

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Sensory Friendly Concerts

by Penny Brill

The Project:

PSO Sensory Friendly Concerts, creating an inclusive, accessible concert experience for a broad spectrum of individuals.

The PSO Organization's description of the Sensory Friendly project:

In June 2015, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra launched its first Sensory Friendly Concert. The PSO was the first orchestra to offer this fully-inclusive concert experience. Since that time, many orchestras have launched their own Sensory Friendly concerts. The PSO continues to consult and guide these organizations on how to create and implement this programming.

Prior to launching the first concert, PSO staff spent two and a half years learning, listening, and engaging in discussions about how to reach and best serve individuals with various disabilities. To further assist the organization in this area, the PSO created an Accessibility Advisory Committee, comprised of experts from the community, who voluntarily lend their expertise and resources to the PSO. In addition, staff worked with other Pittsburgh arts organizations, university faculty, and national networks, and attended conferences to learn as much as possible. In 2014, the PSO engaged Dr. Roger Ideishi, JD, OT/L, FAOTA. A Professor at George Washington University in the Department of Health, Human Function, and Rehabilitation Services, Dr. Ideishi provides consulting, training, and evaluation for the PSO and advises on scripting and pre-visit materials.

Committed to serving patrons of all abilities, the PSO created an Accessibility Initiative which outlines action items in four key areas: Communications, Facilities, Management Practices, and Programs and Services. The Sensory Friendly concert is a fundamental part of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's goal toward becoming more inclusive by adapting and being responsive to the changing needs of patrons.

Sensory Friendly performances are inclusive experiences at Heinz Hall that are open to patrons of all ages and abilities and designed for individuals on the autism spectrum, those with sensory sensitivities, and others who would like to enjoy a concert in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

The specific goals of sensory friendly performances include:

- *Creating opportunities for individuals with sensory challenges to attend and be present during a live concert and theater experience.*
- *Adapting a live concert and theater experiences to a sensory friendly experience for individuals with sensory challenges.*
- *Identifying the challenges and facilitators for individuals with sensory challenges and their families/caregivers in order to attend and be present during a live concert and theater experiences.*
- *Building the organizational capacity to sustain continued sensory friendly concerts in the future.*

Repertoire selections and pre- and post-concert activities are in consultation and collaboration with music therapists, Dr. Ideishi, the conductor, PSO Learning and Community Engagement staff, and the PSO's Accessibility Advisory Committee.

Sensory Friendly concert experiences are designed for patrons of all ages and abilities, especially those with autism spectrum disorders, sensory sensitivities, or other disabilities. Patrons are celebrated for who they are and are freely able to respond to the music without judgment. For families that include an individual with disabilities, social events are often stressful and uncomfortable. Family members are concerned about how other patrons will respond, or if they will judge or scold their child, sibling, parent, or grandparent with disabilities. Likewise, individuals with learning, sensory or social disabilities may present behaviors which do not meet the expectations of others in more formal and/or foreign settings. Families may therefore avoid social and community events, like concerts. For some families, this concert is the first time

the entire family is able to attend together – including the individual with a disability in the experience rather than excluding them.

To assist in creating a supportive environment, the PSO invests in continuous training in and frequent review of processes and communications. In addition, the PSO offers a quiet room, headphones, ear plugs, and fidgets that patrons can use to control their levels of sensory stimulation. Attendees also have the opportunity to engage multiple senses in the pre-concert activities throughout Heinz Hall. Patrons can play instruments and sing along in the Sound Exploratorium led by Music Therapists from UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, dance with Pittsburgh Ballet specialists in the Movement Room, create art with the Pittsburgh Children’s Museum staff in the Art Room, and meet PSO musicians in three stations in the front of the Hall. Additional on-line resources enable concert goers to feel more comfortable with what they might expect to experience; these include a Spotify playlist of music, several pre-visit guides, pre-visit stories, and visual schedules designed by Dr. Ideishi.

In March 2019, the PSO presented a Sensory Friendly performance of the Pops Concert entitled “Disney In Concert: Tale as Old as Time.” Suzanne Perrino, Senior VP for Learning & Community Engagement, worked with the Disney music producer, Ted Ricketts, throughout Fall of 2018 to create a one-hour performance which was tailored to sensory friendly audiences. This was the premiere of this adapted program. We hope that other orchestras will include this concert idea in their own Sensory Friendly concerts.

