



# MUSIC and the PANDEMIC

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**F**or everyone whose livelihood depends on music, the lockdown due to the pandemic has proven disastrous and discouraging.

With concerts and live shows practically banned, most of us understand that the show can't go on, since large gatherings can lead to multiple exposures and to the closure of even more venues.

### Live Concerts: Musical Creators', Technicians', And Organizers' Main Source of Income

With online music distribution, streaming, and the compact disc's imminent demise, artists' and composers' royalties are calculated as follows: when someone listens to a song for more than thirty seconds, artists and producers split US\$0.005. For the average artist who's not a superstar (who can count on broad support and spend millions in publicity), royalties no longer turn a profit. Songs and albums have morphed into almost-free publicity, like business cards of sorts. The most significant income comes from live concerts.

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### What Do We Do in a Concert?

The following list will help us understand which concert activities can no longer take place due to the pandemic (marked with an N), and which can still occur, to an extent, in concerts shared through video or streaming (marked with a V).

#### Music-related activities:

- Seeing an artist, orchestra, or conductor close up, in the same venue. Giving them support. (N)
- Concentrating on the music with no distractions. Letting oneself go. (V)
- Analyzing the music and the performance, perhaps with the goal of creating something similar. (V)
- Enjoying loud music, screens, lights, and special effects. (V)
- Listening to live music with no streaming or recording mediating the experience. (N)
- Relaxing. (V)
- Getting excited. (V)

#### Social activities:

- Coming together to listen to music with friends, family, children, or a partner. (V)
- Accompanying younger children who want to attend the concert. (V)



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- Gifting the concert to someone who likes the artist. (V)
- Seeing a musician friend or relative, or a musician struggling for success. (V)
- Clapping and cheering. Giving the artist a full-venue standing ovation. (N)
- Singing, dancing, venting. (V)
- Consuming beverages, popcorn, other foods, and even drugs whose legality is beyond the scope of this article. (V)
- Proving that one was there by taking pictures or filming on a cellphone, perhaps for publication on social media. (It's hard to believe, but I've seen people watch entire concerts on a tiny phone screen.) (N)
- Attending a concert as a way of flaunting one's purchasing power or cultural finesse, perhaps showing off one's outfit and means of transportation as well. (N)
- Meeting gals (or guys). After buying tickets several times from an agency (a box office where one could reserve tickets), the agency's employees asked if I'd had success through the company. I realized that because I'd been going to concerts just to analyze the music, I'd been missing out on the fun. (N)
- Enjoying tickets purchased by a company, office, workplace, or media contest. (N)

- Buying merchandise or souvenirs from the artist.

I'm sure other, unsuspected reasons why one would attend a concert exist.

The pandemic has put a stop to social and musical activities that might unfold at a concert, and each person has her own reasons for wanting to attend or stay home.

### **Videostreaming, A Far-from-Ideal Solution**

We can view a live or pre-recorded concert via streaming, but we all know it's not the same. Not everyone owns devices that can emit high-quality images and sound —and, watch out, or anything too loud could upset your neighbors. Socially, even though one can gather one's friends for a concert, if only to ask them

what they thought of the concert afterward, the fact is that only small groups can get together.

The artist must decide whether to prerecord a concert and put on a show just for streaming. This implies a cost, and to turn a profit, the show requires distribution via platforms that accept online payments or electronic proof of payment. Artists, technicians, and organizers would have to adjust their fields of specialization, learning to film, edit, produce videos, and program websites to keep the costs at bay. You either evolve or you're out.

So, let's consider streaming an available, but not ideal, solution.

## And Speaking of Music at Home...

In Mexico City, we've seen a boom in another kind of concert that may have always existed, but that we've just noticed given the stay-at-home order. Home-delivered concerts. Ubiquitous street musicians not only bring us classical, traditional, popular melodies, but also serve as a constant reminder of their own misfortunes—displaced from their homes, they're in a perpetual struggle for survival, living day-to-day in precarious economic conditions. They go around the city, playing in small ensembles.

Individual members of a town band, most likely from Oaxaca, with a clarinet, trombone, and drum, do their best at my door-

step, playing something that's hard to put my finger on. I ultimately recognize a well-known, classic Mexican tune from the 1940s or 1950s, but they're playing it so strangely. Listening to fragments that seem isolated from the main melody, I intuit that the clarinet and trombone are following the parts they likely played for a full band—with a lot of instruments missing for the song to actually come through. A few benevolent neighbors venture outside and give them money. The musicians' face masks hang around their necks. Sometimes a sharp trumpeter shows up, too. He plays the melodies on his own, occasionally performing the tune from that Hollywood movie with the sinking ship. Acculturated indeed, at least he's giving us a break from the same old melody. It's already been applauded enough. I've heard that a marimba often graces the neighborhood, too. More lively and comprehensive, the musician even takes requests. Whether he's a street player or someone who once worked at a temporarily closed restaurant remains unknown. The other day, one of my neighbors hired a *norteña* band for his girlfriend's birthday. Some people will never forget how to party.

## Experiments for Pandemic Concerts

Europe and the United States have toyed with experiments for pop music and nightclubs with DJs: the public must bring a negative, rapid COVID test when entering and exiting the concert. Some even have to wear electronic tags that track their movements with a computer registering all the nearby groups of people as a way of preventing infection and alerting people of potential transmission. Some concerts have also required face masks and social distancing. In the future, a vaccination card might also be required for such events. For Mexico, the cost of COVID tests would have to drop substantially for this option to be feasible.

