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A Change of Plans and A New Venue of Possibility:

Sensory Friendly Concerts Go Virtual

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Abstract

The sensory friendly concert (SFC) represents an increasingly popular effort toward engaging the autism community in live music performances by promoting inclusive practices and offering specialized accommodations to counter what many consider the rigidity of concert etiquette. The authors explore academic and historical perspectives on SFCs and seek to highlight best practices for the design and facilitation of inclusive community music events in live and virtual settings. Drawing upon the experience of adapting a planned in-person protocol to the virtual setting, the authors explore benefits that extend far beyond the autism community. In addition to providing an environment in which self-expression, diversity, and community are celebrated, SFCs can serve as a transition-oriented therapeutic intervention aimed at promoting progress toward goals related to independent living and musical participation in the broader society, including school and community ensembles.

Keywords: autism; sensory friendly concerts; advocacy; community music therapy; accessibility; inclusion

> Every art communicates because it expresses. It enables us to share vividly and deeply in meanings…Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen. (Dewey, 1934, p. 253)

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Introduction

After months of planning and preparations for the launch of our own sensory friendly concert (SFC®) series in Austin Texas, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived upon American shores. The social distancing recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention encouraged Americans to practice "social distancing." The congregate setting of our planned sensory friendly concert was undermined by the prohibition to publicly gather. Accordingly, we were forced to postpone the culmination of our efforts. As the pandemic stretched on, we began to experiment with how to adapt our model to the online environment. Much to our surprise, a redesigned approach providing the opportunity for neurodivergent individuals to gather virtually and enjoy live music revealed an additional framework for advocacy and peer interaction. In the following sections, we will describe the history of SFC®s in terms of academic literature and popular conception, outline our original concert plans, offer practical guidelines for concert facilitators, detail our adaptations to the virtual format, and underscore the largely untapped educational and therapeutic benefits SFC®s provide to diverse audiences.

Caveat

We are coming to this work as music educators, both of whom identify as neurotypical. Our combined areas of expertise encompass experience working in therapeutic and community inclusion settings, with public school special education services, and through parenting a young adult with autism. Our collaborative efforts have allowed our perspective to emerge—a perspective we've experienced as highly relevant to the SFC® framework and the need for more informal social settings in which transition-aged adults can socialize, make friends, and discover aesthetic experiences. Our understandings of SFC®s stem from our personal experiences engaging in this work and, as such, depart in some ways from SFC®s that were developed as a cultural experience by and for the autistic community. We view our contribution to the literature on SFC®s as encouraging integral ways of thinking—that is, complementing the original context-oriented intentions behind SFC®s with experience- and outcome-oriented perspectives (Bruscia, 2011).

Why a Sensory Friendly Concert?

Since their inception, SFCs® have been primarily geared to promote musical inclusion and participation for individuals with autism.[*] Autism is a *spectrum disorder*, meaning that it manifests differently in each individual and has been described by many in the health professions as characterized by potential difficulties with communication, behavior, and social relationships. According to the latest estimates from the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network (CDC, 2022), about 1 in 44 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder.

Sensory processing disorder (SPD) is commonly associated with autism spectrum disorders, though the condition is also present among many individuals in the general population. Sensory processing challenges can affect one's capacity to adapt in everyday

[*] Though identity first-language is preferred by many in the autism community (e.g., an autistic person) due to the fact that autism must be acknowledged and celebrated as a significant component of one's identity, we've chosen to use identify-first and person-first language (e.g., a person with autism) interchangeably throughout this article. Given our experiences working alongside self-advocates of both inclinations, as well as the fact that neither author has an autism diagnosis, the interchangeable use of language was chosen in an attempt to reflect our values and uphold respect for personhood. As Michael Bakan (2014) so effectively states when discussing the diversity of perspectives within the autism community, "…there are a great many stakeholders, a plethora of views and agendas; most if not all warrant our serious consideration and critical engagement" (para. 8).

situations, regulate attention and moods, and function appropriately in certain social settings. SPD was not included in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) as a separate diagnostic category; however, sensory processing challenges (which include both hypo and hyper sensitivities to sound) are regarded as one of the diagnostic criteria in autism. In the general population, rates of sensory processing disorder are estimated to be between 5% and 16% (Ahn et al., 2004; Ben-Sasson et al., 2009), while rates may be as high as 90% in autistic individuals (Baker et al., 2008; Baranek et al., 2006; Leekam et al., 2007; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007). With regard to participation in successful music learning and enjoyment, considering sensory processing challenges needs to be at the forefront of planning strategies and facilitation.

Why a Sensory Friendly Concert?

