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# AFTER THE STORM COMES THE MUSIC



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**N**o one imagined we would be celebrating the 250th anniversary of the birth of Beethoven, the personification of one of the highest points in music, in an atypical year, a year of unease and uncertainty. A 2020 filled with a pandemic and lockdowns that disrupted our daily ves. In which

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we have lost loved ones and people we admire, and which many of us would not have survived without music. I will rephrase: another 365 days in which music helped us survive.

How did the pandemic change our approach to this art? What aftereffects will it leave in our habits and ways of enjoying it? What is new and what will remain? Will we also speak of a before and an after COVID-19 in the field of musical enjoyment? Will we also experience a “new musical normal”?

## The Sacred Totem of the Live Concert

I write these lines with longing and the uncertainty of an old music lover of the sea. I am one more of the knowledge workers sent home and asked to adapt it into an office. Before the pandemic and the lockdown, I listened to music while I made breakfast, on the way to work in my car, when I came home from work, and during dinner or before going to bed. Now that I think about it, I see that my biggest musical moments, the most relaxed, were on the weekends when I could leave my house and practice that sacred ritual called a live concert.

On the eve of the third decade of the twenty-first century, music is more than ever an industry and a long chain of production and value. Even before the pandemic, the big recording conglomerates were already undergoing profound, diverse changes in the way their products were used and consumed. Compact discs sales were plummeting while those of long-play vinyl records were on the rise and streaming got progressively bigger and bigger.

This year has been devastating for the live music industry. Since the second quarter of 2020, mass concerts began to be cancelled and postponed. The big players, like the U.S.'s Live Nation and Mexico's Corporación Interamericana de Entretenimiento (CIE) saw their business projections brutally slashed. Suffice it to analyze the Mexican corporation's most recent quarterly report to the stock market: it showed an 82-percent drop in its consolidated sales compared to the same period in 2019. The goose that laid the golden egg didn't die, but its fertility certainly dropped.

Amidst fear and uncertainty, music continued to burst spontaneously and imperfectly from the instruments of musicians and bands wandering the streets in search of a few coins. But it also began to appear on balconies and in windows. For many weeks, Saúl, a good friend of mine from Spain, shared with me on WhatsApp the interpretations of his neighbor in Madrid, a trumpet-player from the Royal Theater. And millions of other musicians around the world have done the same, to the applause of real or virtual neighbors.

In the digital sphere, not only did The Rolling Stones debut a new song about deserted streets and urban loneliness (*Living in a Ghost Town*), but artists of the most diverse genres played for their fans from home studios, living rooms, or bedrooms. And millions of singers and professional and amateur musicians inundated social media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) with their own pieces and those of others. This phenomenon, this decentralization of creativity

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and interpretation, was already here and has undoubtedly come to stay.

## Streaming, the Ubiquitous Resource

Nothing can replace movies at the movies, theater in the theater, and music in the moment it is being made. The best rock group of the twentieth century (The Beatles with Sir George Martin at the engineering console) was never more spellbinding live than at its recording sessions, but any kind of music and the listener's experience in the moment when it is being performed are unparalleled.

The performer is influenced by the moment, the place, the mood, and, above all, the reaction of a real, concrete, present audience. Noted jazz drummer Antonio Sánchez confessed that to me last June during a Zoom chat, "When each musician has an impact on everyone on the stage and, from there, also plays to the audience, that exchange of energy is what I most long for. That is what I most miss now that everything has come to a standstill."

The pandemic and lockdown have pushed me to listen to different performances by streaming. Some are recorded, with impeccable takes and great audio quality, like Nick Cave's anthology-worthy performance at London's Alexandria Palace. Others are live, like some of the jazz musicians I have heard from New York's Blue Note in Greenwich Village. This kind of performance stimulates the illusion of the natural, the spontaneous, and what at any moment might go wrong.

The reality of the health emergency has imposed its conditions and hasn't left any room for complaints or demanding too much. It would be worse to go without music. In adversity, digital mediation—or whatever we want to call it—has allowed us to continue to enjoy the healing, stimulating, provocative, and evocative character of music.

In Mexico, festivals like the Cervantino, the Music Festival of Morelia, Mexico City's Historic Center Festival, or the Jazz Festival of the Maya Riviera, despite not boasting the diverse,



prodigious offerings of previous years, at least have brought the sounds of multiple styles into many homes both in Mexico and abroad. This has also been the case of initiatives like the NY Jazz All Stars, a circle organized by DeQuinta Producciones in alliance with Wynton Marsalis's Jazz at Lincoln Center. Mexico's most important university, our university, has also kept up a rich musical offering online, which includes The UNAM Symphonic Series, OFUNAM Recitals, Sound Laboratories, and the Wednesday Performance.