Note regarding what to expect post-COVID-19: During the current COVID-19 lockdown, many on the staff were furloughed including two out of four in Learning and Community Engagement area, and the focus has been sustaining the institution, staying connected with the patrons and community, and sharing music through individual and ensemble performances across various digital platforms. In addition to several classical performances, the PSO has offered extensive virtual videos and resources through the Learning and Community Engagement area. The PSO area recently produced seven videos as part of the new Front Row Series. Episode 3 of Front Row “Finding Your Song” features programming led by the new Principal Pops Conductor Byron Stripling and highlights community artists and legacy arts organizations. We were excited to have Byron Stripling host and play in the PSO’s first virtual Sensory Friendly Concert in December 2020 for no charge so anyone could access and enjoy the concert.

Partner organization description of the Sensory Friendly project: from UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh (CHP)

CHP serves children and young adults. They have a remarkable Creative and Expressive Arts Therapy (CEAT) Department which “offers individual group and family-based services to enhance [a child’s] hospital stay.” They work closely with the Child Life Department and have a full team of creative therapists, including two music therapists. The hospital also has a new CEAT wing which allows for individual and group performances and creative expression and therapy activities and a TV studio called Dream Big Studios. This space offers patients in-room programming as well as in-person broadcasts and interviews in a real TV studio complete with green screens, cameras, and editing area.

The Sensory Friendly partnership from the CHP perspective: UPMC Children’s Hospital music therapist Kory Antonacci first became involved with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 2013. That year, Antonacci was asked to be part of the symphony’s community-wide Accessibility Advisory Committee, the committee that planned and developed the Sensory Friendly Concert series as one of its first major initiatives. Accessibility had been a concern of the PSO and members of the community for some time. Antonacci agreed that the arts should be accessible to everyone in the community and was very excited about being a part of a group with the same goal. She was happy that the planning group included a very diverse array of experiences, viewpoints and skills among its membership. “I knew right away that I wanted to be involved,” said Antonacci. “We are truly developing a model that is now being taken into account throughout the country and beyond.” As part of her (voluntary) work with that committee, Antonacci has held training sessions for PSO musicians, staff, and volunteers as well as front of house staff, including the Heinz Hall ushers, on how to adjust their customer service to meet the needs of patrons of all abilities in an adaptable, welcoming, and inclusive way. “Every person is an individual,” says Antonacci. “The way I want to be approached may not be the way you want to be approached. Being able to train the ushers in that way was really eye-opening for me and I really enjoyed it!”

Description of the pre-project partnership of UPMC CHP and the PSO

In 2009, the Pittsburgh Symphony began a collaboration with Children’s Hospital under the guidance of former UPMC music therapist Debbie Benkovitz (Debbie mentored the current CHP music therapist, Kory Antonacci). Pre-COVID-19,

musicians (voluntarily or for PSO Service Exchange credit, at no cost to UPMC) visited the hospital to perform small concerts in the hospital's atrium for the enjoyment of patients and their families. They also made individual bedside visits and performed during the biannual memorial services honoring children who passed away during the year — a powerful healing tool and moving experience for everyone involved.

“These are families dealing with loss and grief in a way that we can never ever truly imagine,” said Antonacci. “To know that the members of our orchestra are there to walk that journey with the families – to me those are the moments that make our symphony what it is!”

Music therapists Kory Antonacci and Nicole Steele, with the help of PSO staff, developed a Bedside Initiative program, which is a required training for symphony members who want to engage in one-on-one interactions. It teaches the musicians the basics of what to expect when interacting with medically fragile children and how to meet those children “where they are.” Ms. Antonacci will continue to hold an annual required training at Heinz Hall for musicians interested in participating in the program.

Evaluation: process, outcomes of the Sensory Friendly Program

Through the Accessibility Advisory Committee and other Music and Wellness efforts, the PSO works with many organizations in the Pittsburgh area who have experts in various specialty areas, including Wesley Family Services, Autism Connection of Pennsylvania, Western Pennsylvania School for the Blind, Deaf and Hearing Services of Allegheny County, Veteran's Hospital, Sunrise School, Woodlands Foundation, and many others. I was part of the Accessibility Advisory Committee. As part of the Sensory Friendly Program planning, the committee also invited specialists such as Dr. Ideishi and the local CHP music therapists to help define the SF concert format of the event. Dr. Ideishi also evaluated the SF program each year through an audience survey and observation report. The committee met to outline the needs and goals of programming and the pre-concert activities that would make individuals with and without disabilities feel welcome and discuss what information should be helpful before and during the event, what themes would be appropriate, and what accommodations would be important for those with disabilities. They also discussed availability of Braille programs, open captioning, ASL interpretation, and pre-visit materials, among other considerations. During the course of these discussions we experienced increased mutual respect, growth, and new, renewed appreciation for what each of us brought to the planning process. We began to appreciate how deeply meaningful the result could be for those attending the concerts. The PSO had a great deal to learn from the disability community and specialists network. We slowly realized what and how much we had to change our online pre-concert communications, the front-of-house experience, and what happened on stage to make our audiences feel comfortable. The participating organizations helped with all phases of the project, including promotions, sharing concert information to their networks, and other ways of optimizing attendance, and ticket distribution and sales.

