Introduction

Assessments of quality in the performing arts have traditionally consisted of critical reviews, the bestowal of honours and awards, attendance and access rates, the reputation of the director or lead performers, and attributions of success such as sponsorship, grants or festival participation. Quantitative indicators have included number of performances, number of subscribers, attendance levels, number of new productions and earned income (Boerner and Renz, 2008, p. 21). Quality measurement in the performing arts is critical to policy-makers, government funding agencies, foundations and sponsors, who evaluate competitive bids for support and are required to substantiate their investment using set measures: quality or excellence, identity, reputation and access.

This article puts forward and tests the hypothesis that audience experience is an appropriate and important measure of quality in the performing arts, particularly in relation to possible re-attendance. It sets out to prove this through in-depth questioning of audiences immediately following a performance. The research questions are: 1. How do audiences describe their experiences of attending arts performances? 2. What is the relationship between audience engagement and artistic quality? 3. How do arts companies maximize the audience experience? 4. How can this be interpreted in performing arts policy and funding?

The need for such research is demonstrated in the literature. Abbé-Decarroux (1994, p. 99) and Tobias (2004, p. 109–110) note the importance of the notion of quality in the performing arts and the challenge of analyzing it. Radbourne (2007) argues that “audiences . . . will be fiercely loyal if they can experience fulfillment and realization in the arts experience” (p. 3) and that “the new arts consumer is on a quest for self-actualisation where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfill a spiritual need that has very little to do with the traditional marketing plan of an arts . . . organisation” (p. 1). Hume and Sullivan Mort (2008) posit that “identifying the varied measures and relationships present in the consumer mindset assists arts managers in better segmentation and customisation of the offering and delivery of the service experience maximizing return on investment” (p. 312) and advocate for further research into a range of areas, including the various factors that influence customer likelihood of repurchase in the performing arts (p. 322).

All of this suggests that the perception of the audience’s role has changed: where once audiences were seen as primarily passive (Wheeler, 2004; Boorsma, 2006), now it is acknowledged that the audience contributes to what Lusch and Vargo refer to as the “co-creation of value” (cited in Ergar, 2008, p. 97; see also Boorsma, 2006). Similarly, in Sauter’s (2000) seminal research into audience reception, theatre is
described as “the communicative intersection between the performer’s actions and the spectator’s reactions” (p. 53). Other scholars have commented that as an active participant in the creation of artistic quality, the arts sector itself must ask, “What is the consumption value that practitioners in the cultural sector seek to produce?” and “What role does the industry want the spectator to play in forming this value?” (Mencarelli and Pulh, 2006, p. 20). Audiences increasingly want to shape their own experience, and marketing strategies should be refocused on empowering audiences, not targeting them (Scheff Bernstein, 2007, p. 252).

**Historical Measurement of Quality by Arts Agencies**

Traditionally, measurement by public funding and policy-making bodies of quality in the arts experience has given little regard to the various factors that contribute to the audience’s experience. This lack of attention is demonstrated in the early history of the Australia Council for the Arts, Australia’s national arts funding and policy agency. Quality is a core value of the Council, enshrined in the *Australia Council Act 1975* as its first function (“to promote excellence in the arts”). For a few years after the Council’s inception, how such excellence might be measured appeared not to be an issue for dispute, or even for definition. At a 1969 UNESCO seminar during which the scope of the nascent council was planned, delegates largely agreed that “standards of the highest excellence should be sought” in order to guide funding decisions (Hohnen, 1969, p. 5) – though it was considered “impossible to rationalise the valid motives” for funding decisions because “either we feel something or we do not” (Eggleston, 1969, p. 28).

However, this confidence in the innate ability of a select group of distinguished “experts” to identify quality was short-lived, and the development of arts administration over the next 40 years included ongoing debate on how to define and measure quality.

Initially, the principle of allowing “quality” to guide funding decisions had two implications for performing arts policies. First, funds were pooled to provide grants to a small number of companies that “would thereby be enabled to perform at high levels of competence by international standards” (Coombs, 1969, p. 55) – otherwise known as the “few but roses” policy. Second, professional artists were given the power to decide who the “roses” were: artists made up the great majority of the art-form-specific boards, and granting decisions were based on peer review. Underpinning these policies was a belief that decisions about what constituted quality were best left to experts – in this case professional artists.

Since the establishment of Australia’s system of arts administration, successive generations of public inquiries (Industries Assistance Commission, 1976; McLeay, 1986; Nugent, 1999) have investigated and made recommendations on the way public funding is allocated in the performing arts. The reports of these inquiries have often been critical of the fact that public funding has privileged the “supply side” of artistic production with too little attention to demand for the arts. Increasingly, they have called for more research into the demographics and interests of potential audi-
ences. The 1986 McLeay Report, for instance, argues that government funding should be concentrated on serving "the public interest" rather than professional artists, and that the public interest would be best served if the decision-making boards of the Australia Council comprised audience or consumer representatives as well as practising artists (p. 58, 105). The 1999 Nugent Report recommends that performing arts companies "undertake detailed market segmentation work and improve the capabilities of marketing staff" in order to improve box-office success (p. xiii). By the late 1990s, the Australia Council, government departments responsible for arts and culture, and performing arts companies had become the beneficiaries of greatly improved research on audience demographics and interests (Costantoura, 2001). Audience research and development is considered one of the Council’s key responsibilities. Arts agencies of the federal and state governments now produce guides for artists and arts organizations to use in developing and utilizing audience research (e.g., Close and Donovan, 1998; Tomlinson and Roberts, 2006).

