

Music on screen – reflections on livestreamed concerts

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“You need to pivot,” they said. “Embrace the new normal; that’s how life is going to be from now on”. A familiar trope directed towards artists from governments around the globe, what is more sinister may be what is left unsaid. Perhaps they imply the following: we don’t value your craft, we don’t have the time or headspace to help you, and you’re on your own. While that may be a slightly harsh way to interpret the struggling legislations of the world when faced with the continuing onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may not be that far off from the truth. Despite the generous reliefs granted to other entertainment industry sectors, the lack of parliamentary support for nightclubs in Britain (Mizierska & Rigg, 2021) is all but proof of the lack of support from the powers that be.

As a musician with roots in session work, COVID-19 has destroyed my former career. In particularly conservative countries with authorities that choose to err on the side of caution, practically everything else is allowed to happen before live music. I have witnessed firsthand the breakdown of former colleagues who are too deeply entrenched into the persona of a gigging musician. Most of them have known only this lifestyle and career for decades. As a result, many of those waiting for the return of music have no other income generation alternative besides low-paying odd jobs. This fact exists in parallel to the discovery made by Mizierska and Rigg (2021) of how many night-scene professionals went through the “five stages of grief, beginning with denial, namely insisting that the situation was not serious and would not last for long” (Mizierska & Rigg, 2021, p. 77). Other musicians have pivoted away from not only performing but also music completely. Many cite money as a reason, but further conversation and commiseration reveal their loss of faith in the government. Ironically, this is the very government that should promise a more prosperous, enriching life. Simply put, the poor handling by legislation has caused the disillusionment of many artists with unlimited potential. This is undoubtedly an incredible pity.

Those who continue to struggle have turned to one of the only other possibilities to keep the music alive: livestreaming. Musicians converted bedrooms and living spaces into camera-friendly areas with drapes, lights, and other peripherals. Using their craft to wage war on the pandemic in the only way they knew how to, songbirds crooned, guitarists shredded, and, indeed, everybody poured out their hearts and souls. Though novel and a refreshing change from the coerced silence of the evening streets, these endeavours would quickly find themselves facing unprecedented obstacles and creating a host of new issues for consideration.

The importance of ritual – why music is important

Human beings are creatures that need a routine to function. We often hear that one feels better (psychologically or physically) after morning coffee or a good 7am yoga session. Even something as simple as making one’s bed after waking up already sets the tone for the rest of the day. Perhaps this activity also links to the oft-used phrase to “wake up on the right side of the bed”.

Vandenberg, Berghman, and Schaap (2020) reference the vital role of the genre of music associated with raves to unify people. They state that the ritual of attending a concert together “can establish and ratify membership symbols, foster standards of group morality, and be conducive of individual emotional energy or confidence” (Vandenberg, Berghman, & Schaap, 2020, p. S143). Though their study concerns electronic music, it can be easily extrapolated

that all forms of music fulfil a habit-setting function in society. However, the authors posit that the “liveness’ of livestreamed concerts is defined in terms of time, rather than space” (Vandenberg et al., 2020, p. S144). Therefore, we must expect virtual concerts’ ritualistic power to pale compared to yesteryear’s raves. It is, therefore, no surprise to find more disorientation in an overworked population with much fewer avenues for them to enact their habitual destressing.

Physical and social presence

A study conducted by Onderdijk et al. (2021) examines the implications of livestreamed concerts on how much engagement is elicited from an audience. Manipulating different factors, the authors drew salient observations and conclusions that can aid in executing more holistic livestreams in the future, pandemic or not.

3 concerts were conducted to investigate 3 different aspects of audience participation. The first had audiences able to vote for songs – essentially song requests. This experiment concerned agency. The second juxtaposed participants watching the livestream with virtual reality headsets with those viewing on a normal YouTube livestream. This one sought the implications of physical presence. The final experiment compared attendance through Zoom with watching through, once again, a normal YouTube livestream; it investigated social connectedness connotations.

Regarding agency, Onderdijk et al. (2021) found that providing the participants with an option to vote had no relation with how much agency they felt. Instead, “social connection with the artist was predicted by whether their preferred song was played, regardless of their ability to vote” (Onderdijk et al., 2021, p.15). This observation is especially noteworthy because we can extrapolate that an audience cannot be, in a sense, manipulated into feeling engagement. Instead, what they feel is organic because art is, itself, organic. This acknowledgement of how agency concerns only the individual’s opinions is worth keeping in mind as we examine the results of the other two experiments.