Most people now have knowledge of the SFC® concept, yet lack experience planning or participating in a "sensory friendly" event. Among symphony orchestras, the conventional SFC® framework promotes musical participation by offering accommodations (such as earplugs, dimmed stage lighting, reduced sound levels, sensory aids, welcomed physical movement, clearly delineated programmatic schedules, and quiet rooms) and relaxing what many consider the rigidity of classical music concert etiquette.

Other accommodations might include increasing house lighting to allow audience members to exit the performance hall between and during movements and stationing trained support professionals around the hall as ushers—such as special education teachers (SPED), music therapists (MT-BC), or licensed social workers (LSW)—to promote accessible concert experiences for all.

Concert organizers and volunteers (including parents, therapists, or professionals) may facilitate activities during intermission designed to engage attendees both socially and experientially, such as Instrument Petting Zoos. Instrument Petting Zoos, a commonplace offering at SFCs®, are designed to not only prompt social interaction with musicians, but also to provide a sensory-rich, hands-on experience by allowing participants an opportunity to touch and produce sounds on a variety of musical instruments. Social stories, a tool developed by Carol Gray (2001), describe a situation in story form, which allows individuals to visualize a scenario and practice social responses appropriate to specific activities and settings. With regard to an SFC® experience, this could include details outlining what to expect on the day of the performance, as well descriptions of the performers and the venue. Virtual, descriptive, or in-person tours of the concert facility ahead of the event may be offered as well.

Community Music Therapy and Rise of Sensory Friendly Concerts

Thirty years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), public places, buildings, and streets are arguably far more accessible now than they have ever been. Legislative efforts to ensure readily achievable barrier removal have now come to be applied to social as well as physical barriers, and continue to provide individuals with disabilities support when encountering both discriminatory practices and inaccessible spaces (ADA Update, 2022). In practice, however, what constitutes reasonable accommodations varies drastically from place to place, and this inconsistency may translate into minimized opportunities to attend live musical performance, subsequently impacting individuals' future attitudes toward intersecting with community arts events. In fact, according to the 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts by the National Endowment for the Arts (SPPA), it was estimated that though disabled adults composed nearly 12 percent of the U.S. adult population at that time, they represented under 7

percent of all adults attending performing arts events or visiting art museums (Bureau of the Census, United States). The total sample size of the 2012 SPPA was 35,735 U.S. adults, ages 18 and over (SPPA, 2012). It would be reasonable to assume that individuals with autism and SPD may be among those deterred from attending arts events.

In their article entitled "Sensory Friendly Concerts: A Community Music Therapy Initiative to Promote Neurodiversity," Shiloh and LaGasse (2014) assert that,

> part of the solution to creating an inclusive culture and community for these individuals and their friends and loved ones, is in providing an accepting environment with available accommodations that allow for engagement and enjoyment of music. (p. 114)

Thus, the concept of SFCs® [Sensory Friendly Concerts] had been developed in 2011 by C. J. Shiloh, the Director of The Musical Autist (a nonprofit organization). Though trademarked, the term has been co-opted and seemingly adopted into common parlance. Shiloh and LaGasse define SFCs® as "a community music therapy (CoMT) initiative dovetailing the strengths and skills of community musicians and music therapists within a local community to provide an accessible venue for music engagement and expression" (Shiloh & LaGasse, 2014, p. 114).

CoMT originated in the UK in the early 2000s as a means of bridging the diverging frameworks of music therapy practice and community music, and represented a multidisciplinary understanding of people, music, health/illness, and disability. When designing music therapy experiences, proponents of CoMT consider recipients within the context of their ecological surroundings, often aiming to capitalize on the affordances of communal music-making.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century,

> British (and much European) music therapy had unnecessarily narrowed its practice and theory in pursuit of the golden brick of medical and statutory legitimacy. Modeling itself on psychotherapy, it had forgotten what music could do along the full continuum between private and social work. Meanwhile, community music in the United Kingdom was edging into the traditional territory of music therapists, working with the ill as well as the marginalized. (Ansdell, 2014b, p. 32)

First presented in *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, Gary Ansdell's (2002) article, "Community Music Therapy and The Winds of Change," inaugurated the CoMT approach, which he conceived of as a constructive disruption to the consensus model of music therapy practice. In his view, the consensus model was characterized by "an increasing 'privatization' of practice – individual or closed-group sessions becoming the norm, with therapists clearly experiencing (for disciplinary and professional reasons) discomfort integrating performance practically or theoretically into their work" (Stige, et al., 2010, p. 164).

Ansdell (2014b) would later reflect upon his authorship "as a case of my being a node for many forces coming together at that time, with my weaving them together in late 2001" (p. 32). In fact, others had independently formulated notions of CoMT around the same time in different parts of the world. Symptomatic of this burgeoning, transnational awareness was Kenneth Bruscia's addition of an extra category—Ecological Music Therapy—to the second edition of his seminal 1998 text, *Defining Music Therapy* (Bruscia, 2014). (For a further discussion of the emergence of CoMT, see Ghetti, 2016.)

