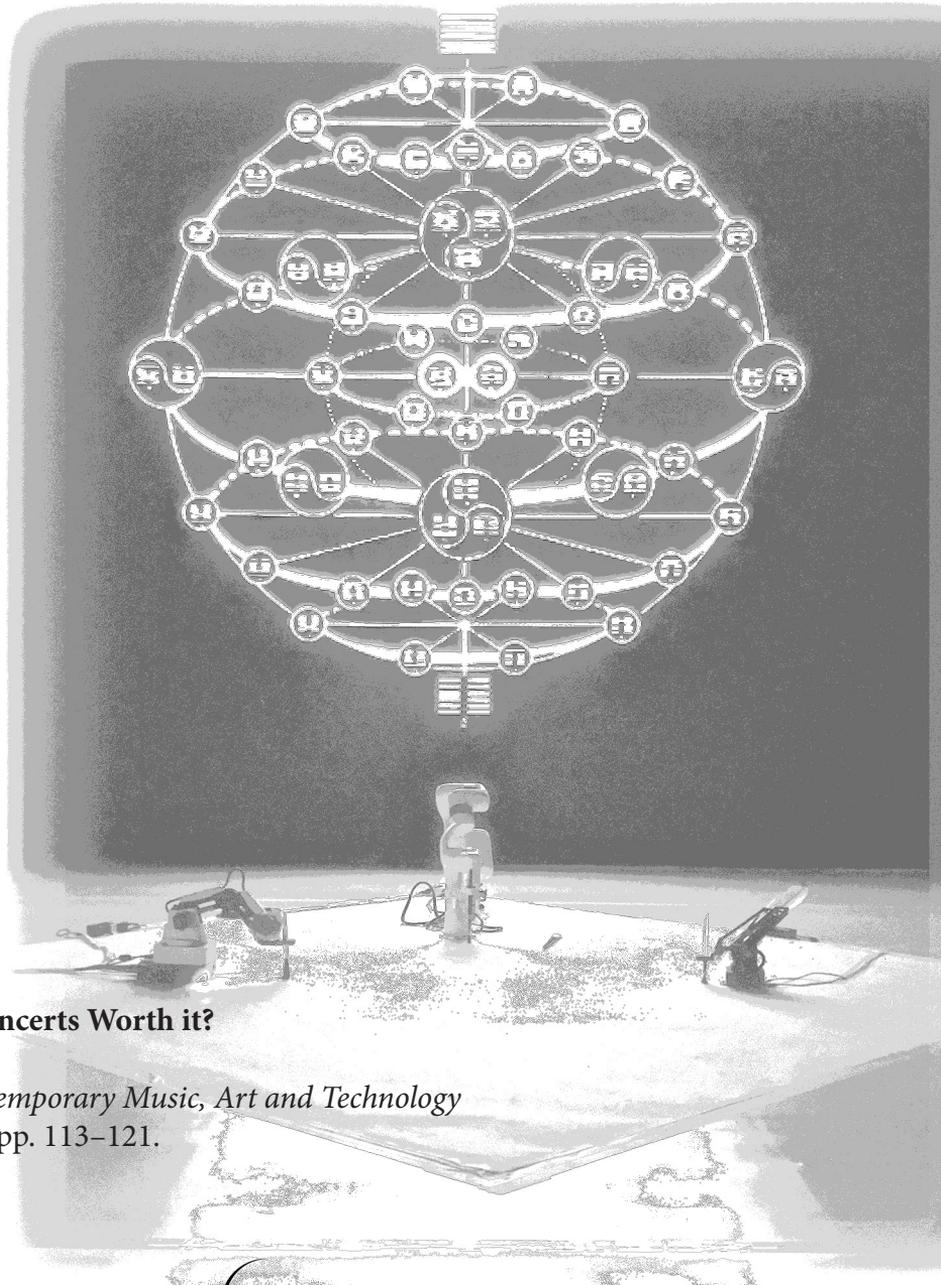


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Are Intimate Small Concerts Worth it?

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ARE INTIMATE SMALL CONCERTS WORTH IT?¹

Abstract: Developing multiple streams of income is an essential method for surviving as an artist, but what streams should an artist pull from? The awareness of one's resources and knowledge of how to use them is what makes or breaks a musician. Many musicians may have overlooked three key resources: House Concerts, Secret Concerts, and Listening Rooms – small intimate venues commonly overlooked. Are these venues worth performing at? Based on one's character, financial needs, and current connections, each of the three venues may or may not be resourceful. This article provides the insight needed to make a decision as to which small intimate concerts (if any) are financially good for you.