So for AD, AE and CE, this project easily rates at the top of each scale.

Overview of the initial PSO Sensory Friendly Concert Modifications and Activities:

Sensory Friendly Concert Modifications:

- Mitigation of sudden, loud sounds
- Mid-level lighting throughout the performance
- Free fidgets, earplugs, and noise-cancelling headphones
- Patrons are welcome to leave and re-enter the concert at any time
- Patrons are welcome to change seats, moving further back or closer to the stage, based on their sensory preferences and needs
- Patrons are welcome to talk, clap, sing, dance, and move throughout the concert
- A designated quiet room with relaxing activities and live video feed of the stage is available for patrons who would like to take a break at any time during the concert

Accessibility Services & Accommodations:

- Family restroom (*lower level*)
- Accessible restrooms (*main floor and second floor*)
- Accessible seating and entrances

- Gluten-free and casein-free concessions
- Braille programs
- Large-print programs
- ASL interpretation
- CART translation
- Hearing loop with T-coil
- Portable FM assistive listening devices
- Curbside assistance

Personal Observations from Penny Brill:

An American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter for audience members with auditory issues was available during the concert as well as a quiet room for listeners who needed a break from all the sound and activity; a movement themed room utilizing dancers; areas for clay making, fidget tables, and drawing activities in yet another space; and a room where music therapists initiated singalongs, interacting with the children ahead of the concert. I and other musicians were placed around the front of house so that the kids and their families, as they explored their options, could have a more personal interaction with some of the instruments that would be in the concert, and ease their way into the concert experience. In one hallway, one musician sat quietly demonstrating the mechanics of a bassoon to children and parents. The soft sounds of a cello floated down from the balcony. I let children, if they were interested, try bowing or plucking the strings on my viola, or dancing while I played.

During the concert, narrated and directed by the conductor, kids roamed the aisles, clapping when they felt like it or vocalizing to sing with the music. The lights stayed up to help with focus, and some of the louder moments in the music selections were toned down.

Currently, planning for Sensory Friendly concerts still includes many of the initial decision makers, but is adapting to changing needs and priorities and strengthening our relationship with the special needs community. Fortunately, with the addition of our new Principal Pops conductor Byron Stripling, I find that he is from the outset well-aligned with the committee's Sensory Friendly concept ideas, as well as being committed to DEAI, a direction which is both a current PSO value and strategic imperative. The most recent and first **virtual** Sensory Friendly concert held in December 2020 began with our new Principal Pops conductor Byron Stripling introducing the program and later playing trumpet with a jazz keyboardist. The PSO OPAAM (Orchestra Training Program for African American Musicians) Fellow, Shantanique Moore, introduced several of the pieces and performed as well. It is encouraging that Byron is attempting in this way to help the organization become more inclusive and welcoming.

To accommodate the online format, but be consistent with the successful in-person format, the program included pre-visit materials and virtual pre-concert activities through videos with ASL interpretation, and printable resource materials. The outline included what audiences could expect, details about who would be performing, and what would be played, the length of the program (short), and optional activities including:

- **How to Modify the Sensory Friendly Concert at Home** (video + tip sheet)
 - Shantanique Moore, EQT OPAAM Fellow, shared tips on how to enhance the experience at home
- **Social Story: About the Virtual Sensory Friendly Concert** (video + story)
 - Shantanique Moore, EQT OPAAM Fellow, shares an overview of the concert and resources available
- **Make-Your-Own-Concession** (video + recipe card)
 - Step-by-step video on how to make cookies with UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh music therapists
- **Sound Exploratorium** (video + activity instructions)
 - Interactive video of body percussion activities led by UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Creative and Expressive Therapies Department
- **Music and Movement Activity** (video + activity instructions)
 - Two dancers offered adaptive dance techniques for Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, provided by Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre
- **Building/Craft Activity** (video + activity instructions)

- Snowman craft video provided by Wesley Family Services
- **Snow Globe Coloring Activity** created by artist Emily Marko (printable)
- **Sleigh Ride Maze – Standard Format** created by artist Emily Marko (printable)
- **Sleigh Ride Maze – Adapted Format** created by artist Emily Marko (printable)
- **Twelve Days of Christmas Activity** created by artist Emily Marko (printable)

The Senior Vice President of Learning and Community Engagement, Suzanne Perrino, said the orchestra is (post-covid) working to incorporate universal design practices in the rest of its programming. Universal design is about creating an environment that can be accessed and understood and enjoyed by as many people as possible regardless of their age or abilities. Since the orchestra began its foray into creating Sensory Friendly experiences, Ms. Perrino said, the Learning and Community Engagement programs have incorporated elements of the Sensory Friendly modifications into the performance space, preparation online, and programming. The Pops programs are incorporating some of the changes as well.