### The Lockdown and Virtual Music

Lockdown has made us favor virtual music. The exhortation to "stay at home" has also been understood as "listen to music at home." The offerings of free and paid concerts of the most diverse genres is abundant. The quality of the audio can be the absolute best. Nevertheless, something is missing. This does not seem to be the simple perception of a music lover longing for halls, auditoriums, and listeners who cough and clear their throats between one movement and another; strong scientific backing exists for the idea of the shared musical experience. Laurel Trainor, the director of the McMaster Institute

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for Music and the Mind (MIMM) in Ontario, has explained this in the Canadian press. Her research results make me think of our musical customs.<sup>1</sup> For her, whether playing music together or being present as part of the audience at a live performance generates an intense emotional, social experience. Different MIMM research projects, which use a fully functional concert hall with monitoring equipment, have found that when an audience listens and watches a concert on a video, they do not move as much nor do they enjoy it as much as when they listen and watch a live musical performance. They also show that when people move in time with the music at a concert, it raises their feelings of confidence and their desire to cooperate with others.

I won't hide it: I long for the comfort and sound quality you can enjoy in the Fine Arts Palace or the Nezahualcóyotl Hall; but I don't miss even a tiny bit the problems of access, or the crowds, or the smoke of other concert-goers that I have to put up with at mass gatherings in venues like the Sports Palace or the Sun Forum.

In different parts of the world, the new normal has begun to open the floodgates for the public to return to concert halls. Almost nobody is bothered by having to step on disinfectant mats for their shoes, having their temperature taken, obligatory mask-wearing, or for having to maintain a healthy distance from other members of the audience with several empty seats between them.

An emblematic venue like the Berliner Philharmonie in Germany's capital, with a 2440-seat capacity, was only admitting 670 people in September; by November, it was already seating 1000. Frankfurt's Alter Oper is allowing 600 people in its 2400 seats. It's a matter of addition and subtraction: to be profitable, a venue like that needs an audience of 700 or 800 people.

## Welcome to the Age of Drive-in Concerts

All over the world, in all the genres and sizes of musical performances, people are looking for alternatives and new business models. Big pop music groups in Mexico like El Tri, Moderatto, Intocable, and Caifanes are exploring drive-in concerts, whether it be at the Pegasus Forum outside Toluca or at Curve 4 of the Rodríguez Brothers Autodrome in eastern Mexico City. Caifanes will offer a twofer that may become common practice in the near future: first it will give a drive-in concert (on December 10, 11, and 12) and then it will stream the same concert (on December 23) for people who prefer to stay home. We should remember that in surveys done in different places in the world, almost half the people questioned said they would start going to concerts only months after a vaccine for COVID-19 exists.

Mexico City rock and jazz venues like the Foro Cultural Alicia, the Sangriento, the Indie Rocks!, the Foro El Tejedor de El Péndulo, El Convite, Jazzorca, and Jazzatlán are beginning to open up to a few music lovers. That doesn't mean that, given the complete absence of government support, some of them, like the Alicia, aren't forced to sell records and posters to survive. If in Mexico's USMCA partner nations, the United States and Canada, where independent music venue opera-

tors are better organized than in Mexico, without federal support an estimated 95 percent of them could disappear, we have more than enough reason to be concerned about what could happen here. Mexican independent venues will have to use their imagination and come up with loyalty strategies or crowdfunding ideas.

## From Digital Music to the Triumphant Return of Vinyl

The pandemic stopped music in gyms, bars, and dance clubs. This led many people to buy more music in online outlets like Amazon, making Jeff Bezos's company one of the big winners of the year: the company has earned more in 2020 than any other year of its 26-year history, and it hired 175 000 people.

Many also used digital music platforms more. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, 85 percent of the today's music is consumed through streaming. The digital citizenry has the pending task of using the power of each individual as a consumer to favor the platforms that pay the artists the best. This is a matter of fair trade and valuing intellectual work. At the end of the day, Napster, Tidal, Apple Music or Google Play Music are not the same as Deezer, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, or SoundCloud. The devil is in the details, and the aware consumer will have to make a conscientious analysis to pick the best platform for him/her and the artists he/she likes.

The burgeoning return to vinyl records, on the other hand, is not merely a retro gesture by hipsters and millennials who want to be cool. Audio-lovers of all generations have already reevaluated their vinyl record collections and are increasing them. 2020 is the first year in 34 when the sale of vinyl records surpassed that of CDs, which were in frank decline.

With this panorama, it is appropriate to end by stating the obvious: the most important thing will continue to be the quality of our approach to music. Give it the time and attention it deserves. The same that we give to reading, for example; the attention we should pay to all our daily conversations. Inhabit it. Flow with it. Perhaps that is what Friedrich Nietzsche was thinking of when he wrote, "Without music, life would be a mistake." **NM**

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://mimm.mcmaster.ca>.