

Behaviours (Attitudes) of Opera Consumers in Romania Towards Online Performances during COVID-19 and Recommendations for Optimizing the Management of Opera Theatres

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Abstract. *This study examines the behaviours (attitudes) of opera (lyric theatre) consumers in Romania towards online performances during the COVID period. The objectives of our study are the following: 1. to identify how lyrical theatre consumers (opera) perceived online performances during the COVID period; 2. to identify the relationship between socio-demographic and professional-artistic variables (age, studies, self-identification as classical music enthusiast, self-identification as an opera music enthusiast) of lyrical theatre (opera) consumers with their perception/opinions regarding online shows). The study employs a cross-sectional, non-experimental design and uses a survey-based questionnaire approach. A total of 214 respondents participated in the study, of whom 142 (89.7%) were female and 72 (33.6%) were male. Of the 214 participants, 192 (66.4%) came from urban areas and 22 (10.3%) from rural areas. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, and statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22. The results are discussed with reference to similar results reported in national and international studies. From an academic perspective, this article enriches the current understanding of the behaviour of Romanian lyrical (opera) consumers towards online performances in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and can be a tool of specific guidelines for managers, regarding a systematic adaptation of their business models in crisis situations.*

Keywords: crisis management, opera theatre, public institution, public, entertainment.

Introduction

Although the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was a health crisis, its effects spread rapidly and deeply into other areas, from the economic, social, political, to the cultural.

The virus has also affected nations economically, being just as contagious from an economic point of view as it is from a medical point of view (Baldwin and di Mauro 2020). The SARS-COV-2 pandemic was a shock wave that disrupted the linearity of world life. For almost two years, humanity has fluctuated between states of emergency and states of alert, in order to limit the circulation of the virus.

Never in world history has there been anything that has affected daily life as much as this pandemic. It has imposed itself on a planetary physical and virtual level, with unprecedented, expanding force, condensing time and space in the most critical way, worldwide. This phenomenon

is known as “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1990). The performing arts industry has struggled with major challenges, such as widespread job losses, financial hardships, and a deep questioning of its role in society. In a sector that has historically existed by gathering a live audience in large numbers, the impact of the pandemic could not be underestimated or quickly forgotten – and opera houses around the world found themselves in the most precarious position in modern history. Concert halls and theatres closed; so did ticket offices, performance seasons, tours and festivals were cancelled or rescheduled.

The separation of services into essential and non-essential (Nicola, 2020), forced the artistic sector to fight throughout the pandemic to claim its importance. In Romania, the essential services sector included: energy, transport, banking sector, financial market infrastructure, health sector, supply and distribution of drinking water, digital infrastructure.

According to Art 6, Operators of essential services (Law 362/2018), a “service is considered essential if its provision cumulatively meets the following conditions: a) the service is essential in supporting societal and/or economic activities of the greatest importance; b) its provision depends on a network or an information system; c) the provision of the service is significantly disrupted in the event of an incident” (Law 362/2018).

To reduce the spread of the virus, with stronger propagation in closed spaces, the authorities decided, in certain periods, to ban live performances. The opera audience understood the need to minimize the risks of viral exposure, choosing to attend performances (when allowed) under conditions of social distancing, between the desire to participate and the fear of getting sick.

The most disadvantaged cultural products were those in the category “performing arts”, which includes opera, theatre, or concerts, which usually happen indoor with the physical presence of an audience or happen online.

Fortunately, COVID-19 did not completely shut down the music world, as the era of social distancing was also the era of social media. When gathering large groups of people in enclosed spaces was unthinkable, opera performance took an unprecedented leap and embraced the shift to digital. Through the virtual media, artists were not alone in their loneliness. The mass migration of artists and audiences to the virtual world is impressive. The unforeseen impact of the COVID-19 pandemic hastened the urgency for innovation to ensure survival. In response, the performing arts and live events industry has continually adapted, reshaping how audiences engage with and experience the arts. The regular, loyal audience was the one that was addressed firstly by the digital format, but also a new audience that was won over and attracted to opera during the pandemic.

While the pandemic has highlighted inequalities in many areas, it has also amplified the potential for digital performance to reach new audiences and inspire new producers (Webb & Layton, 2022). For a long period, digital space was the only medium that allowed the arts to connect with their audiences. Audience engagement has been a major challenge for digital performance producers.