In his book, *Music-Centered Music Therapy,* Kenneth Aigen wrote, "There are many areas of overlap among the contemporary approaches of aesthetic music therapy, community music therapy, culture-centered music therapy, and music-centered music therapy" (Aigen, 2005, p. 158). Thus, CoMT can be described as one of the many overarching frameworks of music therapy which have emerged since 2000. Whether you are a community musician

or a music therapist, you can now draw on a shared theoretical body of knowledge that weaves together a patchwork of music-related fields such as music psychology, music education, music sociology, and music and health studies.

Shiloh and LaGasse are among only a handful of U.S. authors who have contributed to the body of CoMT literature (Aigen 2004, 2005; Ghetti 2016; Hanser 2018; Soshensky 2011; Turry 2005). A recent thematic analysis published in *Voices* by Murphy et al. (2023) suggested,

> the need for further research into and development of CoMT practices in the United States to address the harm in healthcare and educational settings perpetrated against those who do not have the means, abilities, or permission to participate in arts programs that ultimately will improve quality of life. (p. 16)

If SFCs® are in fact a promising CoMT initiative within U.S. society (as reflected by their growing popularity among symphony orchestras and ballet companies), the lack of discourse surrounding best practices is confounding, at best.

In 2015, The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (2022) was among the first major organizations to include sensory friendly events as a regular part of seasonal offerings, and many others have followed in their footsteps, ranging from the Dallas Symphony Orchestra to Friction Quartet. Through targeting more diverse audiences, and especially those community members who are often marginalized, classical music organizations can provide a meaningful service, while at the same time displaying a willingness to be adaptive and culturally relevant. SFCs® provide a unique opportunity for symphony orchestras to serve communities in which classical music concert attendance may be decreasing, but the incidence of autism is rising.

A Note on the Malleability of Concert Etiquette

> Some individuals who have been diagnosed as having an autism spectrum disorder may be limited in terms of community activities in which they can participate because of the reactions and judgment they often receive from society. This is particularly common in public events that traditionally require sitting quietly, such as attending a concert in a formal venue. (Shiloh & LaGasse, 2014)

A deeper, historical understanding of the emergence of what we *now* consider traditional concert etiquette may serve to inspire symphony orchestras to make performances more accessible to a wider population. Current musicological perspectives dispute the historical authenticity of concerts being solemn occasions, describing eighteenth century concerts as settings in which, “Audience members could stroll around and converse, paying attention only to the music that interested them, without being considered rude….” (Burkholder et al., 2014, p. 467). Throughout the Romantic era, it wasn’t uncommon for audiences to mill about during performances or to clap during movements (Ross, 2008). The fluidity of concert behaviors across history suggests a format that may be conducive to fostering more inclusivity, and ultimately accepted as the norm. Therefore, the SFC® can be thought of as an instantiation of an earlier era in which concert conditions were “predicated on the personal interaction between performer and audience in a manner that is today regarded as a distraction from ‘the music,’ rather than an essential part of the concert experience itself” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 261). Jazz events, rock-and-roll shows, dine-in movie theaters, and food-enhanced pops concerts, with a frequent emphasis on audience participation and relaxed etiquette, harken to this earlier era. In reality, there are more experiences than people imagine that reflect the flexibility and fluidity of the SFC®.

The scale of an event has broad implications for different sensory considerations and

levels of audience anonymity. Consider a classic example; Woodstock, in contrast to an intimate house concert, was an extraordinarily large-scale event that was equally shaped by both the performers and the audience members. Similarly, the scale of modern popular music festivals broadens the definition of audience etiquette and/or participation. It should be noted that organizations such as Accessible Festivals (n.d.) exist to create accessible spaces for folks with disabilities at music festivals by working to bring concert protocols into alignment with ADA. The necessity of such experiences reminds us that the scale of the event itself can threaten, undermine, or enhance the musical experiences of neurodivergent audience members.

By relaxing concert etiquette and providing specific accommodations for individuals with sensory processing challenges—including autistic individuals, as well as individuals with acquired brain injuries and disorders of consciousness—organizations can expand access to music participation through programmatic offerings that more accurately reflect the needs of the communities within which they are situated. Additionally, SFCs® could help to remedy the plight of many arts organizations experiencing decreases in concert attendance by increasing access to music listening for individuals within the autism community, as well as other members of the disability community. By targeting more diverse audiences and ensuring equitably distributed access to musical experiences, music organizations can provide a meaningful service, while at the same time demonstrating a willingness to be adaptive.