Arts agency grant application guidelines are set by the Cultural Ministers’ Council in its Business Plan Framework for all funded arts organizations in Australia. The current guidelines require arts organizations to provide evidence of their ability to deliver their program based on data such as number of performances/events and number of paid attendances, along with data on audience reviews, feedback from visitors, critical reviews, and peer and media reportage (Arts Victoria, 2007). Such frameworks are commonplace conventional measures of quality used by arts funding agencies as a means of evaluating and assessing applications for funding in a highly competitive environment.

The three performing arts companies that are the focus of this study are recipients of state and federal funding. Their work is therefore subject to evaluation and assessment by funding organizations. In this article we look at audience measures of quality as an alternative means of evaluation.

**Authenticity and Audience Engagement in the Arts: A New Measurement?**

"In developed countries, ... products and services of so-called 'creative industries' [which include the performing arts] ... represent a large share of consumption activities and account for a considerable proportion of individual and family expenditure" (Santoro and Trollo, 2007, p. 109). It is therefore prudent that performing arts organizations engage in the complex process of trying to understand what it is in the performing arts experience that will give audiences what Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) term a "hedonic response" (p. 93). Santoro and Trollo (2007), drawing on the work of Lacher and Mizerski, define the hedonic response as "a combined response from the emotions, senses, imagination, and intellect" (p. 109) and argue that "consumers expect ... [hedonic] products and services to create an absorbing experience ... arousing their emotions, stimulating a physical reaction, soliciting their memories and fantasies, and triggering their cognitive development" (p. 109–110). The level of intensity in an audience member's response during a performance..."
may vary (see Carù and Cova, 2007, p. 36), but nonetheless the notion of the hedonic response clearly links with that of self-actualization as outlined by Radbourne (2007): “appropriation, connectivity and transformation” (p. 3). Santoro and Troilo argue that the “search for a hedonic response” is what motivates consumers to seek out “hedonic products and services” (p. 109). Although people attend performing arts events for a variety of reasons (see, e.g., Hill, O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan, 2003, p. 49–50; Voss and Voss, 2000, p. 77), it makes sense to take the concept of the hedonic response as the definition of quality from the audience’s perception in the performing arts.

Recent research (Radbourne, 2007) has demonstrated this link. Surveys of orchestral audiences in 2006 and 2007 at four different concerts (newly created string and electronic orchestra, festival orchestral performance, State Symphony orchestra classic concert and State Symphony popular concert) found a significant correlation between intention to re-attend (from 91% to 97.7% agreement) and agreement with the statement “A musical performance evokes an emotional response in the audience” (mean response over 4 on a five-point scale for all concerts – the most significant correlation across all the surveys). Further questions elaborated on the “emotional response,” probing the audience experience. The findings indicate that if the audience member has a personal experience that meets some self-actualization need, then he or she is likely to re-attend. It might be assumed that the present study is looking at audience satisfaction. In their analysis of the literature, Szymanski and Henard (2001) report that “satisfaction” can range from having one’s expectations fulfilled to experiencing outcomes that exceed what was anticipated. As will be shown below, our research found that audience members usually perceive quality as much more than simply having their expectations met, and hence – because of the various meanings of “satisfaction” – we will talk in terms of “engagement.” Although Brown (2004) writes that “some people want to engage fully and learn something every time they go out, while others idealize a more passive, disconnected experience” (p. 2), he also states that not much is known about how fulfillment of customer expectations influences the likelihood of customers attending again in the future (p. 2).

Our research, as well as that of Radbourne (2007), suggests that audiences see active and connected forms of engagement as indicators of quality and that this influences re-attendance.

Our study focused on four components of the audience experience: knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement. The aim of the primary research was to test the idea of the audience or spectator experience as a measure of quality, thus empowering arts audiences to actively participate in the co-production of artistic quality. Building on audience surveys in 2006 and 2007 across four diverse orchestral performances, this research with seven focus groups (two theatre companies and one chamber music group) generated four distinct components of the arts audience experience. These components were linked to findings on attributes of the audience experience, particularly arising from new research on common co-creation and audience self-actualization needs (Radbourne, 2007; Radbourne and Arthurs, 2007), and in the literature as outlined below.

