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Concerts in Care Ontario: Evaluation of Performances, May-June 2021

Kate Dupuis

Sheridan College, kate.dupuis@sheridancollege.ca

Candy Zhang

Sheridan College

Lia Tsotsos

Sheridan College, lia.tsotsos@sheridancollege.ca

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*Concerts in Care Ontario:
Evaluation of Performances, May-June 2021*

Project Team

Kate Dupuis (Schlegel Innovation Leader)

Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

Candy Zeng (Research Assistant)

Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

Lia Tsotsos (Centre Director)

Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

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Abstract

Background: Concerts in Care Ontario (CiCO) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing older adults with access to musical performances. During COVID-19, CiCO has transitioned to an online delivery of their programming, using Zoom to reach older adults living independently and in congregate care settings. This project explores the potential benefits of virtual CiCO performances for older adults and their care partners, with a focus on specific pandemic-related concerns for the older adult population, including mood and social connection.

Method: Data were collected in a variety of ways: 1) through observation of CiCO performances ($n = 13$), 2) a questionnaire ($n = 59$ senior participants and $n = 3$ staff), and 3) interviews and standardized evaluation forms from staff ($n = 6$).

Results: Satisfaction with the performances was very high, with 100% of participants reporting benefits for their well-being. Participants indicated feeling more relaxed and connected, and that they appreciated the educational/learning aspect of the performance structure. Participants were observed to react in positive ways to the performances, including outward displays of appreciation for and curiosity with the music, performers, and instruments. Staff indicated that the performances were extremely positive for the older adults in their care and had a secondary benefit for the well-being of staff within the congregate care settings.

Conclusions: Virtual delivery of Concerts in Care Ontario programming was very successful, with both the older adults and the staff who attended (via Zoom) the concerts responding positively to the experience. Future exploration of a hybrid model of performance delivery post the COVID-19 pandemic may help even more Ontario older adults access the healing power of music.

Introduction

The Sheridan Centre for Elder Research (CER) was contracted to provide evaluative support for Concerts in Care Ontario (CiCO), as part of a grant from the Ontario Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility. In May and June 2021, two members of the CER team worked with CiCO to collect data from participants attending 13 different performances.

Older adults, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were already at an elevated risk for social isolation. The ability of CiCO participants to tune into performances from the comfort of their own homes provided a potential opportunity to overcome social connection difficulties experienced in these uncertain times. Given the extensive literature on the benefits of music for the emotional well-being of older adults and those who care for them, collecting data around the CiCO performances provided an opportunity to examine the potential benefits of virtual delivery for those attending the performances.

In particular, the CiCO model lends itself to creating social connections for older adults, as each concert is divided into two halves, with a dedicated opportunity of approximately 10 minutes in the “intermission” of each performance for participants to ask questions of the musicians (and the organizers). It also provides an opportunity for both passive and active participation in music, with potential downstream effects on participants’ mood.

The funding provided by the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility allowed CER to evaluate the potential benefits of the CiCO performances for older adults dwelling in the community and in congregate care settings.

Method

Data Collection

Observational data. Data were collected through observation of 13 CiCO performances in May and June 2021 (Fridays only in May and Wednesdays in both May and June). Session observations were collected via a standard template, with sections for pre-performance introductions and discussion, each of the two halves of the performance, discussion during the intermission, post-performance discussion, and any comments made in the Zoom chatbox. Observed behaviours of and comments by participants, as well as comments by the performers and the organizers, were noted.

Participant SurveyMonkey questionnaire. An 18-item SurveyMonkey questionnaire was created for attendees of the CiCO performances. The questionnaire collected basic demographic data (age, identified gender, associated organization) and solicited feedback on and reaction to the performers and performances.

Staff interviews and questionnaires. Staff from the congregate care and SALC organizations that were taking part in the CiCO performances were encouraged to complete a standardized feedback form ($n = 3$) or a post-intervention interview with the principal researcher ($n = 3$). Although not explicitly asked to do so, three of the staff also completed the SurveyMonkey questionnaire.

Data Analysis

All quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted using Microsoft Excel. Thematic analysis was conducted by the principal investigator, through identifying and coding specific themes in the participant responses and in the observations.

Results

Observational Data

Responding to performances. Participants were observed to make numerous positive visible and/or auditory responses to the performances, including swaying/moving their head/arms to the music, clapping along to the beat, smiling, laughing, singing along, dancing in their chair, sending a heart icon through Zoom, giving (in some cases double) thumbs up, and applauding. Some participants were observed to close their eyes and sit quietly in their chair, which was interpreted as peaceful contemplation of the music, while others sat very close to the screen and stared attentively without much outward display of emotion, which was interpreted as quiet focusing on the experience.

