

Why does the Midwest love orchestras so much?

Is it the Lutherans? The Europeans? The cold?

WP Analysis by [Andrew Van Dam](#) Staff writer|Follow October 7, 2022 at 8:09 a.m. EDT

Midwestern Airbnb hosts are [unusually likely](#) to use the word “orchestra” in their listings, according to our groundbreaking research into the mysteries of regional Airbnb promotion. But why?

Readers sent in a multitude of theories, starting with the most obvious: The Midwest teems with tremendous orchestras, the sort of world-renowned outfits that will draw out-of-town visitors to your Airbnb. Cincinnati reader Dana Harms reels them off.

“There are top-notch organizations in the Midwest: Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and the Minnesota Orchestra,” she wrote. “(I was surprised too, when I moved here!)”

Others pointed out that even smaller towns in the region tend to have robust symphonies and orchestras. And there’s data to back this up. Reader Stephen Spiewak, a senior digital content manager at ticket marketplace Vivid Seats, kindly ran the numbers on live events in 2022. Midwest states hosted 27 percent of [U.S. orchestra performances](#), even though they were home to only 19 percent of concerts overall.

Our own analysis of nonprofit IRS tax data yielded similar results. The Midwest doesn’t necessarily have more orchestras than the rest of the country, but it does seem to have bigger and more active ones. Led by the powerhouse orchestras listed by Ms. Harms, the region has more orchestra revenue and assets per capita than anywhere else.

Renée Gaarder, a Purdue University musicologist and historian who [studies](#) New Deal-era efforts to promote music, said the Midwest was quick to embrace a major federal campaign to establish orchestras and music-education programs. Her research shows cities and small towns that got orchestras back then are more likely to have orchestras or symphonies today.

“There was a lot of buy-in to the Federal Music Project,” said Gaarder, who has sung in a local choir for more than a decade. “What we’re seeing today could be a result of that push for live music and music consumption.”

But that raises an even bigger question: Why was the Midwest such fertile ground for classical music? Let’s take a look at your theories.

More Lutherans

The answer is Lutherans! We have a strong musical tradition in our churches, with singing by everyone throughout the services. And from the mid-1800s through the invention of radio, local music making was a key part of community life, with every hamlet having one or more municipal bands and performance venues for them.

— *Peter Schmidt, Lexington, Mass.*

Many readers reminded us of Lutheranism's deep classical music tradition, from the hymns written by Martin Luther himself to the compositions of noted Lutheran Johann Sebastian Bach.

Memphis-born Tesfa Wondemagegnehu conducts choir ensembles (and hosts team-building barbecues) at St. Olaf, a Lutheran college south of the Twin Cities with music programs so famous that multiple readers wrote to cite them for the region's classical-music compulsion. When he moved to Minnesota, Wondemagegnehu was floored by the funerals.

“Let me tell you, every time I'm inside of a funeral here in Minnesota and these folks open their mouths and sing in perfect harmony — four-parts, sometimes more — I'm like, ‘Where are you people from?’ It's extraordinary!”

Wondemagegnehu said.

It reminded him of the Black churches he grew up with. “If you put a bunch of Black folk in the South together, guess what? You'll hear the same harmony, too!” The Midwest is home to far more Lutherans than the rest of the country combined, according to our analysis of the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) (the 2020 version has not yet been released). You're six times more likely to run into a Lutheran in the Midwest than you are elsewhere.

And readers are right, there's a correlation there. Orchestras tend to have more income and assets in states and counties that are more Lutheran, according to IRS data.

But other factors correlate with Lutheranism as well.

More Germans and Scandinavians

Having grown up in northern Indiana, I can attest it has a strong German, Scandinavian and all-around Baltic-sea heritage. That heritage includes a love of community music, be it city bands or city orchestras — or better yet, both! Classical music overlaps with church music, waltzes, marches and oompa-pa music to be a bedrock positive element in a Mid-Western community.

— *Ann McNulty*

While many in classical music are working to push the art form beyond its European roots, the genre arrived in the United States as an import from the Old World. It makes sense, then, that it would be popular in the region with the highest concentration of immigrants from such Northern and Central European countries as Germany, Norway, Sweden, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Finland.

