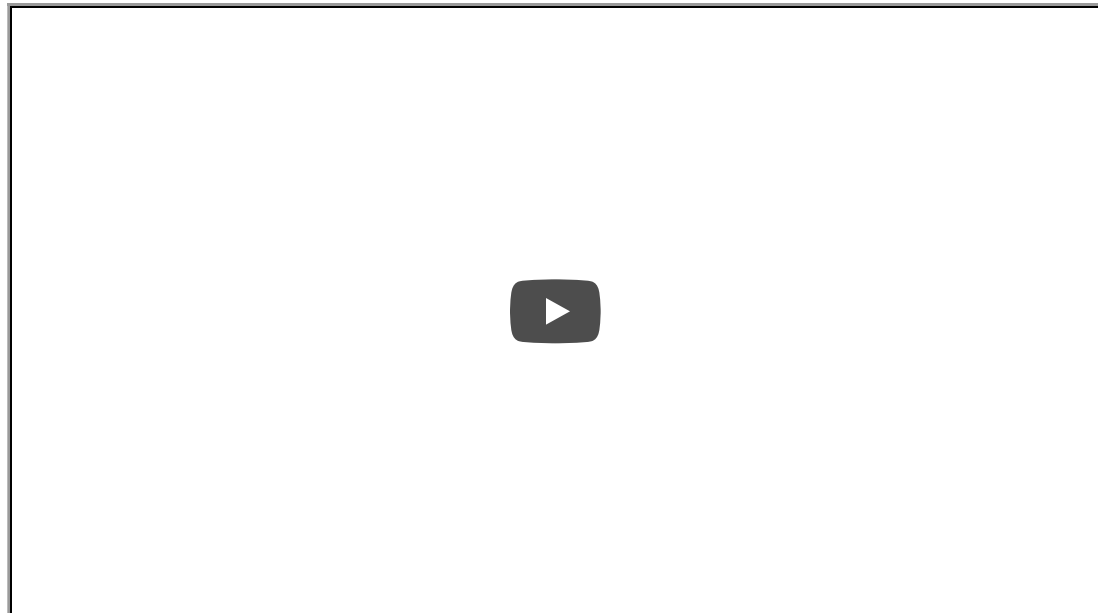


So, what exactly does “sensory friendly” mean and why is it so important? Performances that are dubbed sensory friendly refer to the conditions that make a show more agreeable and comfortable for all people, especially those who are on the autism spectrum or who have other social, learning and sensory disabilities. Among other things, this means sound and lighting, venue rules and seating arrangements are modified in such a way that the show is safe and enjoyable for everyone. Zanes was immediately struck by how powerful and unifying his first sensory friendly show was and he’s been devoted to the concept ever since.

“I remember that the first experience really blew my mind because I’ve never seen that type of inclusion and accessibility before, but what was interesting about it was that I just did my typical show,” says Zanes. “The work was really the venue because they did a little bit of work to make the conditions more agreeable for a larger community and more folks were able to come to the show. There was no question in my mind that that was the future of family performances. It was absolutely clear that there is no reason that [my shows] would be anything but that moving forward.”

Eliaza, who performs onstage alongside Zanes, talked in depth about why sensory friendly shows are so vital and why there should be more of them. “We’ve had experiences where there have been families with special-needs children and it’s a challenge for them because sometimes these families are afraid to go into public spaces because of the judgement, the stigma, all these things that come along with the unpredictable behaviors of their child,” says Eliaza. “So, what we were finding was a lot of the families are split where mom might be doing something with this child who is neurotypical and dad is taking the other child to do other sorts of activities, but the families aren’t coming together and having these social experiences together.”



Zanes also makes clear that these shows aren’t just for those with special needs. These are shows that are designed to be enjoyed by anyone and everyone, but he says that the term “sensory friendly” is often misinterpreted. “Because it’s early days in this movement, a lot of the families with what we would call neurotypical kids don’t recognize that they’re still included in this thing,” says Zanes. “It’s just a way of opening the door wider or maybe even a clearer analogy would be that just because a show and a venue is wheelchair accessible doesn’t mean that the show is only for people in wheelchairs.”

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[Gold Connections](#)

[\(/articles/UqGmuotY5CE.html\)](/articles/UqGmuotY5CE.html)

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Eliaza speaks to the tangible benefits of these shows, even for those without special needs. “We’ve been blessed to hear from a lot of families after the shows who might not have known much about what sensory friendly was and they brought their, for lack of a better term, ‘neurotypical’ families, and they expressed how incredible, to the point where they were moved to tears, it was to be in a shared space with neighbors that they might not have met and to have this joyous moment with their children,” says Eliaza.

The Kennedy Center has been leading the sensory friendly charge for the last several years as their [2013 guidebook](http://education.kennedy-center.org/education/accessibility/lead/SensoryGuidebook.pdf) (<http://education.kennedy-center.org/education/accessibility/lead/SensoryGuidebook.pdf>) has become the movement’s go-to, all-encompassing online resource. Zanes and Eliaza’s latest project, the comic folk opera *Night Train 57* became the first sensory friendly album to be commissioned by the Kennedy Center and it’s available now. Zanes describes the organization’s Director of VSA and Accessibility, Betty Siegel, as “the [Bob Dylan](https://www.pastemagazine.com/tag/Bob+Dylan) (<https://www.pastemagazine.com/tag/Bob+Dylan>) of sensory friendly” and Zanes and Eliaza have lauded the center as being a valuable resource when they were brand new to the movement. The center helped them educate venues and promoters about what modifications needed to be made in order for them to put on sensory friendly shows and according to Zanes, they were quick to get onboard.

“We’ve never had a presenter say no,” says Zanes. “Once they get the information and they realize how easy and straightforward it is, everybody says yes. If we’re talking about sensory friendly and it doesn’t sound like it’s tons of fun, we’ve done something wrong in communicating it because it’s an incredible atmosphere.”

Eliaza recalls one particularly moving experience where a nonverbal child was moved by one of the duo’s performances. “We had a child who was wheelchair bound and we talked to her mother after the show and the child was just so cheerful,” says Eliaza. “She was nonverbal, but very excited. She was crying and the mother told us how this was her first [live performance](https://www.pastemagazine.com/tag/live+performance) (<https://www.pastemagazine.com/tag/live+performance>). I think the child was about 12 or 13. That really hits your heart.”






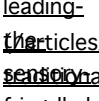

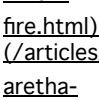


Zanes emphasizes that he doesn’t just want shows to be accessible to people with certain special needs. He wants to see sensory friendly become the new norm to make sure that as many people can be included as possible. One of the reasons that Zanes and Eliaza’s effort is so worthwhile and inspiring is that music and art both are crucial in the development of young children, so the more children that are exposed to the arts, the better.

“Whether or not the funding for music is cut in schools, what we get from our view, is this constant reminder of how deeply music affects people and how much music is a part of the human experience,” says Zanes. “Music is a way of communicating,” adds Eliaza. “Where words fail, music speaks. Music helps us learn. Music helps us stay grounded. Music helps us to connect. Music helps us to make sense of the world and it helps us express ourselves.”

Their live show, Night Train 57, premiered in Fall 2017 and will be touring North America for the next several years. Zanes and Eliaza perform onstage as a trio with Mexican percussionist and comic actress Yuriana Sobrino. The album, Night Train 57, is available for purchase and on streaming platforms.

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