Knowledge is concerned with providing audiences with information to enable a better understanding of or perspective on the performance they are experiencing (Kawashima, 2000, 2006). Examples include contextual...
programming (developing programs or seasons around a topic, theme or artist); visual enhancements (adding to or magnifying the performance); self-interpretive aids (outside the performance – e.g., programs or Web sites); and interpretive assistance (within the performance – e.g., conductors’ or directors’ talks or the use of handheld PDAs to provide informative text throughout the performance) (Brown, 2004, p. 6–15). The rationale for utilizing a knowledge strategy is that the deeper the understanding of the performance, the greater the appreciation, leading to a richer experience and increasing the likelihood of return visitation (Kawashima, 2000, 2006). A knowledge strategy also connects with what Kotler and Scheff (1997) refer to as the “augmented product”: “features and benefits beyond what the target audience normally expects” (p. 193), and also the finding by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) that “external communications can affect not only customers’ expectations about a service but also customers’ perceptions of the delivered service” (p. 45).

Such a strategy can also help to reduce the fear of risk among potential audience members. Dowling and Staelin (1994) contend that “consumers engage in risk-reducing (i.e., information-search) activities in order to reduce their perceived risk level (and, therefore, their feelings of being uncomfortable)” (p. 121).

Risk refers to the possibility of either loss or gain. Colbert et al. (2001, p. 84–85) describe four related kinds of risk that determine the likelihood of re-consumption by theatregoers: functional risk (the possibility that the product will not “meet the consumer’s expectation”); economic risk (in which the cost makes the decision-making process more complicated); psychological risk (in which the product poses a threat to the consumer’s desired self-image); and social risk (which is concerned with how the consumer wishes to be perceived, and thus is not necessarily experienced by all consumers).

Negative risks may also include fear of confrontation: engagement with the arts can challenge consumers with “ethical issues, moral choices and emotions that are difficult or painful to acknowledge” (Hirschman, 1983, p. 49). Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), drawing on the work of Singer and of Zuckerman, similarly note, “If consumers know in advance that hedonic consumption will require a certain level of imaginal participation and emotional expenditure, they may choose to use (or to avoid) a certain product” (p. 97).

The greater the perception of negative risk, the greater the likelihood that participation will not occur. Crealey (2003, p. 30–32) suggests several strategies for minimizing negative risk and maximizing positive risk: product testing by involving consumers in the process leading up to the performance or cross-pollination by testing segments with products designed for other segments; selling risk – that is, selling the idea that the performance is risky, that it will shock or amaze; reducing social risk by creating a comfortable and accessible pre-performance environment; and, finally, increasing the provision of knowledge (outlined above) to enhance understanding of the performance and minimize anxiety.

The onus is on arts organizations to maximize the perception of positive risk and minimize that of negative risk. Research such as that outlined in this article can contribute in this regard. Conchar et al. (2004) argue that “it is important to undertake studies that integrate risk processing with the overall decision-making process. The concept of simultaneous evaluation of risk and return (benefits) deserves concerted attention in the consumer behavior literature.” (p. 433)

Authenticity is a term that has been much discussed (see, e.g., Grayson and Martinez, 2004; Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006). In the context of the performing arts, authenticity can broadly be defined as “a form of truth within the performing arts event.” The greater the authenticity perceived by an audience member within a performance, the greater her or his enjoyment of the experience.

Authenticity can be seen to have two main components. One is authenticity of what is being offered: Is the performance up to technical standards? Does the audience believe the play is by the playwright whose name appears on the program? Is the music performance faithful to the score?

The second component to authenticity in the performing arts is the audience’s emotional perception. Authenticity is generally associated with reality, truth and believability, yet these qualities mean different things to different consumers; whether or not an experience
is considered authentic is based on the perception of the consumer (Arnould and Price, 2000; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Furthermore, as Wang (1999) writes: "That which is judged as inauthentic or staged authenticity by experts, intellectuals or elite may be experienced as authentic and real from an emic perspective" (p. 353). Therefore, in the context of the performing arts, audience members may experience a performance as "authentic" even if it is not faithful to its original script or score.

Wang (1999) identifies three types of authenticity (p. 352), each of which (particularly the third) has implications for the audience experience of the performing arts. Wang's first category, "objectivity authenticity," is concerned with "epistemological experience (i.e., cognition) of the authenticity of originals." His second category is "constructive authenticity," which "refers to the authenticity projected onto . . . objects." The third category is "existential authenticity." Wang explains: "In common sense terms, existential authenticity denotes a special state of Being in which one is true to oneself, and acts as a counterforce to the loss of 'true self' in public roles and public spheres in modern Western society" (p. 358). Wang writes that existential authenticity can, in terms of analysis, be divided into the "intrapersonal" and the "interpersonal" (p. 361). The interpersonal can be realized through "communitas in a Turnerian sense": "structures fall apart, and differences arising out of the institutionalized socioeconomic and sociopolitical positions, roles, and status disappear." (p. 364)

Certainly, there are socio-economic and socio-political factors that affect people's attendance at performing arts events (see, e.g., Hill, O'Sullivan and O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 43–50), and - as will be discussed - "communitas" is not always realized. However, Wang's notion that authenticity can be both felt individually and experienced collectively, independent of an external arbiter declaring whether or not a performance is "authentic," makes "existential authenticity" an ideal concept for exploring the audience experience of quality in the performing arts.