Kory Antonacci will continue to hold annual required training sessions post COVID-19, for interested musicians, and musicians will continue to play at CHP for memorial services, in the atrium, in the recording studio, and at bedside, continuing to strengthen, develop and reaffirm the relationship of the two organizations.

Assessment: what worked well on purpose, or accidentally The design of Sensory Friendly programming was developed over a long period of time, with considerable thought and attention to detail. The highly successful end result would not have been possible without invaluable input from many experienced people working in the disability community.

At the concert hall, because the PSO included dancers, music therapists and other creative arts therapists in the preconcert activities in different rooms in the hall, the children and families had a very personalized and interactive experience, with multiple activity choices. As a musician I was surprised and moved by the gratitude and relief of the families as we welcomed and interacted with the special needs children and adults. It was apparent that a welcoming experience for the whole family in a public space was rare, particularly when it involved special needs adults. Having multiple options for preconcert activities meant that the families could very likely find something that would engage their children.

What could be improved

- When the PSO first developed Sensory Friendly programming, Dr Ideshi and the music therapists had numerous meetings with ushers, musicians, the conductor and others involved in the concerts in order to explain the thought process behind the concerts. Attendance was strong at those initial voluntary meetings. Before the subsequent concerts, however, musicians and some staff stopped attending training as it wasn't required. Because some musicians were not included in the decision-making for repertoire, they were less supportive of the programs. Other musicians became overly concerned by the dynamics of the music in rehearsals and would question the conductor regarding possible issues with the audience. Dr. Ideishi was on-hand at the rehearsals to reassure the musicians that the individuals in the audience will have a spectrum of reaction to the sensory input and may like louder or softer music, but not all musicians were convinced that what we were doing was OK.
- To answer performance questions, more of the musicians and other new participants in the programs need to attend professional learning sessions and engage in the planning process and pre-concert activities, but attendance needs to be required. Following the initial concert, fewer musicians were willing to sit in the lobby areas and interact with the children, a big loss for the families who might have been somewhat anxious about attending a live event. As a result, many fewer musicians signed up to present these pre-concert sessions. Ironically, this is one of the most-loved events of the pre-concert activities and one which is very fulfilling.
- These concerts initially were once a year, eventually occurring in December. I would hope that we could do them more often, and that other organizations in the Cultural District would also modify their programming with similar goals in mind.

Lessons learned for effective engagement

- All participants must be aligned with the vision of the project. As the original creators retire or leave, the new participants must be aware of the principles and considerations that shape the program, or the program will lose its focus, and as a direct result, its effectiveness.
- Because the orchestra was willing to take considerable time and effort to include all interested special needs organizations as well as inviting knowledgeable specialists into the planning of the Sensory Friendly concerts, all involved were very pleased with the outcome, with remarkably enthusiastic feedback from the audience.
- As new players, special needs school leaders, and others join the project, we need to have a required **refresher**/review of what we are trying to do and what, if anything, needs to change.
- A post-concert **debriefing** should invite feedback from all participants.
- **Alignment** is vital.
- **Planning meetings inviting input from all relevant community leaders** (as we did at the beginning of this project) is vital.
- I am greatly encouraged by the involvement and leadership of Principal Pops Conductor Byron Stripling in our current virtual events. I hope he can remain involved in future Sensory Friendly concerts in addition to Pops programming once the orchestra is playing live again. Because he is in a **powerful, titled** leadership position he is easily able to support Ms. Perrino in keeping the program as a priority in the PSO's offerings.

Here are the answers to additional questions I asked, provided by Suzanne Perrino, SVP of Learning and Community Engagement:

Did we get grants or other (new non-arts) funding as a result of this project?

Yes we receive a great deal of support for the Sensory Friendly Program. This support comes in from individuals, corporate, and foundations.

Approximately what was the budget?

The budget is fairly small for Sensory Friendly, especially this year because of COVID-19. For the past two years, the program has been based on the Holiday Pops Program, so this enables us to share resources and talent. We also have a great deal of free support from our community and cultural partners including UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, Wesley Family Services, the Children's Museum, Slippery Rock University, and the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre.