> Thanks for putting this on. It was a great concert.
>
> –SFC® audience member/participant

A Therapeutic Experience with Empowering Potential

> In order to pursue a meaningful music inclusion in the community (especially one that had previously never experienced integration), the role of the music therapist is a fundamental one. (Stige et al., 2010, p. 77)

While the literature related to organizing and facilitating sensory friendly concerts remains scant, there exists great opportunity to continue examining the educational and therapeutic potentialities of the SFC® as an experience, while remaining a platform for self-advocacy, community building, and recreation. By thoughtfully designing marketing materials, concert programs, and sensory friendly spaces, facilitators can ensure attendees have ample opportunity to practice identifying their preferred sensory aids, making concert-going preparations, and utilizing available accommodations. For attendees, the experience may serve as a prelude to meaningful participation in the broader musical community, as well as in more traditional music listening settings.[1] In other words, the SFC® framework may have the potential to inspire broader musical participation, while also representing a celebration of inclusion and neurological diversity.

Stige and Aarø (2012) describe a model of participatory processes in CoMT, two of which include *Bridging and Bonding* and *Communicating and Celebrating.* Our model primarily seeks to explore these pairings, with a particular emphasis on *Bridging*–not only among the neurodiverse[2] performers and audience members in attendance, but between SFC® and non-SFC® settings. SFCs® may serve as a framework to promote progress toward goals related to independent living through the presentation of activities that address various soft skills necessary for both children and adults to build confidence in navigating non-SFC® settings.[3] After all, not every concert can be made into a "sensory friendly" concert, as it's commonly understood.

Juliette Alvin (1968) was widely regarded as a pioneering music therapist and theoretical forerunner to the type of community-oriented work that would eventually

emerge under the name CoMT. She described the potential for music therapy to be flexible in ways that provide recipients an incentive to seek music experiences in the community. In this way, music therapy can serve as a possible steppingstone from integration to inclusion—a view the authors of this article embrace with regard to the SFC® experience.

Implementation Sequence

We believe facilitators benefit from designing SFCs® to reflect the nature of the needs and interests of each unique community. This can be accomplished by regularly distributing program evaluations designed to collect data revealing the need for/effectiveness of the accommodations offered, how the event ought to be framed, and preferred genres.

The list below represents a possible sequence of steps to consider when planning a sensory friendly concert. These suggestions are applicable to in-person concerts or those presented virtually. Annotated comments below each suggested step reflect the authors' actual procedures in preparation for an in-person SFC®.

1. Gauge community interest.
   Authors gathered programmatic recommendations from autistic self-advocates and prospective SFC® attendees.
2. Secure a space.
   A local coffee house with an outdoor performance area provided space for a small-scale event which served to prompt interest in the larger upcoming concert. As both authors were associated with a university music department, two large rehearsal spaces were secured that provided space for performances, as well as areas for audience and family members to take sensory breaks.
3. From design to implementation, collaborate with, and collect input from, autistic individuals (and other prospective audience members), support professionals, and performers.
   The authors approached a local advisory group of self-advocates, the invited musicians, and staff members from the Autism Society of Texas regarding concert planning details. This process may unfold differently in different cultural or community contexts.
4. Design marketing and advertising materials.
   A promotional flier and web link to the event post were both distributed online.
5. Invite involvement from diverse community partners including local colleges or universities, disability service providers, music therapy clinics, and beyond.
   Diverse community partners were invited to provide input into the implementation process and share information as part of a resource and services fair. We acknowledge that geographic and cultural factors may influence facilitators' access to community partners, and that's okay. The SFC® framework can and should always reflect the communities within which they are to take place.
6. Seek additional volunteer support.
   For the in-person concert, the authors enlisted support to prepare a space and assist attendees that may have needed a sensory break, to post signs directing participants to parking areas and the concert venue, and to assist with set-up and break-down.
7. Facilitate the SFC®.
8. Document the event through video, and photo toward future marketing and grant support.
   Both the in-person and virtual and virtual SFCs® were recorded for archival and future support purposes.
9. Distribute surveys to and review feedback from attendees.
   A survey was forwarded to participants following the in-person SFC® at the coffee

house to gauge participant's responses to the format, genre, and length of the event.

10. Revise framework based on feedback to optimize success of future concert protocols.

    The authors repeated successful procedures from the initial planning stages and incorporated feedback from autistic individuals, support professionals, and performers into the design of future concerts.

While procedures related to preparation and presentation significantly overlap between in-person and virtual concerts, there are practical guidelines that may be specific to each. These considerations are derived from the CoMT literature to more closely align SFCs® with the underlying ecological perspectives therein (Aigen, 2004, 2005; Ansdell, 2002, 2014a, 2014b; Ghetti, 2016; Hanser, 2018; Soshensky, 2011; Stige, 2002; Stige et al., 2010; Stige & Aarø, 2012; Turry, 2005).

