

## 7.7 **‘I’ll record it...let me just try to understand how I hold the microphone on the bass’: From live performance to DIY during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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### × **Abstract**

The coronavirus pandemic has shaken everyday life. In the music scene, the criminalization of nightlife has led to a drastic reduction in live music (Nofre et al., 2020), and artistic professionals, like other gig-workers, found themselves in a position of vulnerability (Jean, 2020). But it was not only the performances that were affected by social distance: conditioned access to studios also made rehearsals and recordings difficult. In this context, access to technology has become indispensable. When musicians are wondering “how can I monetize online?” (Nobre, 2020), DIY is an alternative to consider. Composing and recording at home for later dissemination is a means of passing the time, preserving the perception of productivity and contribution to society, maintaining a close relationship with audiences and still get some income on streaming platforms. This study uses an ethnographic approach that combines participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to address the relationship between technology and creativity.

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This paper is the result of preliminary and exploratory research carried out within the scope of the doctorate in ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the New University of Lisbon, Portugal. This study uses an ethnographic approach that combines participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations to address the relationship between technology and creativity.

In order to maintain a certain diversity, people from different music genres who perform in Lisbon, classical music, burlesque, *fado vadio* and indie, were interviewed. The majority accumulate musical work with other activities to provide a certain stability<sup>2</sup>, which is in accordance with the results of the Survey of Independent Professionals of Arts and Culture carried out by the Portuguese Observatory of Cultural Activities (Neves et al., 2021) and data from the Union of Show Workers, Audiovisual and Musicians. My parallel work as a performer favoured the dialogue with the musicians, uniting them a shared experience of running out of concerts, trying to find motivation to explore new things and “passing time” while struggling to cope with isolation, having rehearsals cancelled by confinement measures – and even trying to do it illegally, and being stopped by the police. By being seen as an insider, it was possible to approach sensitive themes such as transgression in the daily life of a musician.

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2. Even though teaching was a recurrent option, in this small sample there were also musicians working in design, creating content for social media, and driving touristic transports - jobs that allow management of the workload.

Despite saying that they are available to conduct the interviews in their own name, the interviewees expressed discomfort with the situation, especially when we addressed contractual issues – not wanting to harm themselves or the establishments that employed them sporadically or regularly. As the consent was not enthusiastic, it is more ethical to make them anonymous in this paper. A similar fear was noted by *Ação Cooperativista* (Cooperative Action)<sup>3</sup>, in an inquiry revealing that the obligation to pay for canceled shows by public entities, established in Decree-Law No 10, was not fulfilled (Lusa, 2020). It is worth asking who gains the most in maintaining the topic taboo. In other hand, anonymity is safer for queer artists, as homophobic violence did not decrease with the pandemic.

## 1. Emergence of the coronavirus in Portugal

The first case in Portugal was identified on March 2nd, 2020. On the 9th, the World Health Organization declares a pandemic. However, it is only on March 13th that the government declares a State of Emergency – establishing a strict confinement. The climate of uncertainty dragged on until June 1st, when the Government implemented the Deconfinement Plan, which allowed the reopening of concert halls and music venues under strict hygiene and safety standards. From September onwards, there is a new increase in cases, which leads to the declaration of a Calamity Situation on October 15th, and a State of Emergency on November 9th. The Government opts to grant an opening at Christmas, allowing circulation – perhaps anticipating massive disobedience and strong criticism from Catholic believers. Vaccination begins on December 27th, prioritizing the elderly. On New Eve there was no exception regime, maintaining the State of Emergency until March 2021. On March 11th, a new Deconfinement Plan begins, in a delicate balance of advances and setbacks, with measures constantly changing, sometimes allowing, sometimes preventing, the planning of events in the short and medium-term. The monitoring of measures in place at the moment can be consulted on the government website *Estamos On* (República Portuguesa, 2020).

As Jordi Nofre et al. (2020) pointed out, the criminalization of nightlife has led to a drastic reduction in live music. Tyra Jean adds that artistic professionals, like other gig-workers, found themselves in a position of vulnerability (Jean, 2020). As an example, an excerpt from the interview conducted with a burlesque singer:

*368* <sup>3</sup>Basically, I had two concerts a week in March. I did three and then they canceled everything because of COVID. [...] It was my understanding that it would be paid with a receipt. I tried to go to the finance department in my area and they were closed because of COVID... and I was postponing. I didn't receive a receipt... I wasn't receiving any money either... And on June 4th – the reopening of the space where I went to sing – I was paid for the four concerts, “under the table”, without a receipt. [...] They didn't give me any security. They said: “we are all in the same boat, we don't know what is coming from now on”.

But it was not only the performances that were affected by social distance: conditioned access to studios also made rehearsals and recordings difficult. Even when it became possible to return to rehearsals, it also had its challenges. Despite trying to maintain a certain distance in the rehearsals, two different members of the alto section in the Gulbenkian choir<sup>4</sup> confided that there were transmission chains there, which meant that they quickly had to go into prophylactic isolation. They point out the specificity of voice projection as an aggravating element, for which the distance of two meters was not considered.

In this context, access to technology that allows adaptation to the life in confinement has become indispensable. Suddenly, it seems the virtual scene Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett write about was the only one available (Bennett & Peterson, 2004).

3. *Ação Cooperativista* is an informal activist group created on April 14th, 2020, that practices a collaborative, non-hierarchical work methodology that seeks to unite, valuing diversity, workers in the arts and culture in Portugal (*Unir Sem Apagar as Diferenças*, 2020).

4. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation appear in 1956 by the last will and testament of Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, a philanthropist of Armenian origin who lived in Lisbon between 1942 and the year of his death, 1955. Established in perpetuity, the Foundation's main purpose is to improve the quality of life through art, charity, science and education (*Overview*, 2021). With that intention, the Foundation created the Coro Gulbenkian (Gulbenkian Choir) in 1964. Nowadays, the choir has a full symphonic formation of around 100 singers, but it can also appear as a smaller vocal ensemble, according to the nature of the performed musical works. Thus, the Coro Gulbenkian may appear as an a cappella ensemble or join the Orquestra Gulbenkian or other orchestras to perform choral-symphonic literature. It has also performed (and often premiered) many 20th century works by Portuguese and international composers (*History*, 2021).

## 2. Turning to online – the rehearsals

Software such as ZOOM, Facetime or Google Hangouts, among others, have allowed the collective musical real-time practice to be transposed into a format compatible with social distancing. Ursula Levens, musician and music pedagogue at University Carl von Ossietzky and editorial board member of the journal *Music Cognition*, thinks those tools can help make the isolation more tolerable, because they allow visual contact, which creates some kind of proximity (Levens, 2020). But it comes with some disadvantages: latency affects the perception of beat and rhythm and the feeling of synchrony, and expressive dynamics might be inaudible or distorted. Artists who also teach music manifested a stronger concern with the sound, as they felt it didn't affect only them, but also made it harder to help their students as much as they would in presential classes.

## 3. Who wants to DIY?

The quote that inspires this paper is from a classical contrabassist that was trying to record music at home. We started playing on a project of an indie singer and songwriter who had record her EP in confinement. As they<sup>5</sup> are struggling to figure out how to do that for the first time – until then their career was as a performer of classical music mostly, so they didn't feel the need to record – the rest of the band didn't have the same challenges. The singer, the only one who used to record from home, had microphones and software dedicated to that activity. I come from a piano classical education but also have some past experience as keyboard player in a post-rock band, so I was a little bit familiar to the use of technology. It became obvious that the different backgrounds of each element of the group conditioned the knowledge and equipment available at their home.

In an interview, a violinist that plays with several quartets and orchestras shared the same experience. The sound he was looking for, he couldn't achieve at home. He also thought it wasn't worth the effort or the financial investment – specially with the reduction of income due to the cancellation of concerts. He said his time was best spent practicing and leaving the recordings for the orchestras. The turn to online silences the population fringe of those who are technologically excluded, such as the elderly or the poorest or those who live in areas with a bad network, etc. – reinforcing pre-existing inequalities to the pandemic. Thus, it is clear that not everyone can or wants to transition to the virtual scene. So, who wants to DIY and why?

Guilherme Nobre, a researcher at the Unesco Chair for Sustainable Human Development, urges musicians to look at DIY as a way to monetize online (Nobre, 2020). But is this really a viable option, is it possible to earn a living wage? All interviewees didn't think so. They said: “maybe for the already famous artists who actually can live from the royalties”. That is definitely not the case for the large majority of Portuguese musicians, and let's be clear, quality or quantity of the work done has nothing to do with it. That doesn't mean it is not worth it – as the burlesque singer points out: “for a time, the online festivals were the only way to be paid”.

Richard Frenneaux and Andy Bennett (2021), in the article published in the journal *Rock Music Studies* suggest that going online is a way for artists to maintain a close relationship with their audiences. They also point out that musicians who were into DIY pre-COVID already have the skills necessary to adapt to the new circumstances. That was the main goal of the indie singer and songwriter. She is in her twenties and she performs since child as singer and dancer. She used the extra time to record at home for the first time the songs she was already performing in concerts, both in Portugal and England, and the positive feedback from the audience encouraged her to keep writing. She ended up producing a whole EP and some videoclips. She said that helped a lot psychologically: she used to be busy, so she needed something to pass the time and to feel productive and give back to society. It was also a way of preserving her musician identity – as the question “What kind of performer doesn't perform?” was making her feel sad and depressed. Her music is on Spotify and YouTube, and some previews on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. She has mixed feelings about that: although she thinks the streaming platforms exploits artists, as a female queer musician who is enthusiastic about doing it all by herself and having total creative freedom, she finds it hard to make her work known through traditional media such as radio. She also stressed that, even though she had less streams per song on YouTube, they paid her way more than Spotify.

5. As a non-binary person, the pronouns preferred by the contrabassist are “they” and “them”.

The *fado vadio*<sup>6</sup> singer doesn't think his practice could be done online, as a subgenre based on intimist mood and improvisation. However, he finds the DIY recordings at home could really pay off. For him, the quality of the final result doesn't matter, as long as the tourists keep buying it. As the process is inspired by pirate CDs of the turn of the millennium, it is possible to have a real return on the investment. Sometimes, the badly done record can even be preferred as is perceived as more 'typical' or 'authentic'.

## 4. Final thoughts

The pandemic of COVID-19 came to highlight the precarious situation facing the culture and arts sector, and live music is no exception. Without concerts, the musicians found themselves struggling to have an income. The virtual scene appeared to be the only one option available, so some performers tried to adapt to the circumstance. Aesthetics preferences, financial situation and technological knowledge conditioned that transition. Finally, it's worth noting that, in the scope of this investigation, there are more testimonies of singers going online, starting DIY and staying's on with social media than instrumentalists. Thus, the next step will have to do with realizing if there is a connection between these concerns and "being the face of the band" or if those who played electrified instruments were already more used to recording from home, or if there is a different explanation.

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6. *Fado vadio* is a type of fado in which both amateur and professional fado singers can participate, accompanied by house guitarists. Usually, the singers choose the songs in the moment, based on what they feel is a good fit for the mood of the room or themselves – an exercise similar to what Tia DeNora described as "knowing what is needed" in self-programming musical material (DeNora, 2000).