Collective engagement is the audience member's sense of being engaged with the performer(s) and the other audience members and/or with discussions before or after the performance (see Boorsma, 2006; Jacobs, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2004). It can be both verbal and non-verbal, both intra- and interpersonal. Jacobs (2000) reports that after attending a performance, non-attender college students noted that while attendance produced anxiety (for the reasons outlined under Risk above), "the copresence in the concert hall of so many other people, especially people of diverse backgrounds, enhanced their evening's enjoyment, as did the opportunity to talk with others about the performances" (p. 135). Everson (2004) underscores the importance of both the intra- and the interpersonal in the spectator's experience of the theatre: "The fact is that while the emotional and perceptual dimensions are experienced individually [although, as will be discussed below, people may smile at each other to indicate that they are having similar experiences], the cognitive analysis of a production is to a large extent a collective phenomenon, which may enhance the spectator's insight in a performance through communication with other audience members." (p. 171)

Jacobs's research cited above, as well as our own discussed below, demonstrates that the same may be said of other types of performing arts, a view supported by Pitts's (2005b) reference to "the close relationship between social and musical enjoyment that is at the heart of concert attendance" (p. 269).

The construction of meaning, whether personally or collectively, is part of the arts experience that provides consumers with value (Boorsma, 2006). McCarthy et al. (2004) explain that people derive great value from collective engagement in the arts, because it "allow[s] private feelings to be jointly expressed and reinforce[s] the sense that we are not alone" (p. 50). Pitts (2005a) gestures towards the importance of research into collective engagement: "There remains a need for closer investigation of the extent to which feelings of social compatibility and comfort affect listeners' enjoyment of different genres. Greater understanding of this aspect of live listening might help to generate some solutions to the problem of widening participation and securing future audiences." (p. 139–140) Although Pitts is writing in the context of a specific chamber music event, her suggestion is apposite to any performing arts management that seeks to increase its audience base.
These four components of the audience experience – knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement – are the defining elements that audiences use to measure value and that arts organizations could therefore use to predict attendance and participation. If these elements could be measured, they could form an index of the arts experience. The following research tests this theory.

**Research With Arts Audiences: Methodology and Findings**

We propose that the “quality” of an artistic performance can be defined by the individual audience member’s personal definition of quality based on her or his experience of the performance. Drawing on the work of several authors, Boerner and Renz (2008) make similar claims regarding opera performance, arguing that it is directed at a perceived subject and that “objective criteria are unsuitable for assessing quality” (p. 22). They refer to Eversmann’s (2004) findings on theatrical events, which define the subjective experience of a theatre performance as including “one’s personal involvement, perceptions, thoughts and emotions during the event” (Boerner and Renz, 2008, p. 22). Our research (discussed below) found that knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement are key elements of this subjective experience. We therefore propose that if a performing arts company can create a situation that maximizes positive experiences for the audience member with all four of these components, then that individual is likely both to feel and to judge the performing arts event as high quality.

The study was undertaken in partnership with three performing arts organizations based in Melbourne, Australia (Musica Viva, Melbourne Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre). These organizations selected the productions (five in total), which fell within the time frame of the research project. Focus groups were then conducted with audience members at live music concerts and theatrical works performed by the three organizations at three venues. This study does not address the differences between live music and theatre in terms of audience responses, but rather is concerned with the quality of “live-ness” experienced by audiences of both art forms.

Two types of focus group were conducted. The first was made up of company subscribers (hereinafter “subscribers”) recruited by the three arts organizations. These were voluntary participants who came forth in response to the organizations’ calls for expressions of interest. The second group of audience members had not previously attended a performance of that company (hereinafter “non-attenders”) and were members of the general public recruited by a research assistant. These participants were screened to ensure that they were over 18 years of age, had never previously been in the audience for the work of that company, and agreed to attend the performance and participate in the subsequent focus group interview. A total of five focus groups (made up of 27 individuals) were conducted using structured interview questions.

The aim of this approach was to reflect the experiences of people who would commonly choose to see such performances and people for whom it was a new experience. The two cohorts were generally consistent in their reflections on what they valued in a live performance. Therefore little distinction is made between them in the following discussion. However, we do indicate whether the respondent was a subscriber or a non-attender, because while the two cohorts reported seeking the same experiential factors, subscribers were more likely to report that they found these factors, whereas non-attenders more often reported that such factors were absent or were insufficient for them to deem the experience of significant value.

The focus group questions prompted the respondents to reflect on the nature of their experience as audience members and to consider a variety of elements that enhanced or detracted from that experience. The responses of subscribers and non-attenders suggest four key experiential strands, and these were common to both cohorts.

*Knowledge/learning:* Respondents cited the importance of information as part of the audience experience and its role in providing opportunities to learn.

*Quality measures:* Respondents discussed the importance of “quality” in meeting their expect-
ations in terms of achieving self-actualization and experiencing authenticity.