Literature review

As a result of restrictive public health regulations, a strong acceleration of the digitalization process happened which, in turn, has made online connectivity an absolute necessity. On-location performances were moved to platforms during the pandemic.

Despite all the restrictions, the demand for cultural and artistic content has increased during the quarantines, with classic digital content being more accessed than ever. We can say that we have witnessed a digital revolution. The “National Institute for Cultural Research and Training” in the study “Culture in quarantine - Monitoring the cultural field during the Covid-19 crisis /

Adapting the cultural offer", on April 8, 2020. The study highlighted the fact that artistic institutions have identified new channels for promoting and distributing their artistic products, in order to connect remotely with their audience. According to it, since the first year of the pandemic, of the 250 cultural institutions monitored, 153 (60%) have adapted their activity or mode of operation to respond to the pandemic challenges (National Institute for Cultural Research and Training, 2020).

In spite of the disruption of artistic tradition the digital revolution made an important contribution to economic growth. There has also been an unprecedented consumption of online culture and an increase in digital literacy. The European Commission wants to make the 2020s Europe's "digital decade", and President von der Leyen has called on the Union to pave the way for digital innovation, with a common plan and clearly defined objectives for 2030 (EU Commission, 2020). As part of the NextGenerationEU program, designed to make Europe "healthier, greener and more digital" (EU Commission, 2020), Member States have been invited to invest 20% of their financial support from the Recovery and Resilience Facility in digital transformation, including the creative and cultural industries.

The closure of opera houses and a series of audience restrictions have forced a rapid migration to digital platforms in a desperate attempt to create some work opportunities for the arts sector and to connect it with the public. However, the multi-sensory aspects of live performance have proven more difficult to transform into digital formats, due to a feeling of incompleteness or a lower quality of the aesthetic experience from interacting with digital content. Many artist professionals did not consider digital services to be equivalent to those offered live. Even if the goal of digitizing performances should have been full financing, the prerequisite was that artistic and cultural institutions would step out of their comfort zone and develop something truly new and useful (Oswald, 2021).

From the release of archival recordings in the early weeks of lockdown to the emergence of the Zoom-produced performance, much of 2020 and 2021 saw the arts opera embracing the online media in a way that has never been seen before. Almost unknowingly, digital has also led to a quiet but vital revolution in accessibility (Wallace, 2022).

The most commonly used approaches to creating digital content have been those that have used standard technology to share pre-recorded content or broadcast live events. Despite the lack of skills and experience, those who have addressed these issues have often pursued learning on the fly (Gordon, 2014), using a multitude of training videos available on YouTube. These digital show producers now have opportunities to break new ground. In the digital transformation imposed by the pandemic, digital technologies have been essential in the opera industry, as tools to attract new audiences while retaining and increasing the loyalty of existing audiences (Imran, Shahzad, Butt & Kantola, 2021). Online meeting spaces for study, research and knowledge exchange have become the new normal for artists to gather and share work and ideas through digital platforms (Mastrominico, 2022).

To understand the impact of the pandemic on the behaviour of opera music consumers, a series of studies were conducted. So: Lu, Xiao, Xu, Wang, Zhang, & Zhou (2023) in the article "Evaluating influencing factors of audiences' attitudes toward virtual concerts: Evidence from China", exploring the factors that shape audience attitudes toward virtual concerts in China, focusing on player experience and technology acceptance models.

Also, Brgles & Škender (2022), in the article "A Perspective on the Opera Audience of the 21st Century", from "Opera and Media of the Future", explore "how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected opera audiences, highlighting the rise of the digital opera audience" and the shift toward

online performances. Additionally, Sai Wei (2023), in the article “Critical Assessment of the Impacts of Digital Technological Developments on Opera Companies and Consumers through Production and Consumption”, from “Media and Communication Research”, “critically assesses the impact of digital technological developments on opera companies and consumers, focusing on streaming opera and audience engagement”.

Furthermore, Opera America (2024), in the report “Understanding Opera’s New Audiences: Research Report”, offers “insights into the motivations, experiences, and barriers faced by new opera audiences nationwide in the years following the pandemic”.

These articles provide insights into how audiences have adapted to and perceived online opera performances during the pandemic.

In Romania, there are fewer studies on this issue. The study “Trends in Cultural Consumption During the Pandemic – 2020”, conducted by the National Institute for Cultural Research and Training (INCFC), analyses the cultural behaviour of Romanians in the context of the pandemic. This study found that between July and December 2020, there was a significant decline in attendance at public cultural events, including opera performances, compared to 2019. Additionally, many Romanians shifted towards cultural consumption through online performances (Matei, 2021).

