

The Rise of New Musical Expressions in the 2020 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article provides new context to the history of music, by exploring some key examples of how the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted music making and planning in 2020, in the early stages of the so-called ‘lockdown’ which included the cancellation of all public events and performances.

In response to this, professional ensembles, individuals and producers began to find solutions to sustain contemporary performance and entertainment. We have classified the new artistic concepts that emerged as ‘The Lockdown Performance Movement’, and include ‘The Italian Balcony Performance’, ‘The Music Performance Collage’, ‘Social Distance Ensembles’ and ‘Drive-in Concerts’. These performances had precedent but not in the way we have begun to see them during the pandemic. Taking England as a geographical context, and including influences from around the world that were seen in England, we analyse these examples, and also take the Indian Arts festival producer, Milap, as a case study, and explore the response of the music and arts industry in general in England. This provides a context and introduction to help predict how music-making and the industry as a whole might change in the future, in what is being described as the ‘new normal’ or ‘post-COVID’ world.

1. Introduction

The 2020 lockdown brought a lot of uncertainty amongst arts producers, venues and artists. Although the underlying mood seemed to be that this was a temporary situation and life would very soon return to normal, the scenario changed drastically as innumerable concerts were cancelled throughout the world, interrupting the activities of musicians and the performance industry. From small music venues to festivals and symphonic orchestras, there was a realisation that the pandemic and its impact on society would have a far-reaching and permanent effect on the music industry.

As festivals and performances began to be cancelled or postponed (BBC News, 2020a), more and more artists began sharing content online — informal concerts on twitter feeds or instagram live, facebook live concerts and other archive performances. This provoked considerations on how to bring work that has been offline into a new context, dependent on digital tools and a completely new audience behaviour. Furthermore, it generated new music aesthetics, marking the beginning of the decade with iconic lockdown manifestations.

Concerning the economical side of the industry, governments and institutions offered financial help to musicians during the months of quarantine, however, measures like this were exceptional; they have been applied in a few countries and have not always been successful (Savage, 2020a). Still, aside from capital reasons, performance also happens for promotion or for the sole sake of performing. Thus, different alternatives to continue

providing entertainment to society have been sought, mainly through streaming and other digital means.

Following the above considerations, here we examine the following points:

- The ‘Lockdown Performance Movement’ or the music performance manifestations that achieved high visibility throughout the world-wide lockdown.
- The significance of digital tools and skills for online performance and the importance of social media during the lockdown.
- A case study to examine how one festival producer responded to the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on Indian music performance.
- How producers and musicians are beginning to recover and plan for the future beyond the lockdown.

2. The Lockdown Performance Movement

The early stages of the lockdown seemed to trigger different responses in musicians. Coming from their perspective, some performances were career focused — perhaps coming from a need to maintain public profile, income and career development, as well as to fulfil the musician’s inherent desire to perform to an audience. On the other hand, the performance movements were also characterised by societal needs too, and were aimed at addressing the sociological impact on a society with no active musical performances, or to positively influence health and wellbeing, particularly during the most uncertain periods in the pandemic.

We characterise the ‘Lockdown Performance Movement’ as the different aesthetic manifestations of music which set trends throughout the world and are set to leave their footprints in the history of art. These manifestations were strongly characterised by their unique tendencies, style and meaning. Different sub-acts that must be considered are:

1. The Italian Balcony Performance
2. The Music Performance Collage
3. Social Distance Ensembles
4. The Drive-in Concerts

The first act concerns footage of musicians in Italy playing or singing music on their balconies while in lockdown (Hall, 2020). This manifestation began in March and spread throughout different regions, expanding to other countries and becoming popular in social media. This concept expands to all musical acts that happened in the streets, including, for instance, the weekly ‘Clap for Carers’ in the UK. This was designed to appreciate the NHS and care staff during the first weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, and were often enhanced with musical acts and collaboration on streets around the country (Speare-Cole, 2020).

For musical groups (i.e. musical bands, choirs and orchestra ensembles), one solution for continuing work was found by recording remotely and sharing the files with a video editor, who could synchronise the music and create original material to be shared online. This act resulted in countless performances in a type of ‘collage’, a video edition that synchronised

individual remote acts. As there is not yet a clear terminology to describe the style of this edition, we here suggest the term ‘Music Performance Collage’.

Certainly Music Performance Collage was already happening before the lockdown, however, there were no large ensembles doing this and innumerable manifestations of this art form came only through the pandemic event. We can observe several examples of ‘lockdown orchestras’, such as the BBC Lockdown Orchestra (Savage, 2020c), the Socially Distant Orchestra, the Arctic Philharmonic, and the same type of manifestations appeared from choirs, such as the Couch Choir and the Quarantine Choir. A Classic FM article from May shows 39 examples of large ensembles (Asprou, 2020).