Risk: Respondents recognized a sense of risk as a key marker of their experience as performing arts audience members.

"Live-ness": Respondents noted that the experience was qualitatively different to the experience of being in the audience for the non-live (recorded) arts, noting in particular the nature of "live-ness" as a shared, communal audience experience.

The context and scope of the research are as follows. Of the five performances, two were music concerts. The first was a concert by a Melbourne-based piano trio called the Benauad Trio and the second was a concert by the touring Choir of Westminster Abbey. The Benauad Trio performed in a small, informal jazz bar, and the Choir performed at Hamer Hall, Melbourne’s largest concert hall. The other performances were theatre productions. The Malthouse Theatre produced The Pitch, Peter Houghton’s solo-performer comedy about a scriptwriter’s movie pitch to Hollywood executives, and The Tell-Tale Heart, Barry Kosky’s adaptation of the Edgar Allen Poe short story. The Melbourne Theatre Company produced the French comedy The Madwoman of Chaillot, starring the popular television actor Magda Szubanski, at the Playhouse Theatre.

The components discussed above – knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement – were reflected in the focus groups’ discussion of their experience as audience members at these performances.

Knowledge

Both subscribers and non-attenders discussed the role of knowledge and/or learning as a critical part of the audience experience. Respondents’ comments had both negative and positive connotations. The positive connotations of knowledge related to the notion of the audience experience as educative – prompting further thought and discussion.

When asked about the role of the audience, a respondent commented: “To be discriminating. . . . I can’t think of any way in which I can give something to it, except my attention or my appreciation, but I like to have something that I take away from it. That’s why you go, really – so that you can actually take some-thing that will hopefully make you think about your life in general.” (subscriber)

Other respondents stated: “It’s almost an education thing, just do it for exposure.” (non-attender) “I think certainly an audience’s [role] is to engage . . . . I like to know more about what I’m listening to or what I’m looking at.” (non-attender)

These comments suggest that audience engagement is, in part, a function of learning; the experience is significant if one can “expose” oneself to its educative message and “take something away from it,” something that develops one’s understanding of what is being listened to or watched. Such analysis underscores a point made by Kushner (2003), that audiences seek to maximize “utility” in aesthetic experiences (p. 120).

The connotation of “knowledge” as a negative experience was a theme for non-attenders, some of whom expressed discomfort with not being sufficiently “in the know” to value what they were seeing. In this conversation two non-attenders discuss the experience of watching a theatre piece:

Non-attender A: “I was amazed the audience [was] raptured at the end . . . . I thought, what for? . . . I heard some people, when . . . we were in the queue going in, talking about him, so he’s obviously renowned. Clearly, I missed that.”

Non-attender B: “It’s just that thing of everyone sitting down and . . . . that’s why I find live performance quite difficult. . . . When people started laughing . . . . it’s, like, are they in the know? . . . . Did they know the people, did they know stuff about the play? I mean, I don’t know anything about it . . . . I didn’t know he wrote plays.”

These responses suggest that there are hidden knowledges within the experience of viewing live performing arts that can challenge those not “in the know.”

These findings confirm Jacobs’s (2000) point that the experience of art can produce anxiety for audiences, particularly around the realization that “there is something in an arts performance that demands to be figured out” (p. 139).

The expectation of knowledge/learning experiences for both subscribers and non-attenders produced discussion about the importance of program notes in adding value to the audience.
experience. Respondents in a non-attendees’ group expressed disappointment with the program notes for a particular production: “We wanted to know more about [the performer] once they were up on stage.” One non-attender expressed interest in having more explanation provided for the audience: “I suppose there was a very . . . brief overview at the beginning and I think I might have liked a little bit more, I know [there was a written program] and I checked and kept going to that, but I think they need to engage more initially. [I didn’t] know what to expect, [so] just to have a little bit more input, maybe . . . a little bit more about what the piece was.”

This discussion suggests that providing information as an adjunct to the viewing or listening experience is important. Respondents expressed a desire to know more about what they were viewing and to be given information relevant to the performance as a part of the viewing experience. Brown (2004) argues that audiences are seeking more interactive experiences and that the more information provided to them, the better — though he acknowledges that it is unclear how best to provide this information (p. 13). Like Brown, Kawashima (2006) considers audience education a critical feature of audience development, and he goes further, exploring a range of management strategies such as “I taste Cultivation,” outreach programs and extended marketing activities to remove tangible and intangible barriers to attendance (p. 57).

Risk

Another theme that emerged in the focus groups was the notion of risk, in particular the idea that risk-taking is an integral part of the audience’s experience of the performing arts. The notion of risk was used by respondents to connote an experience that was out of their comfort zone. Two non-attendees at a music performance discussed how they felt about being in an intimate venue and sitting very close to the stage:

Non-attender A: “I think at first I didn’t like the fact I was sitting really near the front, so I was uncomfortable with the amount of noise . . . As it progressed I actually started to really like the fact that I was close to it and you could really see detail and what was going on and the facial expressions that I think further back you might have missed . . . So as I actually got more comfortable I actually sort of start[ed] engaging a lot more.”