Keywords: awareness, concert, small, intimate, house, listening-room, secret

House Concerts

It is not always common knowledge that artists can throw a house concert or perform in another homeowner's house (Timberg 2016). Some artists learn this fact the hard way, spending a significant amount of time performing at bars and cafés just to lose money with each performance (Timberg 2016). But if an artist is sociable, has good merchandise, is willing to do some ground work, and isn't performing on any loud instruments (Concerts in Your Home 2020b), house concerts are the perfect place to put oneself on the map.

House concerts are some of the easiest small, intimate, concerts to profit from.

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In fact Fran Synder, the founder of the first online house concert networking website and the *Listening Room Festival*, says that house concerts are “the lifeboats of the music industry” (Synder 2010). Through his company *Concerts in Your Home*, “in the past 11 years, [he] has secured over 10,000 house concerts for about 1,000 artists” (Herstand 2017). A homegrown artist such as Michelle Malone is a great example of the success that can follow a house concert. Malone asks for a fixed fee of \$1,500 or \$20-\$25 per attendance fee per concert and makes bank (Guthrie 2020). Another successful artist, Jennifer Daniels, makes \$100 to \$300 per house concert in merchandise sales alone, however, she only makes an overall average of \$500 per house concert (Guthrie 2020). The reason for the price discrepancy between these artists is production. Michelle produced her music through the independent label *Aluminum Jane*, then created her own label SBS, or *Strange Bird Songs* (Demings, n.d.). By publishing herself under an entity larger than just a sole proprietorship Malone has been able to secure wide respect and popularity, especially in Southern America (Demings, n.d.). Her music has been featured on a TV commercial, giving her the connections to stage a performance with Elton John. This all started with her decision to produce her music under a label. Jennifer Daniels, meanwhile, is independently produced (Daniels, n.d. b)). Her career entails house concert touring and teaching (Daniels, n.d. a). By taking on all the roles of a label, she is arguably unable to have as great of outreach as Demings, in my opinion. Nonetheless, these two artists are making significant figures through house touring, a pursuit as made possible through sites such as *Concerts In Your Home*, *Russ and Julie’s House Concert Resources*, *Home Ditty*, and various Facebook related groups (Concerts in... 2006; Russ and ..., n.d. 2020; HomeDitty 2020; House Concert Search via Facebook, n.d. 2020).

House concerts, however, can be a cumbersome experience for hosts. One thing that may seem annoying to hosts is that there are no payments for their services, with all proceeds going to the artist. One way homeowners could gain funding is by passing around a hat for spare cash, but this is not a popular way of paying for events. Many homeowners instead hold potlucks (The Music Playground 2009), but if they live in the State of Arizona they better make it a secret or hold it through an official organization as potlucks are currently illegal (Moye 2016). If the host does not reside in Arizona, their only costs would be preparation and cleaning. With little chance of a large PA system (Concerts in Your Home, n.d. b) there is unlikely to be any heavy metal moshing (or “a form of aggressive [...] dancing” (Galanek, n.d. 2020)), leading to fewer broken household objects and little replacement cost for homeowners. Thus, the homeowner may practically receive free concerts from artists, and with organizations working nationally or internationally, one can be exposed to a vast number of different people, styles, and genres. The situation is a win win for the artist and homeowner.

After enjoying the experience of hosting concerts, a homeowner might be interested in receiving more financial reward for their time in preparing and cleaning

for events. This can be done through sales and attendance fees. However, the moment a host decides to start selling anything from their home – from attendance to food, the home becomes a place of business and the owner will become responsible to adhere to the required laws. Selling liquor such as wine or beer requires a license; provided by a State's *Liquor Control Commission* (Eastman 2019). In New York (NY), a liquor license costs between a "range anywhere from \$300 to \$14,000" (Brophy 2019). Selling food in NY requires a *Food Service Establishment* permit from a local health department. A host's home kitchen cannot be used to prepare the food, but must be prepared in a separate space not identified as the host's home's kitchen (The Bureau of Community Environmental Health and Food Protection 2019). Lastly, the host's house will need a permit for "general liability insurance" falling under the demands of "Special Events and Short Term Rentals" (Alliant 2019). If a homeownership artist is willing to face these complexities and comply with the law in a way that allows them to profit from providing a house for artists, the success can be exuberant. Because the presence of house concerts is still up and coming with its online presence, having a foothold in the business before it explodes can be life changing. If an artist starts renting out real estate, they could have a very lucrative side hustle owning homes for bands and artists to perform at while also collecting rent from those living in the houses. There is a question of how open non-musician home renters will be to put their location on the map for artists to tour at. However, if one can find a group of other people interested in being hosts and renting a house, it could be a very profitable expansion of the already lucrative housing market. If the artist doesn't want to face these legal complexities, there is an incentive for artists not to be real estate owners, nor perform at their own home altogether. The safer, easier path is to perform on tour. This is a great way to grow one's audience body. It is up to the artist and how they best see themselves surviving the industry.

