

# The COVID-19 Pandemic & the Future of Ethnomusicology



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It has been months since most of the world realized the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the privileged ones—who have the financial sources to maintain their lives without working outside—took shelter in their homes. With every passing day, we have a better understanding that what we are going through is not a short-term disaster, during which we will stay in our homes for a while and then go back to “normal.” First and foremost, this worldwide

phenomenon, with a sense of uncertainty surrounding the “defeat” of the virus, brings forth a unique dimension to our experience. As we feel closer to death and loss, we are also witnessing the deterioration of all the institutions, health systems being the most important, that we assume to be working along with the immutable nature of social inequalities “in sickness and in health.” Furthermore, the already existing economic crisis will only deepen with unforeseeable consequences that increase worries about the future, even for those in the most privileged positions. We must also face the truth that the emergence of this pandemic cannot be considered independently from the current global climate crisis. We need to apprehend that our relationship with nature may pave the way for similar pandemics in the following years, perhaps leading to an age of viruses or other disasters. Thus, we cannot assume the current circumstance developed along with COVID-19 is an exception.

Due to all these reasons, when the pandemic finally ends, we can only imagine “going back home” if we understand that “home is a place where you have never been,” as poetically described by Ursula Le Guin in *The Dispossessed* (1994, 70). Even for those who, so far, have been safe and sound, the impact of this reality on daily life is indisputable. The pandemic has changed social relationships, compelling us to discover new forms and means of interaction and socialization. Family members and friends are socializing over Zoom meetings, neighbors are meeting in their hallways, and nursing home residents are playing bingo with the help of a megaphone. We strive to recreate the already familiar social relations in a new context and spatiality or to explore new forms of co-existence. Web-based tools such as Zoom—for those with abundant and reliable internet access—can be considered to play a more effective and widespread role than a megaphone in this endeavor. The use of the internet in distance education is also an essential part of this.

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Internet tools and virtual communication possibilities have had a significant impact on musical performance and listening practices. Online practices, which have been used previously but are now employed more than ever, have become the dominant form of musical performance. We witness the transformation of collective performance practices via the internet. Musicians have few options other than collective performance through simultaneous—if lag is not an issue—or edited successively captured and subsequently layered recordings for collective performance. Even though the audience contributes to these online performances by likes and sending emojis, which is not the same as watching a live concert, it gives room for interaction and the audience’s contribution to their bodily existence by cheering, clapping, dancing, etc. The collective dimension of listening practice is also under transformation. Simultaneous listening, entertainment, and dancing have gained a new dimension through online Zoom parties where individualism and collectivity are experienced simultaneously.

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# Future of Ethnomusicology

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Considering the free online live performances, and the symphony/opera houses that open their archives, it may be said that online performances give more access to music for the audience who doesn't have physical or economic access to these performances than ever. Cultural and class-based barriers should not be underestimated. At this moment, the question of "how long and to what extent this access will remain free?" or "what kind of restrictions will be put into place?" remains unanswered. Besides these changes in music making and listening, musicians' and other music industry workers' already precarious work is now completely disrupted. Questions have started to arise concerning how new regulations will possibly affect the disorganized, informally employed laborers, who will be left outside, and what kind of new economic networks will come into being.

We, who stay at home, live in a paradoxical moment: we are confined to our homes and stay informed about what is going on outside only via the internet; however, we can stay informed about the whole world in the same way as well. This transformation, unsurprisingly, attracts the attention of the theorists and practitioners of social sciences and humanities. Researchers using ethnographic methods, namely long-term research based on observation and various interview techniques, have started to consider the potential of online ethnography. In the field of ethnomusicology, we transition to a new phase where digital ethnography resources are widely shared, and the scope and methodology of ongoing research projects and student work are rapidly adjusting to online ethnographic research under these new circumstances. A group of European musicologists and ethnomusicologists took