Our third classification proposes the ‘social distance ensemble’ scenario. As another solution for music collaboration, musicians who could meet in physical spaces but had to be in accordance with social distancing guidelines could still perform together by keeping a certain distance (in the UK for instance, that would be 2 metres). Small groups of musicians began with this form of manifestation (BBC News, 2020b) and were soon followed by larger ensembles, such as the Berlin Philharmonic (Tommasini, 2020). In popular music, many artists have done the same and streamed live shows (Hunter-Tilney, 2020).

Finally, while the above suggested social distance between group members and video recording or streaming, a similar idea was to do the same and include a socially distancing audience. This was made possible with ‘drive-in concerts’, which happened initially in Norway, Denmark, Lithuania and US (Iqbal, 2020).

3. Looking for Other Digital Music Contexts

Outside of the trending lockdown performances mentioned before, musicians have also explored other digital routes. However, for those who were not familiarised with digital performance, engaging with new tools was certainly a challenge. Before the lockdown, those who performed at local venues (e.g. bars, pubs, small events) had their audience in physical contexts. Going digital meant they had to attract this same audience to their media channels, or find new audiences. Previously, the local scene had offered an advantage for some musicians, since the online world has a wide-range of performance musicians with well-established audiences and social media followers, which means more competition in terms of visibility.

To a certain extent, musicians with music technology skills and home-studios were advantageous. Whereas a great part of the world population in this decade has access to computers and mobile phones with recording and streaming capabilities, the standard quality of inbuilt microphones and cameras are not high quality. Video and audio quality is crucial to create an ambience where the audience can engage virtually and enjoy the experience. It is very likely that many musicians planning to go digital during quarantine have invested in new performance equipment.

Besides the technology, there are two more considerations for musicians going digital. The first is whether the act will be live or recorded. The second consideration is whether a

musician will play solo or within a group. For several reasons, such as finding the audience or having an efficient digital setup, the option of going live is more ambitious. Playing within a group is also a greater challenge, as current broadband latency issues do not allow real-time synchronisation.

While we walk towards 5G and faster connectivity, online interaction between musicians is becoming more apparent. The research field of Networked Music Performance (NMP) and platforms for collaborative performance such as eJamming and Sofa Session are likely to become more popular (Mills, 2019). In 3D virtual worlds, live performance is still in early-stages but has been attracting more attention. For instance, live DJ performances through Fortnite have attracted audiences of millions (Stephen, 2019; Stuart, 2020).

Finally, unconventional social media platforms seem to have attracted more musicians during the lockdown. Whereas YouTube and Facebook have been the major platforms for music streaming and networking, Instagram, which initially was popular with the visual arts such as photography, has gained power in the music market. This has been facilitated by the introduction of the live feature in 2016 and the progress with video sharing capabilities, such as allowing longer videos, introduced in 2018 through IGTV (Khaimova, 2019). In the 2020 lockdown, we can presume that the number of musicians joining the platform has increased.

4. The Festival Producer: A case study

Milap is a Liverpool based international Indian arts organisation that produces festivals, performances and recordings, as well as supporting a career pathway for artists. Its work in the music sector has included an annual festival programme and monthly concerts in Liverpool since 1985, and in Greater Manchester and London since the early 2000s (Milapfest, n.d.). At the start of March, Milap's calendar for 2020 included a new festival concept 'Music for the Mind & Soul', a series of performances at London's Southbank Centre, (all between April and July) and a major new 12-day multi-venue festival in Liverpool in November. Here we present the reaction of Milap from the perspective of its artistic director, Alok Nayak — co-author.

The major representative body and major funder for Milap is Arts Council England, who in March 2020 provided an early set of responses, by way of leading arts organisations through the crisis. Their first response was to support individual artists and independent cultural organisations (Henley, 2020).

For Milap, with little opportunity to apply for funding immediately, stabilisation and response came in the form of looking for online activities and changing its focus to produce online performances and recordings, and moving its resources to what could happen during lockdown and most people staying at home.

Many theatres began to close (Bakare, 2020) and when festivals were cancelled due to rules on social distancing and bans on mass gatherings, musicians throughout the world began performing online from home (Savage, 2020b). It seemed like the only possible response for Milap was to try to find new solutions to the crisis. The Lockdown Performance Movement

suggested above did not seem to find their way into the Indian music tradition — in a largely solo tradition, with duets or mini ensembles, improvised music and more formal settings for performances, Indian music could not move outdoors, to informal spaces or to collaborative digital platforms. At that time though, artists with social media platforms began to put more content online in the form of solo performances or talks, in the form of Facebook and Instagram Live or recorded performances ‘at home’. These are intimate, informal and interactive, and rather different to what Indian audiences expected. Simultaneously, Milap began to explore ways in which it could produce content online, which would meet their required standards of production and presentation.

First, Milap chose to collaborate with other promoters and studios, and the first set of Milap concerts were with a partner studio in Kolkata, India, which produced Milap concerts for broadcast on YouTube and Facebook. Second, Milap began to focus more on content which framed the music, artists and the content that was to be produced, including interviews, information and ideas for audiences to read, listen or watch, about Indian music. Third, a continuous framing and re-framing of two phases in Milap’s response were based on an assumption that performances had to remain online, and in which there would be a ‘new normal’ heavily influenced by the financial support and response of the arts sector as a whole (Henley, 2020b).