Table 1. Practical Considerations for In-Person & Virtual SFCs.

Practical Considerations	In-Person Settings	Virtual Settings
Participatory enhancements toward audience and performer interactivity	• Group Discussion and Demonstration • Pre-Concert Lectures • Instrument Petting Zoos • Listening Maps	• Group Discussion and Demonstration • Pre-Concert Lectures • Instrument Demonstration • Listening Maps • Prompts related to in-person concert-going
Accommodations	• Multiple intermissions • Earplugs, headphones, quiet rooms, reduced stage lighting and amplification • Social stories to help prepare attendees for the show, parking maps • Seating choices to include bean bags, floor seating, and distance from the stage to allow or movement • A live stream of the stage via electronic device for those who desire a more comfortable area • Discounted tickets to ease families' potential concerns regarding length of participation or limited discretionary income • Facilitators should consider the needs of performers with sensory processing preferences (i.e. flash photography, positioning of monitors, etc) • Behavioral guidelines and activity schedules presented verbally, as well as visually	• Multiple intermissions • Uniform virtual background to avoid distractions • Participant control over volume, chat thread options, and camera settings
Community-Driven Practices	SFC® Follow-Up Survey Template: https://forms.gle/xMeyxyZVfQWeiFzh9	V-SFC Follow-Up Survey Template: https://forms.gle/ZRmtZo4YSRZsd1Mg8 Genre Preference Survey Template: https://forms.gle/dFjDrQGxXSBP42yc7
Professional Collaboration	Behavior Specialists, Occupational Therapists, Special Education support staff	Individual Student caregiver or professional support staff

Adapting to the Virtual Platform: A New Venue of Possibility

Our experience designing and facilitating an in-person SFC® in January of 2019 at a local coffee shop in Austin, Texas informed our plans to collaborate with the Autism Society of Texas toward planning an SFC® in April of 2019. Survey responses (see appendices) collected after the concert revealed valuable information regarding the space layout, genres, sensory considerations, and food offerings for individuals with specific allergies. The overall response to this concert was positive. The following is a representative quote regarding that event:

> I love the juncture of art, community, and inclusion.
>
> We really enjoyed it. Next time we will look for ways to more thoughtfully engage with others.
>
> *For additional quotes, see Notable Survey Responses.

Later, a following concert based on the framework from our in-person 2019 SFC was to be held at the University of Texas at Austin's Butler School of Music (UT). This program was designed to feature musicians from UT and from the local music community.

The planned performance space was designed with stages on both ends of the large rehearsal hall and 8-10 rows of chairs to accommodate 60-100 attendees facing in the direction of each stage area. The idea was to minimize the down time it takes for groups to set up, eliminating lag time between performances. The plan involved asking the audience to stand up and move to the other end of the performance area as a way to support a more relaxed performance atmosphere and to allow the opportunity for a physical break from stasis and focused attention. We surveyed the hall, created and distributed a social story focused on navigating from the parking garage to the concert hall, designed outdoor signs, reserved and modified a quiet room, recruited local professionals and trained volunteers to provide general support for attendees, organized a resource fair to highlight services and resources available from community organizations, and prepared follow-up surveys.

Needless to say, the event was canceled due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon thereafter, we began planning and facilitating virtual SFCs® in which we adapted our framework to the online, learning environment. Attendees were invited to RSVP through *Meetup*. By virtue of being online, there were many aspects of the experience that afforded each participant individual control over the creation and manipulation of their own sensory friendly space.

In a relevant article including autistic people's responses and perspectives regarding the use of online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, Heyworth et al. (2021) found that, "many autistic children and young people eventually settled into learning from home which some even described as having 'thrived under these conditions'" (p. 8). Parents suggested that though online learning came with its challenges, they felt they could better support their children's "specific needs and preferences" (p. 10). Both young people and parents reported responding positively to the safety and predictability of the home environment and a reduction in sensory demands and social anxiety, and an increase in the level of engagement in the learning process. Ultimately, Heyworth et al. (2021) conclude that more must be done to establish and foster social connections as life after the pandemic continues (p. 16). The virtual sensory friendly concert (V-SFC) framework was designed with the intention of addressing needed support and promoting the potential benefits of the online platform.

The virtual setting streamlined the logistics of a live event, however, as organizers were tasked with soliciting introductory comments from the performers, and editing the music into an engaging, curated sequence. The online platform also provided greater accessibility for a wider geographical audience. During the preparation process, we came to recognize

how the virtual setting allowed each attendee an opportunity to share and experience music in an environment in which they were in total control. We contacted musicians in and around Austin, Texas and asked them to submit footage of themselves performing live. Additionally, we asked each group to submit an introduction along with their piece. We then edited all the clips together using standard video editing software and interspersed slides containing prompts related to concert-going. For the actual event, we asked the performers to attend a live Question and Answer period following the presentation of their video. An experienced staff member from the Autism Society of Texas moderated pre- and post-concert discussions. The planned post-concert discussion was used to invite participants to share their honest reactions and thoughts, which framed conversation and social interchange as organic components of the online concert experience.

