

Kids at the Symphony? A How To Guide!

November 18, 2014 by [Holly Mulcahy](#) in [Neo Classical](#)

Last month, Michael Tilson Thomas (MTT) stopped a concert to tell a parent to move herself and her child to a different location in the concert hall because he was afraid the child would disrupt the concert. This caused a **fantastic debate** about appropriate ages of concert goers, whether children should even be welcome, and if MTT had any ground to stand on with his action.

Most orchestras have age limits listed on their websites, and some even offer **reduced or free tickets** for children.

In my own experiences, it's usually the cell phone in the slow movement or the conversation between two oblivious adults that cause more of a distraction than children. Occasionally an argument between two adults resulting from the phone or conversation will happen!

I do admit I sometimes wonder what's going to happen when I see parents bring in young kids. Whether I'm in the audience or on stage, the **thought crosses my mind**: are the kids up for this concert? Most of the time I'm pleased to see the children engaged and enjoying the music.

Here is my how-to guide on bringing your children to a classical symphonic concert:

Groundwork Preparation

1. Sit with your child and listen to a three minute piece. Before the piece starts, ask the child to listen for three things. Is it a happy or sad piece? Was it quiet or loud? Was it fast or slow? It is important that you convey that while listening they are not to talk but to listen fully! After you listen with them, discuss what they thought. I think it would be a nice tradition to discuss over cookies or some kind of treat.
2. A week later try a longer piece. Same questions, same discussion afterwards. Do not forget the cookies during the discussion!
3. After you bumped up their listening lengths, start to ask them to use their imagination more. What did the piece remind them of? Did the work make them think up a story? Perhaps they could paint a picture of the images that came to mind. Painting, discussing, and the cookies now become a thing, your bonding tradition. You are sharing a very powerful experience that is fun and meaningful.
4. Bonus discussions may pop up such as what instrument is making what sounds. Be prepared to Google what you don't know and you might learn something fun, too!

Pre-Concert Preparation

1. After you feel your child can sit through some longer works thoughtfully, they may be ready for some live music. Check out the schedule of your local orchestra and see what concerts might be a good fit. Have a listen yourself to recordings of works on the program you picked; at this point you should be able to tell if the music is something that will engage your child or not.
2. Sit with your child and play portions of the recordings to be performed on the concert program. Ask the questions listed above and draw some pictures, tell some stories, and share some cookies. Tell them you are proud of how they can sit quietly and you'd like to reward them by taking them to see the music in person!
3. Explain what will happen from picking the tickets up, to finding a seat and sitting quietly while a real orchestra plays the music they have come to know. Explain that there will be a time to talk during intermission and after the concert you will take them for a special treat so you can talk about the concert.
4. Buy tickets near an exit or in the back of the hall if you are even remotely concerned your child might not sit through the concert.

Your Rules

1. You will place your hand on your child's shoulder if they are moving too much.
2. You will remove your child if they make a fuss.
3. You will have your child use the restroom before the concert.
4. Your child will tap your leg if they are done, and you will acknowledge the tap by holding their hand and you will leave at the end of a movement or at intermission if possible.
5. Notice as many exits as possible, have a plan and several backups.
6. Try to take your seat about 5 minutes before the concert starts.
7. No kicking the seat in front and no talking.
8. Only quiet flipping through the program book, and if it falls, leave it on the ground.
9. Both you and your child will go out for a treat afterwards if the behavior was good.

Post Concert Follow-up

1. Hopefully you and your child had a great time. Good preparation usually allows for that!

2. Ask your child what was the best part of the concert and what wasn't. Make notes for future concerts you might consider.
3. Start introducing some other music, keeping your tradition and special time going strong.



Backstage at a Chattanooga Symphony concert with music director Kayoko Dan and a young patron.

I have found there is no right age limit. Some kids can sit still for a couple hours at age 6, some have to wait until age 13. Every child is different so don't try to force the issues. You will know when your child is ready, and if you discover they are not there quite yet during a concert, you have a system in place to allow for a graceful exit.

Sharing orchestral music is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give their child. In a society where attention spans are shrinking, this is a great vehicle to give a child access to a longer attention span and a calmer thought process. Additionally, encouraging children to use their imagination is a marvelous way to encourage creativity while helping them direct their emotions.

If you have stories about bringing your own child to an orchestral concert, please share!

A very good blog to discover music is called the **Listeners' Club** by Richmond Symphony violinist and expert violin teacher, Tim Judd. Tim posts a work or a spotlight on a composer and includes a Youtube.com link. This is an excellent tool in engaging yourself and children in classical music.



About Holly Mulcahy

After hearing Scheherazade at an early age, Holly Mulcahy fell in love with the violin and knew it would be her future. She currently serves as concertmaster of the Chattanooga Symphony Orchestra and spends her summers at the celebrated Grand Teton Music Festival where in addition to performing in the violin section, Holly volunteers as an active chamber musician. Holly performs on a 1917 Giovanni Cavani violin, previously owned by the late renowned soloist Eugene Fodor, and a bespoke bow made by award winning master bow maker, Douglas Raguse.