For an artist focused on their craft, house touring is a lucrative source of income. It gives "many artists [...] added financial support" for when they are not doing traditional commercial touring (Synder 2010). House concerts typically offer artists complete ownership of all collected funds from the event (Synder 2010). This typically means donations and merchandise sales can go directly into the performer's pockets. Often, new artists typically do not get paid and can even lose money, such as in the 212 US Coffee Houses listed as trusted for live performances, and in the 870 food venues that offer live performances (Undiscovered Music LLC, n.d.; Petri 2020). Artists have an avenue of income they cannot resist! When it comes to advertising and building their following, house concerts provide the close, personal interactions artists need to create a strong fan base (Concerts in Your Home n.d. b). As many events involve guests gathering at their friend's house (Synder 2010), there is an instinctual amount of trust that the audience has about the artist even before an initial meeting. Trust can translate into value if the artist meets their expectations, leading the possibility to create lifelong fans and to sell their own merchandise. This is how an artist can make a small intimate concert at someone's home a worthwhile

performing event.

Secret Concerts

Aside from home concerts, another underrepresented form of concert venue is the secret concert, such as those offered by Sofar Sounds. Sofar Sounds started in London as a “music start-up” and now operates in “411 cities across the world, on every continent except Antarctica” (Dickinson 2018). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* calls Sofar Sounds a “secret concert series [that] is growing too big for the living room” (Dickinson 2018). Similar to the macro-effects the internet has had on house concert touring, Sofar’s private events have grown significantly due to internet communications and networking. Sofar houses their events in office buildings such as “One Liberty Place” or even a “Distillery in Dufftown” (Dickinson 2018; Abir 2019). Sofar, unlike some house concerts, operates as a commercial organization. Sofar began selling tickets for their events around two years ago as an alternative for passing round a hat for donations (although the hat is still passed around) (Dickinson 2018). This not only presents the event as a serious market event, but also “gaurantee[s] the artists a \$100 paycheck each in addition to a video recording of a song of their choosing” (Dickinson 2018).

So as an artist, how does one get into Sofar? The application process has two steps (Sofar Sounds n.d. a). First, an artist needs to fill in their name, contact information, home city and social media links. Second, there is a live video submission. This does not have to be on a stage or in a recording studio – it can be in a home venue. Sofar Sounds encourages the submission of a recent unplugged (non-amped) performance, with no technological enhancements made to the instruments or voices in post-production. Local Sofar team members will review the application, however they will not give feedback if an artist is rejected. They do, however, encourage further applications in the future.

The benefits of Sofar differ slightly to house concerts. The most significant difference is the expanded market and connection with other creatives (Sofar Sounds n.d. b). By utilizing this organization an artist is able to go on tour with some degree of financial support, alongside attendance at commercial events, unlike with many under-the-radar house concerts. The expanded market also allows for easier ways to “fill in []” empty time on a long “international tour” (Sofar Sounds n.d. b)). For example, if an artist is traveling from Germany to the UK, they can stop at the Netherlands and Belgium on the way before taking a boat over to the UK. One artist that did exactly this received an extra \$200 on their tour. Assuming merchandise sales to be similar to that of Jennifer Daniels (as discussed above), the artist may also make an additional \$100 minimum for each Sofar concert, bringing the artist up to an additional \$400 on their tour. This is, financially speaking, very efficient.

On the topic of Sofar’s competition, currently the organization has no direct

competition, as popularizing secret concert networks is actually quite difficult (because they are...secret). Indirectly, there are very similar venues that categorize themselves as 'listening rooms,' the final small intimate concert venue that will be discussed here.

