienced	Female	Active
Ainara	Non-experienced	Female	Active
Maitane	Experienced	Female	Retired
Juan	Experienced	Male	Retired
Alejandra	Experienced	Female	Active
Esti	Experienced	Female	Retired
Izaskun	Experienced	Female	Active

TABLE 1  
Selected sample

We designed an interview protocol that was flexible enough to adapt to the themes emerging from the narratives and from the analysis. Our protocol covered the opera experience of the interviewees before and after participating in the course; it attempted to capture the changes produced in the reception process and the opera experience itself due to participating in the university programme. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, were digitally recorded, and were transcribed. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and were informed of the purpose of the research and of their right to terminate the recording if they wished.

## Analysis

The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Mayring, 2000). The analysis started with open coding – which allowed us to create initial codes describing the opera experiences of our interviewees before and after participating in the university programme – and with analytical memos. By means of constant comparisons between the incidents in each code and the theoretical memos, we generated analytical categories and documented their properties. This process enabled us to develop analytical categories as follows: (a) changes in the duration of the opera experience; (b) changes in the intensity of the opera experience; and (c) changes in the individual.

The analysis was performed with the help of the Dedoose Desktop App for collaborative computer-aided qualitative data analysis (Sociocultural Research Consultants, 2013). We followed the analytical procedure for coding and forming categories described by Kelle (1995) when using data analysis software and the memo-writing guidelines described by Strauss (1987). The Dedoose system, based on memoranda and visual software tools, was especially useful for our analysis because it facilitated the construction and management of the repository of common descriptions of experiences, yielding segments of text linked to codes and codes linked to analytical categories.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE STUDY

“Enjoy the Arts” is a lifelong training programme from the Institute of Leisure Studies at the University of Deusto that has been running since the academic year 2008-2009. The main objective of the programme is promoting a pleasurable and enriching experience of art as a whole and, in particular, Bilbao’s cultural offerings. For the latter, the programme works in conjunction with the main arts institutions in Bilbao, whose artistic content are followed through five specific modules dedicated to various artistic disciplines: cinema, opera, plastic arts, symphonic music and literature (Institute of Leisure Studies, 2017). All modules have an experiential nature orientation, adding live cultural experiences to the knowledge acquired in the classroom. Thus, in the opera module, on which this paper is focusing, participants (most of them senior citizens close to retirement) attend four training sessions at the university and an opera performance at the opera house. The university helps students obtain tickets for the rehearsal of each opera of the season in ABAO<sup>1</sup>. Then, each student decides whether he or she wants to take advantage of this opportunity or whether he or she would prefer to attend the show after buying the tickets on his or her own.

The teacher conducting the sessions explained that he usually follows the same outline to prepare for each opera performance. The content of the lectures is generally as follows: (a) introduction to the historic context in which the opera was composed or performed for the first time; (b) introduction to the author’s biography, emphasising the time in which that actual opera work was composed; (c) introduction to the aesthetic keys and/or artistic movement in which the opera is placed or of which it is representative; (d) audio-visual auditions selected from the performance (DVD), paying special attention to the compared versions, considering both vocal and scenic aspects; and (e) class discussion about the live performance after the rehearsal.

In addition, for each opera performance, students received an email with the following materials: (a) bilingual libretto with introductory texts and graphical material (e.g., photographs of famous scenes of a performance); (b) link to a full version of the opera subtitled in Spanish, if possible; (c) occasionally, links to compare versions of the same scene, usually an aria; and (d) in the case that the opera is an adaptation of a literary text, a file with the original text (e.g., novel, drama, theatre) is attached. These materials were intended to remedy the temporal limitation of the lectures (1 hour) as well as to allow a personalised training experience in which each person decides his or her level of interest in deepening it and spending time with it.



## FINDINGS

After interviewing the selected students, we ascertained that, in general, students respond to a very specific profile, as most of them were already interested in opera when they applied for the course, and that many students frequently attended the performances organised by ABAO. Only one of the interviewees had enrolled in the programme without having any interest in opera at all. She changed her mind in less than a year, and she is now a passionate opera fan. However, this case is not the standard but represents an exception.