The moderator asked attendees of the online event for verbal permission to record and transcribe comments from the recorded conversation following the concert. A Google form follow-up survey regarding the overall level of satisfaction with the event, recommendations for future programing, and genre preferences was emailed to all attendees. The questions in the survey were designed to gather information regarding the effect of the experience on each individual's motivation to engage in future music events. The response rate return was low (22 surveys sent, 2 responses). However, the takeaway for us was that the SFC® was a viable means of sharing and experiencing music, and that preferred genres extended beyond classical music, jazz, and folk. (See *Notable Survey Responses*.)

Benefits for all

> There is passion and enthusiasm around listening to music ……..for everyone.
>
> –SFC® audience member/participant

Diversifying Audiences

For symphony orchestras and other professional music organizations, the benefits of including SFCs® as a part of seasonal programming will extend well beyond the autism community. Efforts to broaden the audience base for any arts organization demonstrates a commitment toward inclusion and provides a well-grounded opportunity for the actualization of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) statement. Additionally, conducting performances predicated on audience interaction represents a reclamation of the historical roots of classical music, while at the same time extending the joys of classical music to those who thrive on such musical and social experiences. In other words, to facilitate an SFC® is to return control to the consumers of an art form through sanctioning reciprocity.

Professional Collaboration

Activities aimed at promoting musical literacy and confident music-making and music-listening may be designed by collaborating professionals from a variety of fields. For example, through encouraging more collaboration among members of the autism community and music therapists (of varying methods) in the design of both in-person and virtual SFCs®, perhaps we can unearth accommodations and activities which have not yet been conceived of or sufficiently emphasized.

In the design and facilitation of our own V-SFC, we enlisted the help of an experienced special education teacher (M.Ed.) employed by the Autism Society of Texas. Though certified music therapy practitioners were absent, the three of us, as experts in adjacent fields, benefited from drawing upon and applying CoMT principles for the benefit of the

attendees. We discovered how the virtual setting in particular is conducive to—and enriched by—interdisciplinary collaboration.

Recruiting local providers who work both inside and outside of music may amplify the social and musical enrichment SFCs® can provide. *Bridging and Bonding* with behavioral and occupational therapy providers, local and statewide advocacy agencies, and inclusive studio teachers, as well as organizations specifically related to autism and the arts, fosters synergistic energy toward positive outcomes (Stige & Aarø, 2012). Reflexively, SFC®s provide the opportunity for preservice teachers to work alongside members of the disability community, thereby nurturing their nascent commitment to protecting all peoples' right to musical experience. VanWeelden and Whipple (2007) found that fieldwork experiences can positively influence music education majors' perceptions of their ability to work with students with diverse support needs.

Additionally, involvement in the SFC® experience could offer therapists and local service providers an additional opportunity to expand recipients' levels of community engagement. SFCs® nourish all the constructs of Community Music Therapy, Music Therapy, Music Education, and Community Music, while standing at the crossroads of many areas of expertise that allow collaboration among diverse professionals who work to promote musical access and inclusivity.

Mutuality

The SFC® environment may not only provide accessible concert experiences for autistic people, but also inspire individuals and families seeking a flexible concert experience to enjoy a music performance without the social pressures associated with narrow notions of focused attention. Autistic individuals and their families who fear that self-regulatory behaviors (such as standing up, rocking, hand flapping, vocalizing, etc.) will be perceived as disruptive may experience social deterrents to attending community music events (Shiloh & LaGasse, 2014). For any individual who enjoys live music, SFCs® may provide structure, support, and a community of acceptance. In this sense, the SFC® can be thought of as a "homebase" to which all music-lovers, whether parents, caregivers, or autistic adults, can return for a reset.

The environment—which may include descriptions of the concert repertoire, stories about the composers or performers, and interactive narratives—can be universally instructive for everyone. Opportunities for interactions among audience members in this setting and the intentional emphasis on inclusion builds community and understanding, while helping to establish the acceptance of neurodiversity. It makes sense for music to be at the center of this type of experience, as it creates space for self-directed meaning-making that provides an opportunity for social and musical interaction without perceptions of difference or ability. All ways of being are welcomed at SFC®s.

The Affordances of Performing

Performing as a musician can serve to foster self-efficacy and a sense personal agency. The framework we propose encourages neurodiversity among audience members as well as performers, aligning the program with principles of inclusion. More frequently inviting neurodivergent performers into concert settings will not only advance attendees' musical development and participation, but can inform the music itself. Additionally, SFCs® might appeal to therapists as an opportunity that provides clients another step in a sequence towards immersion in community music experiences. It also stands to reason that performing can serve as the culmination of a client's musical development, and a poignant expression of an individual's growth toward clinical goals.