The study “Modelling COVID-19 Data for Economic Balance Towards Sustainable Consumer and Business Support” (Cristache, Serban, Țiței, & Nisioiu, 2021) examines changes in consumer behaviour across various sectors, including entertainment and leisure. It highlights that consumer confidence in brands within the entertainment and leisure sector declined significantly between May and September 2020.

The authors did not identify any scientific studies in the specialised literature on the behaviour (attitudes) of opera consumers in Romania towards online performances during COVID-19, despite their necessity for optimising the management of opera theatres.

Therefore, the objectives of our study were the following: (1) to identify which were the attitudes of consumers of lyric theatre (opera) towards online performances during the COVID period; (2) to identify the relationship between socio-demographic and professional-artistic variables (age, studies, self-identification as an enthusiast of classical music, self-identification as an enthusiast of opera music) of lyrical theatre (opera) consumers and their attitudes towards online shows during COVID.

Methodology

The study employs a cross-sectional, non-experimental design and uses a survey-based questionnaire approach. The sample was selected based on convenience, and its size was not predetermined.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to the target group, and the responses were collected from April 6 to June 30, 2024. The data were automatically recorded in Google forms and from there they were imported into Excel and then into the SPSS 22 program, the statistical data analysis program, where their processing and analysis were performed.

The questionnaire through which data were collected on the variables of interest was built based on existing models in the specialized literature (e.g. “Understanding Opera’s New Audiences: Research Report”) and is a cross-sectional observational questionnaire composed of 32 questions. The first questions (5) refer to the characteristics of the participants (1. Gender, 2. Age, 3. Educational level, 4. Self-identification as a classical music enthusiast, 5. self-identification as opera music enthusiast).

The opinions of lyrical theatre (opera) consumers in Romania in relation to online performances during the COVID period was measured by the answers to the following questions:” Have you participated in live performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.)? (Q12), Do you think streaming was the cultural sector's main response to the crisis? (Q13), How many shows did you watch online per season during the Covid-19 crisis? (Q14), Which variable was the most important when choosing an opera performance to watch online? (Q16), Did the online performances you watched feature international opera stars (a), or artists from your local opera house (b)? (Q17). On a scale from 1(extremely unfavourable) to 10 (maximum favourable), what is the number that best defines how online will be used in opera performance in 5 years? (Q21), Will you continue to watch digital opera broadcasts? (Q22).

As the study is a descriptive research effort and includes nominal/ordinal variables, it does not propose hypotheses but rather research questions. The main research question of this study was: “Are socio-demographic and professional-artistic variables (age, education, self-identification as a classical music enthusiast, self-identifying as opera music enthusiast) of lyrical theatre (opera) consumers in Romania associated with their attitudes towards online performances during the COVID period?”.

To answer this research question a series of analyses were run using the Pearson chi-square association test.

Results and discussions

The questionnaire was completed by 214 respondents, of whom 142 (89.7%) were female and 72 (33.6%) male. In terms of age, most respondents fall into the 36 - 55 age category (61- 27.9%), followed by those in the 55 - 64 category (29.9%) and those over 65 (42%, respectively). The least represented category is the 18 - 35 age category (27/12.6% respondents). By education, 22 (10.3 %) of the participants had secondary education (high school, post-secondary education) and 192 (89.70 %) had higher education (university, postgraduate education). The status of being a “classical music enthusiast” was affirmed by 210 (98.1 %) participants and not recognized by 4 (1.9 %) participants. The quality of being an “opera music enthusiast” was affirmed by 200 (93.5 %) and unassigned by 14 (6.5 %) (table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

		Count	Column N %
Gender	Male	72	33.6%
	Female	142	66.4%
Age	18 - 35 years	27	12.6%
	36 - 54 years	81	37.9%
	55 - 64 years	64	29.9%
	over 65 years	42	19.6%
Education (studies)	Secondary education (high school, post-secondary education)	22	10.3%
	Higher education (university, postgraduate education)	192	89.7%
Classical music enthusiast	No	4	1.9%
	Yes	210	98.1%
Opera music enthusiast	No	14	6.5%
	Yes	200	93.5%

The results of the Pearson chi-square association test indicate that some of the socio-demographic and professional-artistic variables (age, education, self-identification as a classical music enthusiast, self-identification as an opera music enthusiast) are statistically significantly associated with respondents' perceptions/opinions regarding online performances) as seen in Tables 2 and Table 3, below.