As mentioned above, we focused our interviews on the opera experiences of our interviewees before and after participating in the university programme, with the aim of capturing the changes produced. Therefore, we structure the presentation of our findings considering the three analytical categories identified during the research: (a) changes in the duration of the opera experience; (b) changes in the intensity of the opera experience; and (c) changes in the individual.

### Changes in the Duration of the Opera Experience

The opera experience is not only restricted to the moment of the performance, but it also includes the previous time of preparation and generation of expectations and the subsequent time of assimilation and recall. Among the students of the opera module, an evident effect of their participation in the course is the prolongation of the experience due to the extension of both the previous time and of the subsequent time.

If I had to stop attending the course, I would continue going to the opera, but I would miss the comments beforehand because the discussion has proven to be very energetic, beautiful and useful to prolong the satisfaction of not only the day you go to the opera but also during the lectures you are commenting... (Juan).

Therefore, the course extends the experience, not only due to the number of preparatory sessions but also because the students share their experience with their classmates and professor after the performance. Furthermore, the prolongation of the experience is produced outside the classroom because the professor sends electronic material. Again, the experience is personalised. Although the time in the university was shared by all of the students, each student decided afterwards how much time he or she wanted to spend at home listening to fragments or reading topics related to the opera performances. Thus, there were people who do not have time to review all the materials, others who tried, and still others, the smallest group, who looked for new things in addition.

Occasionally, there were also people who extended the experience attending the general rehearsal with the group of students from university by attending the opera performance on their own. Ainara, who used to do this, stated: “for me, the rehearsal and the performance are complementary. I enjoy the performance more if I have attended the rehearsal first.” Izaskun occasionally also attended both rehearsal and performance. She stated: “I think that I have attended every rehearsal, and, sometimes, I have repeated [attending also the performance] because someone has come with me or because I just liked the play.”

### Changes in the Intensity of the Opera Experience

The intensity of the experience seems to be directly related to the increase in knowledge that occurs due to the course. It is important to note that the knowledge acquired refers not only to cognitive information related to the opera (e.g., arguments, voices, historic context, composer, scenery) but also to sensory information that includes auditions of specific fragments of audio or video. Izaskun affirmed that “there is a terrible difference between knowing nothing and going without anything, and going after having attended some lectures. There

is clear a difference.” However, what exactly does that increase of knowledge provide to the opera experience and to the intensity of the experience?

Elisa explained to us that the level of knowledge affects emotions and provides you with security and motivation: “you go to the opera knowing everything, and you go more confident, really wanting to listen.” However, in addition, as Esti said, attending the course helps you understand the play: “Opera dramas really don’t make sense if you take them on their own; however, if you contextualised them, it is easier to understand what you are looking at.” In this vein, Izaskun mentioned her understanding of why the scenery, for example, has been set up in a particular way.

The knowledge acquired affected the opera experience, increasing the level of appreciation by the individual and thereby improving the reception process and the perceived enjoyment. Interviewees compared their current opera experiences with those before their participation in the university programme and recognised that, currently, they are conscious of a large number of details that would have been unnoticed had they not attended the course.

There are a lot of things, even from the best-known opera, that I didn’t know. A lot of details are difficult to see, at least for the profane’s ears and eyes, and there are things that I would never have found on my own. And, however, with a few lectures, you can see every detail. We are divinely taught to enjoy the opera up to the smallest detail. (Esti)

In addition to perceiving a greater number of details, the course allowed everyone to build his or her own reception process. In this sense, Inés acknowledged that the professor “makes you reflect and teaches you aspects to take into account” and that, due to attending the classes, “we have better interpretation keys, and we like the opera more.” Students, as co-creators of their own experience, have an active attitude during the reception process. Inés stated: “Before, I was a passive spectator; I just sat back and watched the show, and now I have more knowledge and I enjoy more.” Alejandra also revealed that after having attended the course, during the performance “you are more aware of that what you have learnt in class.”