Indeed, we found states that have an abundance of people of Scandinavian ancestry to have a somewhat higher number of orchestras. States with higher German populations, on the other hand, tended to follow the broader Lutheran pattern: more revenue and assets for music, but not necessarily more orchestras.

Early European immigrants created institutions that still uphold their classical music traditions. One of them was, of course, Wondemagegnehu's St. Olaf College, [founded](#) by Norwegian immigrants in 1874. The college brought longtime American Public Media producer Vaughn Ormseth from Montana to Minnesota decades ago to sing in the choir. He never left the state.

Ormseth said he's drawn to Minnesota's community spirit — and to its music. Compared with other parts of the country, he said, the Midwest has a tradition of cooperating and investing in the common good.

"It goes back to the origins of the state, particularly the Scandinavians," Ormseth said. "There's this co-op tradition, which is unusual for America, which is so individualist."

Ormseth sees the community's civic engagement play out in support for public media. Local public-radio outfits, particularly Minnesota Public Radio and its parent organization American Public Media, produce some of the most popular classical-music programming the nation.

Longer, colder winters

We spend six months in cold that would make the rest of the country roll over and die. We like to spend those months doing nice things in the great indoors. Thus we have a surprisingly large per capita expanse of museums and orchestras and theaters.

— *Rachel Hiltzley, Minneapolis*

The wind will slice through you like a scalpel, thus limiting outdoor recreation options.

— *Lauren Holst, Iowa*

For six months of the year — especially during the three months of peak winter — the Midwest beats out the Northeast as the coldest and darkest part of the Lower 48 states where people actually live. (The Northeast has a few cold and dark corners in the northern reaches of New York and New England, but fewer folks live in them.)

The Midwest runs up the score with smaller cities in the frigid northern plains — think Fargo, N.D., or Duluth, Minn. — but when we looked at the 10 coldest and darkest cities of more than a million people, most of them were in the Midwest, too. And in the depths of winter, it gets even worse: The Midwest is home to five of the top six coldest, darkest cities during the three peak winter months — hello, Chicago and Detroit — with nearby Buffalo the lone outlier.

The Midwest is also home to all of the 10 coldest and darkest counties in the country, concentrated in Minnesota and North Dakota. Almost any way you slice it, the most miserable county by this measure is Lake of the Woods, a Minnesota county of about 3,800 people famous for its goofy Northwest Angle, a

stranded peninsula that marks the northernmost point of the contiguous United States.

The darker parts of the United States do tend to have more orchestras and orchestra per person, as do the colder parts. But it's hard to make too much of this. The variables we looked at tend to run in tandem. The most German and Scandinavian places tend to be the most Lutheran, which also tend to be the coldest and darkest. So, are we describing the ideal conditions for a classical music hotbed, or are we just describing the Midwest? Perhaps both!

What about conservatories?

Dedicated readers will recall that our research into [Airbnb listings](#) identified the most Midwestern words in the world. In a trend potentially related to the popularity of orchestras, we found that “conservatory” ranked as the third most Midwestern word, behind only “walleye” and “heartland.”

But after reading and classifying hundreds upon hundreds of Airbnb listings, we discovered that hosts use the word to describe three very different kinds of amenities.

A conservatory might be a music school. But it might be a sun room. And it is even more likely that your friendly Midwestern Airbnb host is referring to a nearby garden or park — especially a botanical garden with a glass hothouse. Midwestern hosts were about seven times as likely to mention this type of conservatory than hosts elsewhere in the country.

The fine folks at the American Public Gardens Association — the go-to trade group for botanical gardens, arboretums and the like — tell us that of the 11 U.S. members who use the word “conservatory” in their name, nine are in the Midwest. The others are in Tacoma, Wash., and San Francisco.

Interestingly, they also have a field in their membership database that flags member gardens with a conservatory, even if it's not part of their name. Those are 1.4 times more likely to be in the Midwest, adjusting for population. That sounds impressive until you realize that, adjusted for population, gardens that do use the word “conservatory” in their name are a full 17 times more likely to be in the Midwest!

All of which is to say that Midwesterners are slightly more likely to have conservatories than other Americans, but far more likely to call them conservatories. They just love the word! But it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with their impressive and unrelated love of classical music.