Qualitative feedback about performances. Participants were observed to make both auditory and written (in the Zoom chat box) comments about the performances, related to enjoyment of the music (e.g., “I love music”; “I want to thank you for playing [inaudible], he is my favourite composer”), their admiration for the performers (e.g., “Amazing how the singers can sing in different language”; “You have such a beautiful voice... You almost have a voice reminding me of Edith Piaf”), and positive effects on their mood (e.g., “But this has been a relaxed afternoon.”; “I live alone so this helps me relax and I suffer from anxiety and panic attacks so this helps me.”; “I didn’t know it was this good, keep smiling!”).

Interactions with performers. During the intermissions and, to a lesser extent, after the performances, participants engaged in dialogue with the performers. These conversations related to questions and comments about the performers personally (e.g., “For both of them, when did you each start playing your instrument, how old did you started playing?”; “Where is he located”; “Does he have a CD?”; “It's nice to see a baby for change, she's so cute” [the

performers' child was visible on screen]), about their instruments (e.g., “The wood on the flute, is it all one piece?”; “I would like to know if there are more than one type of harp?... I do some composing on my computer and I wanted to know what type of harp I should pick out.”; “How do you determine the mallet quality soft vs hard?”), and about the music (e.g., “I would like him to play ‘In the Mood’”).

Participant SurveyMonkey Questionnaire

There were 59 responses to the SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide a unique identifier so that, were they to complete the survey after more than one performance, we could identify how many individuals were completing the survey. Fifty-five of the 59 participants provided such an identifier, and we were thus able to confirm survey responses from 35 unique respondents. Twenty-five of the respondents answered the survey once, six completed it twice, two completed it three times, one completed it four times, and one completed it seven times.

The mean age of respondents was 77 years, with a wide range (58-96 years), and 77% of the respondents identified as female. Seventy-six percent of respondents indicated they attended the performances once a week, 2% indicated they attended every other week, 2% indicated they attended 1-2 times a month, and 4% indicated they attended once a month. Attendance was impacted by interest in a particular musical genre and scheduling conflicts (e.g., medical appointments).

When asked to comment on what drew them to the performances, the most common responses were to seek enjoyment, for entertainment, for relaxation, to learn something new, to boost mood, and to seek social connection.

100% of respondents indicated that attending the performances affected their well-being, citing that the concerts were enjoyable, provided relaxation, happiness, and joy, helped connect them to the outside world, and calmed them down. These responses tracked well onto the stated purposes for attending the performances listed above, suggesting that the performances were meeting participants' needs: "Looking forward to these made me feel better. Listening to the beautiful (live) music made me feel great." (P48); "The beauty of music makes looks things [sic] differently, more positive and with more hope." (P40); "Overall, we feel great, spent the afternoon with others, great social connections" (P42).

When asked to comment on their experiences at each week's concert, 100% of respondents enjoyed, and 98% felt engaged in, the performances. While only 64% of respondents indicated that they felt connected to other participants, 91% felt connected to the performers. This mismatch in connection was likely due to the virtual nature of the experience, and the fact that there was little opportunity for participants to socialize with one another. In contrast, each performance was structured to include a break in the middle in which participants were encouraged to chat with the performers, ask questions, and learn more about them, their instruments, and their music. When asked what they noticed about the music and the performers, many respondents referenced this opportunity to interact and communicate with the performers: "Very talented and professional. Able to answer my questions." (P44); "Very communicative with the participants, very engaging." (P17); "Very talented and personable!" (P32).

When asked what that day's performance had reminded them of, the most common type of comments related to participants reminiscing about the pre-pandemic concert-going experience: "Being at a concert with lots of people dressed in fine clothes" (P52); "Being at Roy Thomson Hall" (P49); "Remind about the happy time when there do not have pandemic

happened” (P7), and about their own past: “My Grand Father was a Scottish [sic] Opera Singer” (P7); “The days when I could attend concerts because I had no disability and could afford Live concert tickets cost.” (P29); “Travelling in Europe” (P20); “My growing up” (P15).

When asked to comment on improvements to the experience, asking for a longer performance (e.g., “It could be longer, it seems to go by so fast” (P12)) was the most common response, while other participants suggested including a different genre of music (e.g., “More modern music” (P53)), requested a “short game or trivia relate [sic] to the music” (P48), and requested better sound quality for questions from the audience during the intermission.