Another aspect that affects the intensity of the experience is the possibility of sharing it with other people who are interested in that specific opera. In this sense, the course fosters the encounters of students not only in the classroom but also in the theatre.

We usually sit in the same area of the theatre, and although I usually go with my friend, we always meet other friends and classmates. And, finally, you become familiar with all of them: this was my first year, and I already know almost every face. (Elisa).

Moreover, as Juan said, attending the module can also facilitate sharing your experience even with people who are not in the course.

And, as I think that the quality of the pleasure is related to the education you have ... you can always enjoy music naturally, but if you know much about music, the pleasure is bigger ... It is a different kind of pleasure, richer. Knowing more about the voice, the terminology, the lexicon ... also helps communicate with others who also like opera. (Juan).

## Changes in the Individual

In relation to the changes produced in the students, we noted an increase in motivation to attend opera performances, the generation of a more open-minded attitude towards less-known operas and the development of personal capabilities and skills

First, referring to the motivation to attend opera performances, Mariana told us that if she had to leave the course, “I would lose part of that interest, of that motivation to go to the opera.” Izaskun stated that the professor “makes us enjoy the opera and generates a sense of wanting to go, and that keeps you hooked.”

Second, the course, in many cases, also involved a change in the attitude towards particular operas that our interviewees had rejected from the very beginning. Thus, Juan explained to us his discovery of Wagner:

For me, Wagner was insufferable, but through these years the teacher has shown me a Wagner that ... he contextualises the opera with art, history ... and he enriches his class. (...) I have discovered Wagner with him. And it is a great music. (Juan)

In other cases, the development of an open-minded attitude goes beyond the discovery of a specific composer or a type of opera style and is consolidated as a proactive attitude of wanting to be constantly updated regarding the latest news in the opera field:

For me, the opera of the XXth century was insupportable. It seemed to me ... I rejected it. And that is for me an intolerant attitude that I don't like. Now, I have changed that (...), and I have learnt in university to look for originality and to enjoy what is different. I love that now. And, in fact, I enjoy more anything that I have never seen before and that is new to me. (Esti)

Additionally, at the same time that a more open-minded attitude to the rarer operas is generated, a more critical attitude towards the best-known operas appears:

My attitude towards the best-known operas has changed because I had idealised them, and when you study them deeper, you discover that, well, they also have their mistakes, that you like the music, but... And, conversely, other operas that, before analysing and studying them, I thought were second-class operas, now I say what a beautiful play, musically, technically, everything, and the story is also beautiful. (Elisa)

Finally, we also noted that, eventually, classes, personal reflection, auditions at home and the experience of the live opera performances contributed to develop a series of abilities that allowed each individual to advance their own process of personal development. On the one hand, we can distinguish capabilities relating to the process of reception of the operatic experience. In the statement that follows, we observe how Maitane is aware of the evolution of her capabilities and perceives her own competence:

I usually go to the rehearsal and to the opera performance. I enjoy the performance more if I've seen it in the dress rehearsal because the initial impact, apart from the fact that we have prepared the play, is somehow... I happened to write a review of the rehearsal trying to capture those things that seemed not to work very well and then go to the performance and observe what had changed, and I see that I was not so wrong in my appreciations... (Maitane)

On the other hand, the improvement of abilities also occurs in relation to the process of preparing for the experience. Leire said that "although I would leave the course, now I know how to fend for myself, so, in that sense, I think that though I left the course, it has brought me something."

Capacity development promotes the process of personal growth. Thus, the participants in the course, based on its knowledge base, build their own operatic experiences from which they learn new things that, once internalised, increase their receptive skills. In this sense, Leire told us that due to the course, "every day you learn a little more and you realise more things."