In the second and third experiments, Onderdijk et al. (2021) found that “virtual reality promoted feelings of physical presence, while Zoom promoted feelings of social presence” (Onderdijk et al., 2021, p. 22). Indeed, virtual reality showed a significant advantage over viewing a two-dimensional video in physically connecting the audience to the performance. This edge is evident because the viewer can “move around” the room instead of being forced to be static. Likewise, Zoom proved superior in connecting people socially compared to a simple (albeit live) YouTube comments section. This is because Zoom allows the audience to see each other and communicate in real-time, augmenting the impression of being in each others’ presence.

Despite these experiments identifying the positives of livestreaming, one also sees its numerous shortfalls. For example, though Zoom fosters social engagement, the audience cannot be too large, or one will simply see a sea of faces on the computer monitor. Also, the superiority of physically being in a room with a live performance is glaringly apparent compared to our budding virtual reality capabilities. These data will help musicians better leverage livestreams to better society. However, live concerts must be reinstated as soon as physically possible to minimize damage to our collective consciousness.

Social responsibility and artistic engagement

Margolies and Strub (2021) present “musical, poetical, and organizational responses to [the] coronavirus”, “[providing] opportunities for examining a rich, an expansive, and an emergent musicultural discourse” (Margolies & Strub, 2021, p. 2). They examine two things: firstly, how livestreamed Mexican regional music can be the catalyst for social participation and secondly, the composition of original verses by traditional performers making commentaries on the

COVID-19 pandemic (Margolies & Strub, 2021). This article thus concerns the more ethereal aspects of art and how it affects the underlying fibre of civilization.

Most notably, the authors found that “at a moment when governments still struggled to effectively respond to the coronavirus outbreak, community content creators such as Vera put forth solutions to a problem while also establishing a new normative connection between social responsibility and artistic engagement” (Margolies & Strub, 2021, p. 5). Therefore, as seen from how forward-looking artists and art can be, one can already make a strong case for their continued support by official channels. In fact, “in the COVID virtual huapangos, the musicians in many ways positioned their music making as a service to a community in crisis, explicitly framing their performances as expressions of resilience in the shadow of the coronavirus” (Margolies & Strub, 2021, p. 5).

Also, the compositional aspect that benefits the world cannot be understated. To put it succinctly, the performers’ “new verses encouraged strategies for community preservation, sought to sooth uncertainty and fear with familiar repertory, and entertained listeners with humor in the face of isolation and nascent death” (Margolies & Strub, 2021, p. 12). Composers’ potential to allay fears is enormous and cannot be ignored. Artists are already able to influence their audience. Still, composers take it a step further because of their highly honed ability to craft music. Considering specifications such as lyric writing and form manipulation, composers have the social responsibility to conciliate the populace.

Though apparent in the Mexican regional music context, one finds that artists throughout the entire world tend to seek to heal dissent with their music. Therefore, the observations gleaned from this article can apply to musicians in general. Even cover musicians pick songs as homages to a tragedy or tunes to honour a person. These proliferations of positive energy and values in the ever-connected world self-perpetuate. With global problems still rampant, there can never be enough good in the world.

Takeaways for the future

Things will never be the same if we do not ensure they are. Certainly, for some things, that is not a bad thing. Many factors that impact music-making were catalyzed into being by the pandemic, which should be embraced. For example, e-learning has evolved to such an extent that one can find an extremely comparable education entirely online in certain aspects of music.

Moreover, concepts found through studies conducted during and because of the pandemic are valuable and cannot be discounted. For one, reinforcing artists’ and composers’ collective power to enact social justice is paramount. Also, valuable insights into app usage such as virtual reality and Zoom can benefit many facets of society. These include inclusivity for the differently-abled who may not physically attend an event or allowing a long-distance fan to experience a musician’s concert.

And yet, live music cannot be left in the annals of history. Its essentiality is crucial to developing a healthy, productive society with well-balanced lifestyles (Mizierska & Rigg, 2021). Furthermore, the visceral sensation of connecting with a myriad of souls in the same physical and mental space has no substitute. Let us all ruminate on how music has shaped us into who we are and pledge to bring live music back post-haste.

References

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