Table 2 presents the results of the association analysis between the age and education variable and the indicators of respondents' perception of online shows.

Table 2. Statistically significant associations between the age and education of opera consumers and their attitudes toward online performances

Attitudes of opera consumers towards online performances		Coefficient
Did you participate live in performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.)?	Age	$\chi^2 = 11.58$ (df=3, N=214), p= .009
How many performances did you watch online per season during the Covid-19 crisis?	Studies	$\chi^2 = 13.96$ (df=3, N=214), p=.003
Will you continue to watch digital opera broadcasts?	Age Studies	$\chi^2 = .12.139$ a (df=3, N=214), p= .007 $\chi^2 = .081$ (df=1.76, N=214), p=.003

Source: Authors' own research.

As can be seen from the table 2 above, live participation in performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.) (I12) is positively and statistically significantly associated with age. Also, the number of shows watched online per season during the Covid-19 crisis (I14) is positively, statistically significantly associated with studies, and the intention to continue watching digital opera transmissions (I22) is positively and statistically significantly associated with age and education.

Table 3 presents the results of the association analysis between the variables self-identification as "Classical Music Enthusiast" (CME) and "Opera Music Enthusiast" (OME) and indicators of respondents' perception of online performances.

Table 3. Statistically significant associations between opera consumers' self-identification as classical music enthusiasts and opera enthusiasts, and their perspectives on online opera performances

Attitudes of opera consumers towards online performances		Coefficient
Have you participated live in performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.)?	CME OME	$\chi^2 = 5.10$ (df=3, N=214), p= .019 $\chi^2 = 5.12$ (df=1, N=214), p= .024
Do you think streaming was the cultural sector's main response to the crisis?	CME	$\chi^2 = 5.52$ (df=1, N=214), p=.019
How many performances did you watch online per season during the Covid-19 crisis?	CME	$\chi^2 = 13.90$ (df=3, N=214), p= .003
Will you continue to watch digital opera broadcasts?	CME OME	$\chi^2 = .3.30$ (df=1, N=214), p= .017 $\chi^2 = 6.63$ (df=1, N=214), p= .015

Source: Authors' own research.

Note: CME= Classical Music Enthusiast, OME= Opera Music Enthusiast

As can be seen from the table 3, above, first, self-identification as a classical music enthusiast (CME) and self-identification as an opera music enthusiast (OME) are positively,

statistically significantly, associated with live participation in performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.) and with continuing to watch digital opera broadcasts.

Also, self-identification as a classical music enthusiast (CME) is statistically significantly associated with the opinion that streaming was the main response of the cultural sector to the crisis and with the number of performances watched online per season in the time of the Covid-19 crisis.

The results presented above complement the existing literature on behaviours (attitudes) of opera consumers in Romania towards online performances during COVID-19 and recommendations for optimizing the management of opera theatres (Brgles & Škender, 2022; Lu, Xiao, Xu, Wang, Zhang, & Zhou, 2023; Sai Wei, 2023).

A series of other recent studies regarding behaviours and attitudes of opera consumers toward online performances during COVID-19 have revealed several important insights that can inform future recommendations for opera houses, performers, and streaming platforms.

There are studies that have highlighted the fact that many opera consumers found the behind-the-scenes experience, additional content, and deeper engagement valuable. It provides fans with a richer experience and fosters a stronger emotional connection to the art form (Hall, Menzies, Zutshi, & Creed, 2022). Hence, the recommendation that the range of digital products should be diversified: opera houses should diversify their digital offerings beyond just live-streaming events. Offerings could include behind-the-scenes content, interactive Q&A sessions with performers, and exclusive access to rehearsals or historical opera performances.

Other studies have highlighted the fact that one of the main concerns for online opera audiences was the quality of streaming (Schürmer, 2022). Hence, the recommendation to ensure a variety of high quality and accessible content; ensuring that online performances have excellent sound, video quality, and lighting. Accessibility options, like subtitles and audio descriptions, should be standard.

Further studies have highlighted that during the pandemic, many opera consumers were hesitant to pay full prices for virtual performances, especially given the lack of the traditional live experience (Bissell, 2023; Dinardi, Wortman, & Muñoz Hernández, 2024). Hence the recommendation to offer various payment methods: create more flexible pricing and subscription models, such as pay-per-view options, subscription-based access, or tiered memberships that provide exclusive content for various price points.