The Mexican rock band Caifanes has put on concerts that people can attend from their cars and trucks, drive-in movie-theater style. One must wear a facemask and maintain social distance when exiting the vehicle—to buy beverages or go to



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the bathroom, I presume, but also to hear better and cheer the musicians on. If people must stay inside their vehicles, I would propose providing speakers for every car, or for concerts to somehow channel the sound through radios and cell phones. I imagine that the applause doesn't quite resonate outside the car, and that the concert might come off a bit cold, though people could honk their horns in praise.<sup>1</sup>

In Kiev's vertical concerts, musicians stand in front of a multi-story hotel with balconies. The hotel rents the rooms out to small groups so that people in the audience can enjoy the concert from their own space, with hotel perks like food and drink, access to the minibar, and even a discount for those who'd like to stay the night.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the U.S. rock band Flaming Lips put on a show in which both the public and the band were enclosed in plastic bubbles. Each of the one hundred bubbles, with three people each, was equipped with a speaker, a fan, water, a towel, and signs to request to go to the bathroom, or to alert the staff of excess heat. I won't give my personal opinion on the comfort and sound, but I will say that concertgoers must have been dying to see their favorite band. I just hope the bubbles didn't fog up and that they stayed fully transparent.<sup>3</sup>

## What about Classical Music?

Symphony orchestras have been uploading videos of past concerts on social media and have recorded new concerts, with no audience, too. Some have considered open-air concerts with social distancing. The audience would have to stay apart, in designated areas, which would also work with amplified, pop music. However, classical music isn't usually played outdoors. Traditionally, the sound shouldn't require amplifiers but should ring through a venue with proper acoustics. The cost of miking up forty-plus musicians can also add up. Classical concerts tend to showcase well-loved pieces before large audiences—consider, for instance, how the Nutcracker graces the stage every December. In Mexico, we don't have many large spaces for big, outdoor, classical-music concerts—spaces like the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, or La Arena de Verona in Italy. There's also the issue of the weather.

I've heard orchestra directors mention the possibility of installing sophisticated ventilation and extraction equipment with multiple air columns, but not only would such equipment fail to guarantee that the virus doesn't spread, but the cost could also be prohibitive, implying both maintenance and noise, which would interfere with the music itself.



On August 21, 2020, Mexico City’s government switched its color-coded COVID warning sign to orange (with red being the most dangerous and green, the least). The new policy noted that, in theaters (excluding concert halls, of course), “live bands and orchestras playing wind instruments will not be allowed.” A friend who plays one of these lethal instruments in the Fine Arts Orchestra found that, because of these guidelines, he’s now considered an infectious-aerosol transmitter, a public enemy. Do we have nothing but masked-up orchestras with string instruments, piano, and percussions to look forward to? Are Beethoven and Mozart out? Leaving us Béla Bartók, perhaps? What about mariachi bands? The most Mexican music in the land, the whole *enchilada*, with guitar, *guitarrón*, and violin. Trumpeters should play the *güiro* and the *conga* instead. Otherwise, *Adiós muchachos!*

## We’ve Found No Practical Solution

All of these possibilities face the main challenge of securing often non-existent infrastructure, with concert prices drastically soaring while audiences peter out. There’s no way to compete against the 2,300-person concerts that fit at the UNAM’s Nezahualcóyotl Hall, with no social distancing, or the 87,000-person concerts at the Azteca Stadium.

Considering the Mexican economy, and the fact that most costs would transfer directly to the audience, the public would mostly be made up of people with the highest purchasing power.

To me, a sometimes rational adult who doesn’t always succumb to unbridled passions, streaming a concert at home is entirely preferable to any other option. But we’ll have to see what someone who’d rather go to a concert to pick up a date, or any of the other activities I mentioned, would think.

## Post-pandemic Music

Are we ready to see music as phenomenon that’ll always reach us through the screen? I hope not.

Rumor has it that once the pandemic is over, we’ll see a major bottleneck of artists vying to take the stage before an anxious audience. Furthermore, countless songs, albums, and works composed throughout the pandemic, will come out ready for their live debut. Whether that arrangement for the town band, that great hit, or that symphony awaiting publication will grace the outside world as we cheer on remains to be seen. May all the hours of practicing scales and arpeggios lead to perfect execution.



For music as we knew it before the pandemic to survive, we need —and I risk sounding sentimental— what we’ve all been wishing for: for everything to go back to the way it was. For vaccines, herd immunity, chewable pills, or anything, really, to conquer this pandemic, once and for all. And, while we’re at it, for world peace, universal equality, and the end of hunger, too. **NM**

## Notes

- 1 Rubén Ortega, “Caifanes en autoconcierto en CDMX,” Indie Rocks! <https://www.indierocks.mx/agenda/caifanes-ofrecera-una-serie-de-autoconciertos-en-cdmx/>, April 20, 2020, accessed May 1, 2021.
- 2 Alyson Camus, “Are Vertical Concerts the Future of the Music Industry during the Pandemic?” *Rock NYC*, <http://rocknyc.live/are-vertical-concerts-the-future-of-the-music-industry-during-the-pandemic.html>, July 25, 2020, accessed May 1, 2021.
- 3 VideoElephant, “Watch Now: Concert Experiments May Determine the Future of Live Music,” *Journal Gazette & Times-Courier*, [https://jg-tc.com/entertainment/watch-now-concert-experiments-may-determine-the-future-of-live-music/article\\_357ccf41-fe85-5af0-a40e-c1f16d83ace8.html](https://jg-tc.com/entertainment/watch-now-concert-experiments-may-determine-the-future-of-live-music/article_357ccf41-fe85-5af0-a40e-c1f16d83ace8.html), March 30, 2021, accessed May 1, 2021.



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número 136

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