

# Audience Etiquette and Manners Matter!

**How You Act During Public Performances Is a Reflection on Who You Are** – by Paul K. Fox

## Fox's Fireside Chat



*Almost 30 years ago, an article I wrote for the Upper St. Clair High School Choral Boosters was a lighthearted attempt to address a growing need in public performances – one of improving our audiences' listening habits and knowledge of performance "traditions," as well as raising their overall consciousness and sensitivity. Although it now seems a little "retro" and "dated" (texting was not invented yet and tabloids were the fiction of Star Trek and sci-fi programs), it "hits the nail squarely on the head," identifying a growing problem of inappropriate audience etiquette for amateur and professional performances alike.*

### "Uninvited Guests at Performances" (1990)

The painter begins his/her creation on a clean white canvas, void of any dirt, smudges, or imperfections, so that the final art form is pure and readily convey to the viewer. In much the same way, a musician or singer relies on "a clean slate" – that is, a quiet and attentive audience in the concert hall without any stray noises or interruptions that will distract from his/her extremely delicate art form of live music. However, unlike the painter (or unless the concert is recorded and distributed at a later date), music represents only a temporary art... the effects lasting only a moment, and then forever lost until the next time the work is performed. That is why a tradition of **concert customs** have evolved to "set the stage" for clear communication of that really wonderful expression of music.

However, we have noticed in school and professional performances in our area, several new trends have been born from our fast-paced life styles, overworked schedules, television viewing, and Walkman listening habits. Several uninvited guests have been seen at concerts, unintentionally making life miserable for performers and audience members alike. Do you recognize these "**characters?**"

First of all, there is **Gertrude the Gossip** and **Theresa Talker** who spend the entire performance discussing local events or their personal lives. They usually sit in the center section, first row, in order to have the greatest disruptive effect, even though they would be the first to suggest that you were rude for listening in on their conversation. A close relative, **Prentice Postmortem**, likes to give a "play-by-play" account of the relative success of the concert, with comments like, "Did you hear that wrong note?" and "I wonder why he was chosen for the solo part?"

Then we have several impolite visitors from the *Planet Hypertension*, including **Leroy the Seat Leaper** and **Hortence Half-a-Concert** and a host of others. Everyone has witnessed spectacular events created by these adults, who have developed the most advanced technique of choosing only the softest or most sensitive moment in the music to jump up and change seats, run down the aisle towards the bathroom or parking lot, or go get something to eat. Somehow, they feel they are being helpful or considerate of the musicians or actors on the stage when they stand up to leave before or during a particular song, often right after their son/daughter performs. Of course, some music directors themselves are contributing to the situation, selling 12-ounce cans of pop and sugar candy at intermission, which are known elements of improving (?) the biochemistry and behavior of young children staying up past their bedtime.

To add a touch of "color" from a very large pallet of noises, several other guests in the audience feel it is necessary to "perform" along with the singers and instrumentalists. If you sit near the recording, cable TV, or PA microphones, you will usually find **Cyril Cellophane** unwrapping candy specially designed to "rattle" everyone's nerves, along with his friends **Velda Velcro**, **Hildegard Hum-along**, and **Winslow WatchBeeper**. One of the finest musical moments ever experienced at Upper St. Clair was the cacophony of buzzers, chimes, Looney-Tunes™ alarms, and beeps during the slow movements of Handel's "Messiah" oratorio in the 1987 USC Holiday Choral Festival. Performers and conductors have always appreciated the opportunity of setting the exact hour of an ongoing concert using the hourly signals of digital watches in the audience.

And don't forget those long-time veterans **Clem the Clapper, Shouting Sherwood, and Wardella Whistler**, who store up their applause for inappropriate moments like between movements, or after the *Hallelujah Chorus* or *Star-Spangled Banner*, but leave early so that they missed the curtain calls.

All sarcasm and joking aside, performers do appreciate the faithful support of the community. Without the public, lavish Broadway musical productions and extensive choral and instrumental concerts could not be featured. Our talented and hard-working students/musicians/singers/dancers/actors need and deserve large audiences in order to exhibit their craft. The "final exam" of every music ensemble and theater company is the public performance. And, nothing is more demoralizing then spending three months in rehearsal and then performing for only a handful of parents and well-wishers!

However, occasionally it is our job as music lovers to remind everyone the need for **concert customs** which just add up to **good manners**. With the bad habits of MTV™ and Muzak™ that music education researchers say may have bred insensitivity and inattentiveness in the indiscriminate consumption of music, we have to focus on providing that "clean slate" – a calm, orderly, and quiet atmosphere of an alert, well-informed audience!

*Yes, "manners matter!" I can still hear my mother scold us, "Don't be rude. Do you think you were you raised in a barn?"*

*On the subject of "audience do's and don'ts," we will give the "last word" to <http://www.fanfaire.com/rules.html>. The following are considered their updated and succinct "Golden Rules" of audience etiquette:*

1. *Go easy with the atomizer; many people are highly allergic to perfume and cologne.*
2. *If you bring a child, make sure etiquette is part of the experience. Children love learning new things.*
3. *Unwrap all candies and cough-drops before the curtain goes up or the concert begins.*
4. *Make sure beepers, cellphones, and watch alarms are OFF. And don't jangle the bangles.*
5. *The overture is part of the performance. Please cease talking at this point.*
6. *Note to lovebirds: When you lean your heads together, you block the view of the person behind you. Leaning forward also blocks the view.*
7. *THOU SHALT NOT TALK, or hum, or sing along, or beat time with a body part.*
8. *Force yourself to wait for a pause or intermission before rifling through a purse, backpack, or shopping bag.*
9. *Yes, the parking lot gets busy and public transportation is tricky. But, leaving while the show is in progress is discourteous.*
10. *The old standby: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*



*Several things to definitely add to their guidelines – NO TEXTING, not even turning on your smartphone or iPad for a moment to look at the time or your messages. The light from the screen is very distracting to everyone in the auditorium and the performers on the stage! In addition, flash photography is generally prohibited, and may even be dangerous to the performers (can cause accidents!). Finally, any audio/video recording of the event may be an infringement of copyright law. (Don't do it!)*

*In conclusion (from fanfare.com): "Remember, part of one's pact as an audience member is to take seriously the pleasure of others, a responsibility fulfilled by quietly attentive (or silently inattentive) and self-contained behavior. After all, you can be as demonstrative as you want during bows and curtain calls."*

Here are more links to explore for teachers, practitioners, and supporters of music:

- <http://emilypost.com/advice/audience-etiquette/>
- <https://dancemagazine.com.au/2016/10/the-new-rules-of-audience-etiquette/>
- <http://www.highlandslittletheatre.org/faq/theatre-etiquette/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRaayrK16kI>
- <https://www.ket.org/education/resources/audience-etiquette/>
- <https://prezi.com/jabu3khmlukp/10-rules-of-audience-etiquette/>



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The mission of **South Hills Junior Orchestra**, which rehearses and performs in the Upper St. Clair High School in Pittsburgh, PA, is to support and nurture local school band and orchestra programs, to develop knowledge, understanding, performance skills, and an appreciation of music, to increase an individual member's self-esteem and self-motivation, and to continue to advance a life-long study of music. Members of the South Hills Junior Orchestra *learn, grow, and achieve* positions of leadership to serve their fellow members. (For more information about SHJO, please visit [www.shjo.org](http://www.shjo.org). The entire "Fox Fireside" series is at <https://paulkfoxusc.wordpress.com/foxs-firesides/>.)