All of Milap’s regular programme of work, as of June 2020, remains cancelled or postponed, and there is a constantly changing cycle of performances, online content and interactive sessions, both by Milap individually and in collaboration with other presenters and producers. It has resulted in a developing plan which has had a fundamental impact on the future of the organisation, and a realignment of its goals — as a digital content producer, live music producer, artist manager and representative and as an education or professional development organisation. All of these aspects of its work, so intimately dependent on physical meetings, are fundamentally affected by social distancing rules and the suspension of work in the arts and culture industry.

Milap’s experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised a number of important questions and considerations that can be applied to festivals or music producers of any genre and size:

- There is a dependency on venues, particularly larger ones, which means that in any crisis, and even in normal circumstances, they cannot be in control of their own fate or decision making process.
- Producers and promoters, without a home venue or public space of their own, must depend entirely on partners and venues, and therefore during the pandemic, there has been a reach towards more online collaborations and performances.
- What is the role of a producer or promoter, when artists are going directly to audiences from their own social media feed? In the live performance scenario, producers work on curation, presentation, production and content, while in the current climate, there is no room for these aspects of performance. During the early weeks of

the lockdown in the UK and India, Milap found a large number of performances on social media, and questioned its own role in the presentation of performances.

In summary, it has found its role and business plan changing and evolving all the time, from an emphasis on survival, to creativity in a crisis, from competition to collaboration and from an emphasis on short-term outlooks for 2020 only, to a longer 10 year response to the time beyond the pandemic.

5. Recovery and What's Next

During May and June 2020, producers and musicians began to predict what 'the new normal' might be, and how we return to theatres and concert halls in the future. It began with discussions in the blogs of Arts Council England, in comments from representative bodies like UK Music (Radcliffe, 2020) and from the observation of the opening up of the leisure and tourism industry. A 'Government Roadmap' to open UK arts venues was published to help guide the music and other arts industries towards reopening, but it was also criticised for not providing enough detail and future planning (Wiegand, 2020).

The main emphasis was on how the live music industry would survive while the virus was still in circulation, and would therefore require social distancing rules to remain in place, and protection for staff and promoters in the industry. In addition, it was difficult to accurately predict audience trends. With the onset of the pandemic, artists and audiences had a much more direct relationship, via social media and platforms like TikTok which were changing the way people interacted with celebrities. Concerts and online performances were constantly adapting, and may have changed forever.

Milap, for instance, is considering a considerable change to its business plan and producing much more content online, while changing its office and staff structure too. Many businesses, without the security of public funding support, are contemplating closure or serious downsizing.

Whatever comes to pass, it has generally been agreed that financial stimulus from the government is required to stimulate the sector, and any recovery will likely require major intervention or a change in the behaviour of producers, artists and audiences (Crowcroft 2020).

Some artists and producers, in Milap for instance, are considering entirely new formats for their work, to cater to an audience that may not attend live performances like they did before, but, at the same time do not have the same appetite for online video or audio performances.

Milap's research for its own recovery and post-COVID world include the following options:

1. Socially distanced, smaller scale performances (Hamer, 2020).
2. Online production of all content.
3. Performances in unusual, outdoor and open spaces.
4. Change in repertoire.
5. Changes in the revenue making model.

While it is impossible to predict how the sector might respond as a whole, some clues from leadership organisations like Arts Council England and UK Music, coupled with the evidence of where emergency funding measures and funds have been allocated, suggest that artists, creativity and imaginative responses which focus on sustainability, will be prioritised.

6. Conclusion

The lockdown and the coronavirus pandemic have pushed the music industry and its artists into a crisis that has brought about major innovations in performance, presentation and technology. Responses appear to have been instinctive and rooted in a need to connect to people and communities. Social distancing, a key characteristic of the pandemic, therefore, is being challenged by artists and producers, as they look to overcome the challenge with innovation. Furthermore, the documentation of innovative performance which we have portrayed as the Lockdown Performance Movement have left a significant footprint in history which must be acknowledged.

We have also found that three distinct phases have characterised the crisis and their response of the music sector: first, the response to the crisis, as musicians continued to share performances and teaching online to keep their audiences engaged; second, organisations and producers began to map a route out of the crisis, and predict a future beyond the pandemic; and finally, we appear to have entered the third phase, in which the sector makes tentative steps to reopen.

Already it is clear that changes are required for music to survive the continued lockdown, and for us to see that the emphasis on digital platforms is sustained. For instance, the pandemic has attracted investments to video conferencing technology and faster connectivity (i.e. 5G) is being introduced. With less latency issues and closer real-time interaction, platforms for virtual rehearsing, online jamming and live performance will be improved in the near-future.

Even today, it seems like innovations of the past few months, from around the creative industries and social life in general, have influenced the way in which music is shaped in the future. The ‘new normal’ will contain both elements of past traditions, and new innovations which have been invented very recently, and both will likely combine to create a very new scenario in the future.

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