Listening Rooms

There are 606 listening room venues listed on *Undiscovered Musician* alone, against 1,082 listed restaurants and cafés, making available an immense number of listening rooms. A listening room is a location found usually in a restaurant or a bar, where small gatherings of people can go to eat and listen to live music. Some listening rooms are also designed for listening to recorded music on high quality audio equipment (Bernas, n.d.). As nice as listening to recorded music is, it is not efficient when helping artists pay their bills. For that reason, this overview will focus on live music listening rooms.

The main difference between listening rooms and the other two venues mentioned in this paper is quality. For places such as the 12th Floor Porter, private concerts are held, catering is available, and a beautiful stage is presented for performers ("12th & Porter", n.d.). Sofar Sounds does have quality locations, but not at every location. Listening rooms have a restaurant that can financially support the rooms, offering a higher quality of venue. The difference between listening rooms and home concerts lies more in formality than in quality. It is common to find people sitting on the ground at house events, while listening rooms have tables and chairs for guests to sit. This, as well as an actual stage, can create a more formal concert atmosphere. In terms of size, listening rooms are small, lying somewhere between an average house living room and an average Sofar Sounds concert space. The larger the size, the higher the number of guests, making listening rooms such as The Saint, located in Asbury Park, New Jersey (which holds 150 people with a 14 foot x 14 foot stage) less efficient than Sofar's venues (Impression Technologies, n.d.). These rooms also have a very consistent crowd base as each listening room operates independently. This reduces the benefits that can be obtained by performing here when compared to the other two options. A positive, however, is that listening rooms are harder to get into, leading to a higher quality of performance and higher audience ticket prices. This increases the amount of funds available to an artist, but do remember that the restaurant will take a cut of the profits. Therefore, if an artist is currently climbing the ladder from house concerts to Sofar concerts and are ready for something more financially lucrative, listening rooms are a good source of income.

The qualities and characteristics of listening rooms can make them appear to be a half house concert and a half restaurant gig. It is a great transitional venue for artists at such a popularity that they would be paid for food and beverage location performances. In determining which level of entry one should take in terms of performances, think of each of the three venues discussed above as different levels

of experience. A new artist should be doing house concerts, while those with intermediate experience can make themselves available for Sofar gigs and listening rooms. Experts meanwhile should be performing for commercial businesses such as restaurants, TV stations, and large public centers.

Final Notes

There is a lot of overlap between all tiers, but one thing is certain: there is a clear divide in the expertise needed between small intimate concerts and larger, more commercially bred concerts. There is also a difference in respect between venue owners and musicians. Generally, venue owners of small intimate concerts tend to be more respectable and compassionate than the often-exploitative bar owners. In addition, the relationship between the audience and artist is a totally different experience in each form of venue. Currently, artists have more financial incentive to move towards small intimate concerts. Seeing restaurant performances as the bridge to large outdoor concerts with 60 million fans is illogical. However, by building a global fan base by touring house concerts and utilizing listening rooms, it is possible to develop a large and growing fan base.

One may even argue that livestreams deserve a mention as a form of intimate concert venues. Sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Periscope have been very successful in promoting the use of livestreaming, and musicians have taken it upon themselves to spread their sound across this medium. Livestreams are however, oversaturated. Success using these mediums may be difficult unless a musician already has an already existing following developed in the physical world. Success can also come by being one of the first users of the new medium, by being sponsored or receiving shout outs from other successful artists, or by posting livestreams in specific groups or with specific hashtags that represent the corrent target audience. Livestreams also allow artists to connect with their fans on a one-to-one basis. Periscope recently upgraded its service to allow call-ins from viewers to talk directly with the talent (Bernas, n.d.). Additionally, fans can donate funds directly on a livestream to support their chosen artists, while offering themselves as ‘supporters’ . There are also exclusive livestream performances that can be held on certain mediums, however on YouTube (for example) this will require an artist to be a content creator with a minimum of 1,000 followers, which may be out of the reach of many new artists (Karim, n.d.). Livestreams, however, may offer a gateway to a new wave of small intimate concerts that exist solely in the digital world.

At this point, the only thing stopping an artist from making their talent a career is knowing how to finance themselves, as musicians no longer have to begin their careers fighting for popularity without pay. Musicians are being valued for what they are worth on a grand scale. Today, it is more about how artists use their own resources and think creatively than finding themselves locked to external management that may restrict their creativity to please their financial backers. Labels, restaurants, and

large concert halls no longer have the upper hand when it comes to controlling what music is produced and how much money artists are making. The responsibility is now in the hands of each individual performer, and the only limit to their value is the price-tag they place on their own creations.

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