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main limitation of the paper is that only 10 in-depth interviews have been conducted. Therefore, this paper should be considered as an exploratory research that could inspire cultural managers in their practice or that could be the seed for an advanced research. Bearing in mind this limitation and given that almost all of our respondents had, from the outset, an interest in opera and that most of them frequently attended opera performances, we can say that within the audience development strategies proposed by McCarthy and Jinnett (2001), the analysed university programme would respond primarily to a strategy of "deepen participation". According to McCarthy et al. (2004), the relevant factors in a strategy that aims to deepen participation are related to the experience. Our results are consistent with this statement because all respondents reported changes in their opera experience. In all cases, the opera experience was improved due to the increase in the reception capability of the participants, which led to the achievement of a greater enjoyment.

From the point of view of leisure studies, participation in the university programme “Enjoy the Arts” facilitates a leisure activity (to attend the opera) becoming a complex leisure experience, in particular by lengthening the previous phase of preparation and generation of expectations. In addition, many of those interviewed emphasised that attending the classes at the university was for them a leisure experience in itself. Izaskun even stated: “sometimes, the classes are more interesting than some operas.”

Considering that the preparation of an opera takes approximately a month and that many of the interviewees attend both the rehearsal and the performance, the experience of leisure that occurs tended to be a serious leisure experience (Stebbins, 2008) for many of the students. The commitment to the activity and its duration are a good proof of this, particularly for veteran students, whose participation in the course is recurrent. Additionally, as in serious leisure experiences (Stebbins, 2008), a remarkable personal evolution occurred in the participants due to the development of capacities that occurs over time. The increase of both contextual and sensory knowledge and the experience of attending several performances allow individuals to advance in their personal development, looking for new challenges, as was the case with Esti, who stated: “Now I dare anything, and that has allowed me to go looking for news on other sites. For example, I now usually go to Toulouse, to the Teatro Real... looking for something new...”

There are authors who advocate that an initial endowment of sufficient human capital is needed to be able to interpret the symbolic value of cultural goods so that the individual exposed to them is able to appreciate the cultural experience and that this can satisfy his or her cultural needs (Lévy-Garboua & Montmarquette, 2005). Along these lines, Throsby (1994) argued that the cultural consumption of an individual will increase as he or she acquires experience, knowledge or other attributes of the cultural capital, which can help reduce the opportunity cost of the cultural good or service. For this author, cultural consumption can be interpreted as a process that generates satisfaction in the present, and at the same time, accumulated knowledge and experience that will affect future consumption. Considering these ideas, we assert that the analysed university programme contributes to accelerating the process of learning in its participants, facilitating appreciation of the cultural experience and, in general terms, causes a greater enjoyment than if the course were not attended.

However, the most important finding of our research is the fact that the university programme “Enjoy the Arts” contributes to improving the quality of the students’ opera experience. There are two ideas that have recurrently appeared and that are consistent with the literature review. First, the idea of a greater understanding of the work or author (context) and a greater motivation for attending the opera performance (anticipation) have been the two most cited elements. Following Brown and Novak (2013), these ideas belong to the readiness-to-receive the art indicators, namely context and anticipation. Therefore, we strongly agree with these authors in their suggestion that higher levels of anticipation and context lead to higher levels of intrinsic impact. Second, in line with McCarthy et al. (2004), our interviewees also noted the importance of sharing the experience with others (outer experience). Additionally, Radbourne et al. (2013) considered the opportunities to discuss the performance with other audience members and staff to be a quality indicator of the audience experience.

Finally, we conclude by stating that university programmes for older adults can contribute to the development and engagement of cultural audiences by facilitating the path to enjoy cultural experiences, transforming them into high-quality arts experiences. Variables that promote an active and open attitude, such as contextual knowledge, motivation and the possibility to share the experience with others, seem to be key factors to increase the intrinsic benefits perceived by participants, raising the intensity of their cultural experiences.

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## NOTES

- 1 ABAO is the Bilbao Association of Friends of the Opera. It is the organization responsible for programming the opera season in Bilbao. It was established in 1953.