Studies that have focused on maintaining online consumption even after the pandemic have shown that even in post-pandemic times, there is an ongoing interest in virtual and online opera content. Norrgrann, Lammi, & Shah (2022), recommend that even after the pandemic, opera houses should continue to offer online performances as part of their regular programming, balancing it with live events.

Certain studies have shown that a hybrid model helps meet the needs of different consumers, balancing the desire for the traditional live experience with the convenience and accessibility of online content. Hoang, Kousi, & Martinez (2023), recommend that the option of hybrid events, that combine live streaming with live audiences, be considered. For example, a live performance could have limited in-person tickets available while being streamed globally for an online audience.

Other studies, which have highlighted that different age groups, cultural and educational backgrounds, engage with opera differently online. Hammarström & Kling (2024), Ravagnani (2020), and Walmsley (2019), recommend creating diverse content offerings that cater to a broad

demographic, including younger audiences, international fans, and underserved communities. This might include offering different genres of opera or presenting modern, reimagined performances.

By following these recommendations, opera houses can continue to innovate and thrive in the digital age, ensuring that opera remains relevant and accessible to both existing fans and new audiences.

Conclusions

Opera is a traditional cultural domain in which artistic creation depends on audience reaction. During the COVID-19 crisis, it was vital for both lyrical artists and the public to stay connected and for artistic activity to be created in safe health conditions. The world's opera audience was not prepared for a crisis of such magnitude, but the more artists and managers managed to be more flexible, more agile, abandoning the traditionalism of the opera system, they managed to save the theatres and the artistic process. The pandemic crisis and, especially, the lockdowns forced artists and managers in the international art world to become aware of the fragility of "normality" in the artistic field. It was important for artists to communicate with the public and stay connected, developing new ways of communication.

The study proves that live participation in performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.) is associated positively and statistically significant with age - this fact suggests that opera theatre managers should take into account the age of the audience when formulating the requirement to comply with specific rules. The number of performances watched online per season during the Covid-19 crisis is positively and statistically significantly associated with education. Based on these results, opera house managers should consider the fact that people with higher education watch more performances online than those with secondary education.

The general interest in digital opera broadcasts is associated positively and statistically significant with both age and education – suggesting to opera managers that older and more educated people will continue to watch digital broadcasts even after restrictions are lifted.

Also, live participation in performances under special conditions imposed by the pandemic (social distancing, wearing a protective mask, etc.) is associated positively and statistically significant with both the affirmation as an enthusiast of classical music and the affirmation as an enthusiast of opera music. The number of performances watched online per season during the Covid-19 crisis is positively associated with the opinion that streaming was the main response of the cultural sector to the crisis. The intention to continue watching digital opera broadcasts is positively and statistically significantly associated with both the affirmation as an enthusiast of classical music and the affirmation as a enthusiast of opera music. Opera theatre managers who want to increase the number of cultural consumers should also address those in the category of those who did not self-identify as enthusiasts of opera music and enthusiasts of classical music.

From an academic perspective, this article enriches the current understanding of the adaptation of the public of opera in a hostile environment and provides managers with concrete guidelines on the systematic adaptation of their business models in hostile situations.

This study is particularly useful for students and researchers in music and cultural management. It is also intended to help practitioners from concert houses and opera management, such as general managers, artistic directors, marketing and communication directors.

Also, the study contributes to the raising of awareness, not only of artistic departments, but also of opera house management, to encourage artists to be concerned and involved in issues that address the aspects of this study.

Finally, the study proves that the critical conditions caused by the pandemic crisis, in which fear of illness was the primary reason for non-participation, can provide an unexpected but important test bed, also from the point of view of the cultural consumer.

The results of this study should be viewed with caution due to some limitations.

The first methodological limitation of the study stems from the non-random sampling method. Another limitation comes from statistical analysis. This approach of the analysis could be improved by a more complex quantitative analysis.

Despite these limitations, the results of the study contribute to the development of knowledge in the field and suggest future development directions: conducting further research with a larger number of respondents and using more tools to measure opera consumers' perceptions of management in opera theatres. Other interesting research avenues could include a study on opera consumers' perceptions of management aspects, as well as the effects of these perceptions on the future courses of action within the opera institution.

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