Non-attender B: “I certainly sensed what V felt, feeling very exposed at the front, but it was [good] sitting close, seeing those facial expressions and the intensity of what they were doing.”

For these respondents, being “uncomfortable” and “exposed” were risk factors associated with attending a live performance. Both, however, made the point that their initial feelings of discomfort and unease dissipated during the course of the performance. Indeed, the very proximity that they initially feared helped to intensify their enjoyment of the experience: the risk paid off.

Another element of risk in the audience experience emerged in the respondents’ discussion of how watching a live performance differs from watching film or television drama. Here, one key theme for the non-attendees was an awareness that in live performance things might go wrong in front of an audience:

Non-attender A: “I mentioned the possibility of [the actor] falling off the stairs. I mean, you just don’t get that experience [watching film or television].”

Non-attender B: “No, because that kind of mistake would be edited out. I mean, you know . . . [things] can cock up when they’re on stage.”

A further type of risk was articulated by the non-attendees only, in their discussion of what constitutes value for money. Theatre was seen as a more risky “punt” than other forms of performing arts, in particular live music:

Non-attender A: “You pay $50 [for a theatre ticket] — that’s a big night out for me . . . If I’m outlaying a lot of money, I want a guaranteed good night, and if it’s a band, then . . . that’s going to be a guarantee, but generally I wouldn’t take a punt on it for that amount of money.”

Non-attender B: “But that’s what live performance or theatre is. It’s not free — it’s a gamble.”

The views of these respondents suggest that the high cost of theatre tickets delivers a sense of risk, and they express the risk in terms of value for money. Other respondents expressed the notion of risk in terms of the possibility of not connecting with or “understanding” the
work: “It’s such a double-edged thing with theatre, isn’t it, because it costs a lot of money to go and then you go and it’s all very highbrow and you don’t really understand it and you don’t really have a good night out anyway.” (non-attender)

Brown (2004) asserts that the audience member’s calculus of risk means that the higher the cost of the ticket, the less willingness to take risks with the unfamiliar: consumers are willing to “pay almost anything to guarantee a home run” (p. 2). Crealey (2003) agrees, and further argues that artistic risk is “more closely related to the audience member’s . . . perception of risk than to the potential for financial loss” (p. 28). The findings of this study confirm Crealey’s point that the perception of risk is a product of the consumer’s fear of “an unpleasant outcome” (p. 28). In this case, respondents expressed their perception of risk in terms of feeling uncomfortable or confused. Jacobs (2000) suggests that the perception of risk can be ameliorated for audiences by the experience of “communality” – that is, the co-presence in the audience of people with diverse backgrounds (p. 135). The present study also found evidence of what we call “collective engagement” as an explicit measure of value for respondents.

**Collective Engagement**

When asked what distinguished the experience of a live performance, respondents suggested that several kinds of communication affected the value of the performance for them as audience members. Taken together, these forms of interaction were significant in heightening the respondents’ enjoyment of the “liveliness” of the live performance. The respondents identified three kinds of interaction: (1) communication between performers and the audience, (2) communication from the audience to the performers, and (3) interaction between audience members.

In the first category, respondents often suggested that their sense of fulfilment was greater when the performers communicated their expectations of the audience – not necessarily verbally – throughout the performance. One respondent described his experience at a classical music concert: in response to the audience’s applause, the pianist turned to the audience, smiled and held up a finger to indicate that there was another movement and their applause had been premature. Far from breaking the respondent’s concentration or causing embarrassment, this interaction between performer and audience was clearly a source of joy – an indication of “humaneness” and one of the benefits of live performance.

In contrast, respondents who felt that what was expected of the audience was not clear, particularly when they found no encouragement from the performers, often reported disappointment with the live-performance experience. One non-attender explained why he preferred stand-up comedy and live music to theatre, partly as a result of the type of performer–audience interaction involved: “[In stand-up comedy and live music] there’s a lot of interaction and . . . the performer is trying to get . . . audience participation and feedback, and in theatre performance I don’t necessarily think that’s the case. I think it’s more like art on the wall in that it’s about how the audience perceived it without having really much interaction . . . you can’t get any information from the performer as to whether he wants people to laugh or he wants people to be silent, so I find that quite difficult, which may well be one of the main reasons why I don’t go and see a lot of live theatre.” Another respondent suggested that he would have been more engaged with the theatrical piece had there been more eye contact with the performers.