There are particular genres of music that invite more spontaneous

collaboration/interaction among musicians and audience members than others. For example, jazz, blues, or Afro-Caribbean music may be considered more participatory than classical or folk genres that are traditionally more presentational in nature. When considering various genres' pros and cons within the SFC® context, it may be reasonable to assume that the level of audience interaction each genre commonly invites will translate to the virtual setting.

What We Continue to Learn

> When we return to in-person concerts, I most look forward to social interaction with other people. I see other people on live chat, but it's not the same as going and getting coffee with your friends. It's not the same as it was back when we did the sensory friendly concert back in early 2020 before the pandemic hit.
>
> *For additional quotes, see Selected Attendee Quotes Transcribed From Recording of Virtual Sensory Friendly Concert.

Our combined areas of expertise encompass music education, parenting, and the need for more informal social settings in which transition-aged adults can socialize, make friends, and discover aesthetic experiences. Though limited, our collaborative efforts have allowed our perspective to emerge—a perspective we've experienced as highly relevant to the SFC® framework. Influenced, in part, by our perspective as music educators, we view SFC®s as a fertile, as-yet unexplored learning environment. However, our characterization of SFC®s as a place for individuals to "practice" or "gain experience" should not be confused as an attempt to "fix," "correct" or "change" them. Ours is one approach to SFC®s, one that draws on experiential, as well as educationally-oriented intentions.

It is through collaborative efforts that the potential of SFC® settings will be fully realized. Current trends in music therapy are already pointed in this direction—ecological, salutogenic, performance-oriented, celebratory, and communal. However, whether a particular SFC® emphasizes one or more of these aspects ought to be determined by the individuals planning to attend through their responses to surveys or expressed desires. Regardless of how the SFC® is designed, the music and the context, like any art form, will be experienced in a personal way.

The virtual format for SFC® concerts is by no means a substitute for live music events. The spontaneity of social interactions, performers' responses to audiences, and audiences' reactions to the music are inherently challenged. However, our experience of inviting viewers to remain online for post-performance discussions was met with a high rate of participation, possibly because individuals had the freedom to comfortably remain in the performance space. In this regard, an online SFC® event can serve as a setting in which attendees can enjoy live music and engage in informal social interaction. These events can be an opportunity to publicly share progress made as a musician or as a music therapy recipient. Ultimately, the SFC® can be an ideal setting to showcase neurodivergent performers, foster expressions of identity, build community, and simply experience music organically in a non-judgmental space.

Similar to a live performance, online performances can serve as a segue into informal post-performance group conversations, thereby allowing greater numbers of people to share their enthusiasm for music, now or in the future. Both online and in-person SFC®s can serve as catalysts to create more inclusive musical communities. For individuals and families with and without disabilities, music experiences will continue to foster community and provide a powerful means of satisfying our innate need for belongingness.

About the Authors

Jordan Fogle, MM, is a student in the Music Therapy Graduate Program at the State University of New York at New Paltz. He holds a master's degree in Music and Human Learning from the University of Texas at Austin and has supported diverse communities in the establishment of neuro-affirming vocational, recreational, and therapeutic programs in healthcare and educational settings. Both his professional and creative pursuits are informed by his passions for inclusive education, cross-disability advocacy, and the arts. His research interests include the use of music therapy in diabetes care, and community music therapy. Currently, he serves as the Lead Health Education Research Coordinator for an NIH-funded sex education study (STEPS2) for young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at the CUNY School of Public Health.

Laurie Scott is Associate Professor of Music and Human Learning at The University of Texas at Austin. Additionally, she serves as the director of The University of Texas String Project, and the Musical Lives Program at The University of Texas Elementary School. A former middle and high school orchestra director, she now mentors young professionals toward successful lives as music educators. In every facet of her teaching, Dr. Scott serves as an advocate for inclusive and diverse music classrooms, adult music learners, and access to quality music instruction for all children. In 2020, Dr. Scott was recognized by alumni as one of the "Texas Ten" most influential and inspiring professors at UT Austin and most recently received the Marvin J. Rabin national award for Community Service from the American String Teachers Association.

Selected Attendee Quotes Transcribed From Recording of Virtual Sensory Friendly Concert

"I'm learning how to play "Oblivion" and read the music off of that in C minor. It's a bit tricky, but once you get it, it's like magic. The colors come out of the page and go flying all over the place."

"I just like how music takes me to another world, mentally."

"I enjoy listening to music. Music gives me ideas. By that, I mean I imagine visuals as the song plays out when I draw. I like music from the past and present, songs from movies and TV shows."

