

COVID-19 and Participatory Music-Making

Subjects: Music

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Participatory music-making is any music-making activity in which individuals engage for the sake of the activity itself. It can be contrasted with presentational music-making, which takes the production of a performance or recording for consumption by an audience as a principal objective. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participatory musicians adopted a variety of technological means by which to make music together online. While virtual activities allowed these individuals to sustain their communities and grow as musicians, they did not satisfy all the needs met by in-person music-making. Additionally, online music-making increased access for some but posed barriers to access for others. Virtual participatory music-making remains relevant following the relaxation of pandemic restrictions, and it will likely grow in significance as communications technologies and internet access improve.

Keywords: online music-making ; virtual music-making ; participatory performance ; Irish traditional music ; old-time music ; shape-note singing ; congregational singing ; community singing

Introduction

Social distancing measures that were mandated or voluntarily adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably impacted the activities of all musicians, especially those who perform for live audiences and those who gather in groups to make music. Early in the pandemic, music ensembles made headlines following several “superspreader events” that took place at choir rehearsals ^{[1][2]}. The risk undertaken by singers was scrutinized most closely, given their reliance on breath for sound production and their habit of performing in close proximity to one another using resonant indoor spaces ^{[3][4]}. Emphasis was placed on the dispersal of aerosols and droplets, which also accompanies sound production in wind instruments ^{[5][6]}. While various in-person mitigation strategies were proposed ^{[7][8]}, most choral ensembles ultimately adopted virtual approaches to rehearsing and performing ^[9]. Other collaborative and performing musicians likewise turned to the internet as the most viable means of sustaining their practices. This entry will consider the full range of pandemic impacts on participatory musicians in particular, focusing on their uses of the internet to play and sing together.

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