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the first step to establish a comprehensive academic research network about music in the days of COVID-19. The Ethnomusicology Reading Group chose "Digital Ethnography" as its topic for Summer 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Digital ethnography (Underberg and Zorn 2014; Pink et al. 2016, etc.), originating from various concepts emerged at the dawn of 21st century such as netnography (Kozinets 1998), virtual ethnography (Mason 1999), and media ethnography (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998), has developed with the efforts of researchers from various fields. Until today, researchers from diverse disciplines have conducted studies under different conceptualizations both through the media provided by the internet and online observation and interview techniques. Similarly, in the field of ethnomusicology, several studies examine the online circulation, production, performance, and listening (consumption) conditions of music and use online techniques on their own or accompanied by conventional

ethnographic tools. What is new today is that there is almost no other outlet for the music performer, and the researcher is deprived of face-to-face interview possibilities. Thus, under the given circumstances, digital ethnography is the primary method we have. If we bear in mind that new forms of social interaction originating from the pandemic may become somehow permanent practices, we can safely assume that the use of digital ethnography as a methodology will become more prevalent in our discipline as well.

<sup>1</sup> For further reading, see Musicovid – An International Research Network (n.d.) and Ethnomusicology Reading Group (n.d.).

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# Future of Ethnomusicology

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At the same time, we can easily foresee that this new age initiated by the pandemic will lead to a comprehensive paradigmatic transformation in the social sciences. Another tragedy, World War II, created a significant rupture in our understanding of the world with postwar technological advances, the golden age of capitalism in the 1970s, as well as the previously unimaginable destruction that caused notable changes in the social sciences from study areas to disciplinary divisions (Wallerstein 1996).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, we can assume that this pandemic will transform our ways of understanding, thinking, imagining, and doing in our daily lives as well as academic disciplines. We are not currently able to perceive all the economic and ideological aspects of this new world. We only know that the sole barrier between us and a world where capitalism has become even more devastating, and authoritarianism has become the norm, is our determination and will to fight back.

As our epoch has only recently been described as the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), it is impossible to know if a new post-human epoch—for instance, where viruses can overcome people—will commence or not. One of the primary views about the concept of Anthropocene suggests that this epoch started with the worldwide population rise and technological advances in the 1950s accompanied with humans' extreme intervention on nature (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). By drawing attention to capitalism's role in this process and stating that humans' devastating impact on nature is not independent from the capitalist system, it is also proposed that this epoch should be called "Capitalocene" (Moore 2014).

As stated before, we can only acknowledge our current conditions by thinking about the emergence of the pandemic as part of the capitalist destruction of nature. No matter how we name it, we have started to face the effects of capitalism on the environment and human life in the harshest way possible. The climate change debate is not new to the field. Ethnomusicology has acknowledged this reality and contributes to relevant literature in the field of ecomusicology. Adding to pioneer studies of Jeff Todd Titon in the field, many ethnomusicologists published articles independently or in the compilations with the researchers from other disciplines (Allen and Dawe 2017). The relatively new discussion on the human-centric ontology of music has just opened in the context of Anthropocene (Sykes 2020). We can anticipate that the field of ethnomusicology will increasingly lean toward ecomusicology, Anthropocene, and post-human studies in the following years.

We are on the edge of a new age in which we see the world with fresh eyes, develop new forms of interaction and expression, and put them into use with new means. As much as the psychological effects of loss, death, proximity to illness, and the experience of lockdown, the inequities we have faced and our solidarity practices in response to them will transform us all. We already see that music accompanies social relations as before, acquires new forms with them, and enters into circulation with novel performance forms and channels. Musicians, listeners, and music market workers, who are all affected by these new conditions, undergo a transformation and gain new experiences. We, as ethnomusicologists, will have our share of this transformation as well. In order to understand these new relations of music, and relations formed through music, we will develop new perspectives and methods; in fact, we have already started!

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<sup>2</sup> Choosing WWII as an example is not a coincidence. See Karen Cirillo's 2020 article on UNDP News: "Coronavirus: World Bank confirms deepest recession since World War Two."

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# Future of Ethnomusicology

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