These responses suggest that the audience experience could be improved if the performers were to somehow acknowledge the audience’s involvement in and contribution to a production. For one respondent, performer–audience interaction was more satisfying when it was more intimate, albeit removed from the production itself: “One of the volunteers said that it was terrible how you see the actors in the costumes coming out [of the theatre] . . . I thought that was actually a nice thing about it . . . It is part of you and you are part of it.” (subscriber)

This sense that a performance “is part of you and you are part of it” was apparent in the second form of interaction found to heighten the audience experience: the feeling that audience behaviour actually contributes to the quality of a production. Respondents frequently described having perceived that, as a group,
they enhanced a performance through appropriate but generous applause, laughter or even silence. Speaking of a theatrical event, one respondent stated that "the silence of the audience and everybody sitting there watching helped to heighten the feeling in the room of suspense." (non-attender) In contrast, when respondents felt there was too little opportunity to give feedback to the performers, they experienced a sense of alienation: "Some of us . . . didn't feel like a part of the performance at all; we just felt like we had to sit and watch . . . and be quiet." (non-attender)

The third kind of interaction was arguably the most persistent in respondents' feedback on the quality of the audience experience. Audience-to-audience interaction has two aspects: (1) communication between individual audience members, and (2) the individual audience member's sense of belonging to a collective whole. The literature on collective authenticity and consumption provides insights on both of these subjects. Leigh, Peters and Shelton (2006), for instance, report that "authenticity appears to be based on a personal investment that is tied to one's identity and communicated to others. This personal investment is not only product based but also based on one's investment in the subculture of consumption. This effort includes devoting one's time and energy to learning, working, socializing, and communing with others around a branded product." (p. 491)

Some respondents found value in cultivating a shared interest in the particular art form during a performance: " . . . that way of being able to chat to the people beside you, even during the performance, but not during the piece obviously, is very much an important part of my enjoyment of the evening" (subscriber). For one respondent, communication was as fleeting as a smile shared with another audience member "to say this is great" before she resumed her concentration on the performance (non-attender). This engagement was perceived as one of the advantages of subscribing, as the respondents became familiar with the people who repeatedly occupied the seats beside them. In contrast, respondents who felt that there was no opportunity for communication - that they were expected to "sit there and be quiet" - reported less engagement with the experience.

The value of such communication is not necessarily restricted to interaction with other audience members. According to Leigh, Peters and Shelton (2006), "communicating these various activities to others in the subculture (i.e., storytelling) helps legitimize various behaviors as authentic" (p. 491). Respondents who said they would discuss the performance with family or friends afterwards were more likely to express pleasure with the performance than those who reported that they were unlikely to discuss it. However, it is difficult to discern whether lack of communication opportunities caused disengagement or disengagement dulled the desire to communicate regarding the performance.

Beyond one-on-one communication, respondents frequently suggested that simply being part of an audience was one of the attractions of the live performance: "You have a connection individually about how it is affecting you, and then sometimes you may be swept up with others." (subscriber) "It's a different experience to sitting down and flicking through the channels and going . . . I'll just watch this, because you're part of a thing." (non-attender)

The respondents' reported pleasure in being part of an audience supports Jacobs's (2000) finding that the presence of others in the concert hall and the ability to discuss the performance are significant factors in heightening the audience experience.

The benefits of attending a live performance influenced audience members' experiences beyond the event itself. For instance, respondents commented that attending a concert enhanced their enjoyment of listening to the music on CD: "You can actually go back to what you saw at the live performance and recreate that feeling, but you need to have had that opportunity to see it live, I think." (subscriber)

### Quality and the Authentic Experience

In response to the questions about what motivates attendance and what they liked most about the performances, the respondents described the quality of the performances explicitly. The music subscribers referred to the "world class" reputation of the performers, the "excellence" of the conductor, the "glorious and pure"
sound, the “exquisite” voices, the “broad” repertoire and the “stunning” performance of the choir; the non-attenders responded more on the basis of their personal reaction to the production qualities, describing the concert as “brilliant,” “fantastic,” and “absolutely beautiful” and commenting on the energy and intensity of the performers. Subscribers at a choral music concert noted the “hearing of individual lines and the interpretation” of the score, “the purity of timing” and “the lovely order” as factors contributing to their enjoyment of the performance. Among theatre audiences, both subscribers and non-attenders commented on production qualities, referring to the creative lighting design, the set design, the use of piano to enhance the dialogue, the script and content of the play, and the craft of the actor. Thus, respondents identified both the artistic authenticity of the performance and their own emotional perception associated with “reality” or “believability” as factors in their experience of quality. Artistic achievements that appeared to the audience to belong to that one performance were a frequently noted trait of artistic authenticity, and were perhaps the pay-off for the risk they had taken in attending. One subscriber alluded to the uniqueness of a particular performer’s interpretation or expression of the music: “There is a personality that emerges [from the organist].” (subscriber)

Conclusions

Audiences have shown that if their expectations with respect to knowledge or learning, risk-taking, authenticity and collective engagement are met, then they are highly likely to return to that arts organization (Radbourne, 2007). Given that audience loyalty and repeat attendance are measures of success used by funding agencies, and given that audience evaluation of quality is recognized in the literature (Boerner and Renz, 2008) as equivalent, in certain instances, to expert measurement of quality, then the present findings go some way towards validating audience experience as a measure of quality in the performing arts. Figure 1 shows traditional measures of quality and the measures used in the present research.

Both types of measure have an outcome of funding or monetary investment (government grant, box office, sponsorship, philanthropy).