Participants also expressed their gratitude to CiCO (including the organizers by name) for providing them with these performances: “Thank you for arranging these wonderful concerts. I look forward to them every week.” (P58); “Thank you for having these concerts. They are educational, entertaining and help make it a happier day.” (P9); “Please keep Concerts in Care program running for a long time. Special thanks for Debra and Brendon [sic] to co-ordinate and keep it going.” (P2).

Staff Interviews and Questionnaires

Staff interviews. Three staff members from three of the community partners met with the principal researcher for a post-intervention interview to discuss their perspectives on the CiCO performances and share information about the experiences of their clients.

Sharing performance details with clients. The respondents shared information about the performances with their older clients through phone and email. Social media was not reported to be a major way this information was shared. There were some clients who did not have access to internet/devices that would allow them to access Zoom. In some cases, the organizer would join the performance via telephone and put it on speaker so that multiple clients could listen in

simultaneously from their own seats. They reported that clients appreciated any details (e.g., bio, links to YouTube performances) that CiCO could share about the performers.

Experiences of clients. All three respondents indicated that their clients responded very positively to the CiCO performances. The fact that the clients could simply join in and “relax and listen to music” but did not necessarily need to join in or even look at the computer/screen was a strong benefit of this form of programming. Clients reported feeling the performances were “very therapeutic, really relaxing” and they were hoping the performances could continue in the future. One respondent indicated that the concerts were a great opportunity for their clients to reminisce, and to interact with and learn more from the performers: “very unique, very meaningful”.

Secondary benefits for staff. One of the respondents indicated that, in addition to benefits seen for their clients, their staff also experienced benefits from the performances. Specifically, it was very helpful to have one hour (and, in the month of May, two hours) of programming provided for the organization that staff did not have to facilitate. Partnering with CiCO was also positive as it meant they the organization could offer new experiences to their clients.

Suggestions for improvement. The staff indicated that CiCO had been very responsive throughout their partnership, even in one case modifying the programming to include some Canada Day-themed music. One suggested improvement was to obtain information about the performers a few days earlier so that clients would have a chance to familiarize themselves with their music if they so wished. Another was to find a way for the older adults to have more of an opportunity to engage with one another, in addition to engaging with the performers, during the intermission. One final suggested improvement was for the CiCO organizers to present

information about upcoming concerts using closed captioning and/or a shared slide, so that clients could not only hear the announcements but would also have a visual representation of the information as well.

SurveyMonkey questionnaire. Three staff members (one each from three different partner sites) completed the questionnaire. They all indicated that their own well-being was improved by the performances, and this related to witnessing their residents' enjoyment (a secondary benefit for these staff as well). They appreciated the variety of music, that the music connected them even from a distance, and requested songs from different genres: "We appreciate these musical performances as residents really enjoy music." (P1).

Evaluation forms. We received three concert evaluation forms from two of our partners. With one partner, presentation of musical selections, performer interactions with residents, and choice of repertoire were all rated 10/10. The staff indicated that the residents were happy, enjoyed, clapped, and were singing and dancing with the music. For the other partner, presentation of musical selections and performer interaction with residents were rated as 6/10, and choice of repertoire as rated 8/10. The staff noted that the residents appreciated the musical performances; however, they had short attention spans and tended to get bored and doze off during the intermission conversations. These data speak to the heterogeneity of participants across the different CiCO sites, and the need to tailor programming to individual groups. This may be more difficult for the performers to do via Zoom than it would be during in-person performances where the performers could more easily read their audience, and watching a video screen during the intermission Q and A may not be engaging enough for some older adults, in particular those living with complex medical needs.

Conclusions

Data collected virtually and through questionnaires and telephone interviews with Concerts in Care Ontario participants and staff at partnering organizations indicated numerous positive benefits of the performances for older adults and staff alike.

Virtual delivery of Concerts in Care Ontario programming via Zoom was feasible and proved to be very successful, for both the older adults and the staff who attended. The key recommendation emerging from this work would be to continue offering CiCO performances to older adults in Ontario, as these were an excellent opportunity to create social connections, encourage reminiscence, and positively affect mood. As Ontario emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be beneficial for the organization to continue providing access to performances via a “hybrid” model, in which participants can attend either in-person and/or virtually. This would make the performances more inclusive and ensure that even more Ontario older adults have access to the powerful benefits provided by participation in music-based activities like these performances.