"I mainly listen to pop music, but recently I've been listening to gospel music in the car because that's what my family plays when I'm out with them. And I grew up on gospel music because they play that in the church and my family always played that on the road. Other than that, I listen to pop music because it's all upbeat and everything and I just really enjoy music that gives you a lot of energy and everything, and it makes you just want to dance and just act all crazy and stuff. Besides that, I like to listen to instrumental songs that mainly come from video games. They are emotional songs and some are upbeat to get you excited. I also like some electronic music like dubstep."

"I really miss doing things in person. It's been pretty tough being isolated."

"I've never been to a concert in-person, but if I were to go, I would go for the experience."
"Thanks for putting this on. It was a great concert."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not very musically inclined. I don't know very many artists. I listen to a lot of video games and movie music. I like a lot of music from the Legend of Zelda games. I

also like movie scores like Star Wars, Superman, and Jurassic Park. Now, I may not be really knowledgeable about music, but my sister is. She plays the harp. She was in the Austin Wind Symphony for a number of years and they did concerts based on movies and games."

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[1] Please note that this emphasis on practicing and skill development diverges from the emphasis on cultural experience that was the focus of the original SFC®s.

[2] Neurodiversity encompasses all types of neurology, whereas neurodivergence refers to that which differs from neurotypical-ness.

[3] We realize this is putting the onus on neurodivergent individuals to conform to neurotypical standards and not vice versa. We acknowledge that some readers may find this problematic. Our hope is that the SFC® framework can be expanded to offer interested individuals pathways toward broader musical inclusion, while still inherently challenging societal structures and ableist attitudes.

Appendix

Notable Survey Responses

Follow-Up Survey: AST Sensory Friendly Concert at Kick Butt Coffee
(32 surveys sent, 8 responses)

What accommodations were useful to you or your client/dependent?

- Sensory Aids and Fidget Toys, Minimal Amplification of Instruments
- Earplugs, Quiet Room, Minimal Amplification of Instruments
- Quiet Room, Invited Movement Around Space
- She was fine with everything. Hypo not hyper
- Quiet Room
- Minimal Amplification of Instruments

Would you attend one of our concerts again? Why or why not?

- Yes! It was fun & a welcoming environment
- It was great. Very far from where we live. But, liked that it was on a weekend and free parking.
- Yes. I love the juncture of art, community, and inclusion.

What does the term "sensory-friendly" mean to you?

- Not an assault to My eyes and ears, etc.
- Quiet, low lights.
- You can move about and come and go as needed. You can be a little noisy. It's not completely dark in the room. There is some extra space (so you can't grab people next to you).
- Accommodations for folks with hyper sensory issues-volume/lights/audience understanding a melt down.
- It gives a stage to kids with disabilities.
- Provides alternatives for diverse sensory needs in a casual safe setting.
- Adaptive.

Would you prefer the term "sensory-friendly" be included in the name of this concert series? Why or why not?

- Yes, it is a perfect description.
- Sure - gives an idea of relaxed expectations
- If it helps more people to gather and to feel included; then, yes

Which musical genres would you like to hear at future concerts? Select your top 3!

- Blues, Classical, Rock and Roll, Ambient, Jazz, Folk, Pop
- Blues, Jazz, Pop
- Pop, Electronic
- Blues, Classical, Rock and Roll
- Jazz, Pop, Electronic
- Classical, Country, Hip Hop
- Rock and Roll, Pop, Hip Hop

Please provide any other thoughts or suggestions you might have!

- Please schedule more, more, more.

- It was fun!
- My son is on a strict low carb diet for medical reasons & we found some food on the menu he could eat! Eating & listening to music is as good as it gets for him.
- Lots of GFDF in the community. Kick butt didn't have a lot of GFDF lunch options besides a salad. Good to know.
- We really enjoyed it. Next time we will look for ways to more thoughtfully engage with others.

Follow-Up Survey: AST Virtual Sensory Friendly Concert
(22 surveys sent, 2 responses)

What activities/accommodations do you want us to be sure to include at the next virtual sensory friendly concert?

- Maybe instead of 1 hour the concert could be 2 hours?

What does the term "sensory-friendly" mean to you? In what ways can a virtual concert be "sensory-friendly?"

- Being sensory friendly means people find locations, events, products, or services that meet their needs for music.

Which musical genres would you like to hear at future concerts? Select your top 3!

- Blues, Classical, Rock and Roll, Jazz, Pop, Country
- Jazz, Pop, 21st century music form now

Virtual Sensory Friendly Concert: Genre Preference
(22 surveys sent, 3 responses)

What should the musical theme of our next virtual sensory friendly concert be? (Please select your top choice.)

- Meditation/Yoga
- Jazz & Blues
- Contemporary Pop