A simple measurement scale applied to performing arts programming would serve performing arts companies more effectively than regular multiple surveys to analyze the audience experience. This scale would be known as the Arts Audience Experience Index. It would allow arts organizations to maximize four quality indicators derived from the most common audience needs and expectations: knowledge transfer or learning, risk management, authenticity and collective engagement. The Index could be either (a) implemented through a company checklist of action against each indicator, or (b) assessed using periodic focus group or survey data, whereby selected questions around the four indicators are presented for agreement or disagreement. The focus group probes more deeply into reflection and rationale behind answers, personalizing the experience but with prompting by other audience members. The survey provides an opportunity to quantify, across a larger group, levels of agreement with prepared statements. The Index is then evaluated using standard measures of attendance and loyalty to assess effectiveness.

F I G U R E 1  M E A S U R E S  O F  Q U A L I T Y

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional measures</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance numbers</td>
<td>= quality in the performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of performances</td>
<td>arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of new works</td>
<td>➔ government funding,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical reviews</td>
<td>sponsorship, philanthropy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of earned income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access for audiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed audience experience measure</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge/information transfer or learning</td>
<td>= audience engagement and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td>repeat attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity and performer interaction</td>
<td>(quality in the performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective engagement</td>
<td>arts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➔ increased box office,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>government funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We acknowledge the limitations of this qualitative study. Further research in this area could serve to develop the content analysis and codification of primary data. The findings are intended to be applied as a management tool for performing arts companies engaged in the measurement of quality. In this way we hope to contribute to the collective knowledge of policy-making bodies, funding agencies and performing arts companies regarding the contribution of the audience experience to the quality of a performance.

References

Les critères d’évaluation de la qualité dans le secteur des arts de la scène sont habituellement les critiques positives dans les médias, les prix ou les honneurs reçus, une hausse du taux de fréquentation, la notoriété du directeur, de la compagnie ou des principaux interprètes et les succès obtenus, comme l’obtention de commandites ou de subventions ou encore la participation à un festival. Les indicateurs quantitatifs de la qualité incluent souvent le nombre de spectateurs, le nombre d’abonnés, la fréquentation, le nombre de nouvelles productions et les revenus générés. Dans le contexte actuel, l’évaluation de la qualité dans le secteur des arts de la scène est un élément important pour les concepteurs des politiques publiques de même que pour les instances subventionnaires, les fondations et les commanditaires. Tous sont amenés à évaluer les demandes de soutien et, à cette fin, ont besoin d’outils de mesure pour apprécier les réalisations des organisations qu’ils financent, que ce soit au plan de la qualité, de l’excellence, de la réputation ou de l’accessibilité.

Par ailleurs, la littérature récente concernant les valeurs du public — quête d’authenticité et d’expérience personnelle — fournit suffisamment d’éléments pour effectuer une recherche empirique sur la possibilité de considérer l’expérience des publics comme une mesure de qualité pertinente pour le secteur des arts de la scène. En fait, la recherche prend appui sur cette hypothèse et, dans cette perspective, s’intéresse à quatre grandes questions :

1. Comment les publics décrivent-ils l’expérience associée à l’assistance à des spectacles?
2. Quelle est la relation entre l’engagement des publics et la qualité artistique?
3. Comment les organisations artistiques maximisent-elles l’expérience des publics?
4. Comment cet outil de mesure de la qualité peut-il être interprété dans les politiques et les subventions relatives aux arts de la scène?

Cette recherche avance qu’il est possible de déterminer la qualité d’une représentation ou d’une audition à partir de la définition de la qualité personnelle à chacun des membres d’un public et tirée de l’expérience vécue.

Sur le plan empirique, la recherche s’intéresse à trois organisations des arts de la scène établies à Melbourne (Australie). Toutes reçoivent un soutien financier de leur État ainsi que du gouvernement fédéral et, par conséquent, font l’objet d’une évaluation par ces instances. Plus particulièrement, les auteurs ont étudié cinq productions de ces trois organisations. Deux types de groupes de discussion ont été formés avec des membres du public de chacune de ces productions. Le premier groupe était composé d’abonnés et le second, de spectateurs n’ayant jamais auparavant assisté à un spectacle de l’organisation en question.

À partir des données primaires générées par ces groupes de discussion, la recherche a exploré les notions de qualité associées au risque assumé par le public et à l’expérience que celui-ci a vécue. Les résultats permettent de réévaluer le paradigme d’évaluation de la qualité. Ainsi, les auteurs proposent comme indicateurs de qualité les quatre éléments clés suivants de l’expérience du public : les apprentissages possibles, la gestion du risque, l’authenticité et l’interaction avec les interprètes ainsi que l’engagement collectif.

L’échelle de mesure proposée dans cette recherche, appelée Indice de l’expérience du public des arts, apparaît beaucoup plus simple à employer que les processus d’enquête habituels pour mesurer l’expérience des publics. Les auteurs proposent des moyens d’utiliser cet Indice.