Was there any income from ticket sales, or were tickets free? Any costs for ads? Typically we would charge a nominal fee for tickets, but since we are virtual this year, we offered this program free of charge. Sensory Friendly is a mission-driven program and we are excited to reach more people this year because it is free and virtual.

Any costs for marketing? Not this year as we were mostly promoting through social media and networks through the disability community.

Were front of house activities all from volunteers? Yes, typically we ask various community partners to donate their services for front of house activities. In return, we often have players or volunteers working on their sensory friendly programming. This year, they created videos for us.

Was there a new audience, and has that audience grown with subsequent Sensory Friendly events? This was a new audience for us when we started it in 2015. The percentage of population of people with disabilities is 17 – 20% nationally. It makes sense to reach out to this audience as if we do not offer programming for this audience or become more inclusive as an organization, we are excluding many people and their families, including people of all ages and backgrounds. We have some cross-over now with the Fiddlesticks Family Series as well as Holiday Pops. So, the audience has grown in reach, but we don't expect to break 2,000 people per concert. In this case, we are not valuing the concert by attendance or ticket revenue, but rather the mission-driven service to the community.

How do we measure success? Each year, Dr. Ideishi evaluates the program. In the past, we had done a pre-concert audience survey, observational notes, and then post-survey. The pre-survey has gone down in numbers over the years as people become more familiar with the concert experience. We have seen some survey fatigue with this audience over time.

What was the intended outcome?

The specific goals of sensory friendly performances often include:

- Creating opportunities for individuals with sensory challenges to attend and be present during a live concert and theater experiences.
- Adapting live concerts and theater experiences to a sensory friendly experience for individuals with sensory challenges.
- Identifying the challenges and facilitators for individuals with sensory challenges and their families/caregivers in order to attend and be present during a live concert and theater experiences.
- Building the organizational capacity to sustain continued sensory friendly concerts in the future.

Any surveys to measure success? Surveys are collected and collated by Dr. Ideishi and his team. Reports are submitted to the staff each year.

What have we learned? The disability community and organizations that work with this population are incredibly supportive and willing to help in order to contribute to additional offerings for this audience. We have been overwhelmed by the commitment of our community partners, teachers, parents, and therapists to assist us in this initiative. We have also learned that the needs and preferences of these audience are on a very large spectrum. We believed that we would get younger kids and parents attending this concerts at first, but we have seen an age range that is wide – from 1 to 95 years of age – all different types of disabilities and sensory issues including no disability, Autism Spectrum, Asperger’s Syndrome, Developmental Disability, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Downs Syndrome, and multiple diagnoses.

It is impossible to address or meet every individual’s needs in a concert experience. So we try to do the best we can and offer as many modifications as possible. The surveys show the inexplicable value of this type of accessible, family-friendly Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performance and the need for more program offerings of this type throughout the city. Factors that often influence the high percentage of family enjoyment include: sound and lighting modifications; the ability to move about the concert hall; the positive usher and volunteer staff interaction; and, a welcoming and accepting environment. The one consistent issue that is raised in every evaluation is sound level. In every concert, we heard from families that the sound level is both too loud and too soft. This is an issue we try to mitigate with head phones, hearing assist devices, and a general announcement at the start of the concert to encourage families to move throughout the concert, either further forward or farther back in the Hall. In addition, two negative comments came in over the past three years from parents with non-verbal children on the Autism Spectrum. Also, a family with a child with Downs Syndrome is too sensitive to the clapping between pieces, so they cannot attend concerts. So, we know we cannot meet the needs of everyone, but we will try to accommodate as much as possible.

We have found that for many families these experiences are the only time they can attend performances together. So, we try to make the environment as welcoming and non-judgmental as possible. When the entire organization is working together, there is a magical feeling of being together and allowing families and individuals to express themselves freely. This happened last year in our Disney adapted SF program in 2019. When the audience was singing “Let It Go”, twirling in the auditorium, and freely expressing themselves, the parents and performers had tears in their eyes watching the audience expressing themselves freely.

What attitudes have changed? Since 2015, the organization has embraced this program with pride and sensitivity. It has been one of the programs that has united the entire organization. The approach to planning and implementation is substantial and the effort is supported by all staff department areas as well as musicians, the Board, and the community. The Pittsburgh arts community has been working collaboratively on this idea of further reaching out and to collaborating with the disability community since 2013, and it is unique in that Pittsburgh and its Cultural District has adopted this effort as a priority and of great importance. We are lucky that Pittsburgh’s arts community works so collaboratively.