

On the Benefits of a Paradigm Shift in Community Music Organisation in an Epidemic Context

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Abstract

Covid-19 has been traumatic for the arts and culture sector since it became popular. In the community music area, many face-to-face activities have been disrupted as a result.

This article will explore the impact of Covid-19 on the cultural and arts sector through several examples and the need for an organisational paradigm shift in community music in light of this impact, with a view to informing the future development of community music.

Keywords: Covid-19, community music, paradigm shift, benefits

1. Introduction

Since Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO on 11th March, the cultural and creative industries have been impacted more traumatically than by any other crisis in living memory. The effects have been spread around the globe more universally than in any previous crisis, taking many different strategic, operational, financial and human forms, many of them compounding one another in the depth and breadth of the damage they caused. (Note 1) Home quarantines, cut off of public transportation, distancing measures, enforced lockdowns and other systems of response to the outbreak combined to cause disruptions in the arts and culture sector, resulting in many face-to-face community music events being disrupted.

As defined by Kari K. Veblen and Janice L. Waldron, 'Community Music is an umbrella term for a variety of practices and forms found internationally as well as an emerging field in music education grounded in research. At the most basic level, CM currently consists of informal music teaching-learning processes and amateur music-making carried out via non-institutional situations.' (Note 2) Obviously, they point to the diversity of community music practices. We cannot take extract the 'social activity' from community music, and therefore, in the face of the social changes brought about by the pandemic, community music will be forced to change.

This article explores the impact of Covid-19 on the cultural and arts sectors and the need for an organisational paradigm shift within the community music in the light of this impact. The paradigm shift is not only a change in external form, but an internal change in attitudes of thought. This essay will support this claim through discussion of the cases of Purple Patch Art, Fife Youth Jazz Orchestra(FYFO), Loud&Proud Choir and The March Family, then analyze and examine the benefits of a paradigm shift in community music organisation in the context of the epidemic, in order to find relevant information that this phase of the shift can provide for the future development of community music.

2. The Impact and Influence of Covid-19 on the Cultural and Arts Sectors

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on a wide range of industries, but it has hit the culture and arts sector particularly hard, causing almost incalculable losses. (Note 3) The main reasons are as follows: firstly, that the arts and culture sector is often more reliant on collectivity and face-to-face social interaction and is therefore more heavily affected by distancing measures, transport restrictions and lockdowns; secondly, a larger-than-average share of jobs in the culture and creativity sectors are precarious, informal, and/or part-time jobs – and the lack of professional status for many artists and cultural professionals often limits their access to support mechanisms or safety nets that have protected people in other sectors; (Note 4) Thirdly, during the epidemic, many performing arts businesses were unable to carry out any regular performing arts activities and

suffered frequent postponements and even cancellations, thus running out of funds and having difficulties in turnover, even risking closure or being forced to change careers. For example, *The Lion King* called off shows on Tuesday and Wednesday due to 'Covid-enforced absences' among cast and crew. The Royal Shakespeare Company's *Comedy of Errors* at the Barbican in London has also cancelled all performances until the 22nd of December due to Covid cases. (Note 5) In short, by all accounts, the impact of Covid-19 on the cultural and arts sector has been enormous, and traditional organisational models have left it in a difficult position.

3. The Need for a Paradigm Shift in Community Music Organisation in the Context of the Epidemic

Cultural and arts organizations are key players in the community and as such, the traditional organisational model of community music needed to be urgently transformed in light of the impact of the epidemic on them, both in terms of addressing their plight and enhancing the well-being of their citizens.

According to research, the Covid-19 pandemic had a overwhelmingly negative impact on citizens' well-being, with a third of people saying they felt more isolated and less satisfied with their lives. (Note 6) The study revealed that:

In June 2021, 36% of people in the survey said they felt lonely more often during the pandemic and 38% said they were not satisfied with their lives now ... 1/3 of respondents said that they have never or rarely felt they had energy available to them, and 1/4 of the respondents said they had no or little interest in new things they had experienced, and that these factors might influence their willingness to participate in cultural activities. (Note 7)

So the virtual choir was created to provide people with some energy and happiness. For example, in the case of the lockdown, some choir members stated that, 'I didn't realize how important my choir was to my wellbeing and sense of identity.' (Note 8) Meanwhile, some also then talk about benefits with online music making: 'Without the virtual choir, I would have found it much harder. The singing helped keep me on an even keel, I felt more relaxed after each session.' (Note 9) This statement corroborates another study which showed that 80% of the audiences who participated in arts or heritage events in person or online during the pandemic said they found it had a positive impact on their health. (Note 10) This suggests that an important way to improve the wellbeing of citizens during a pandemic is to provide social opportunities for audiences.

However, the online approach is imperfect and does not suit everyone: some choir members noted that, 'We tried singing only once, and it was a disaster because of everyone's different bandwidths, so we now just use it as a social occasion.' (Note 11) Because the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, we can still see Covid-19 as a huge catalyst, encouraging many arts and cultural organisations to try digital communication for the first time. (Note 12) As Anthony Sargent says, 'as always – amongst the loss and damage there has been invaluable learning of new kinds of thinking, new ways of doing things. We need to identify all those new learnings around the world, then build on those new foundations rather than just reassembling the broken pieces from the past.' (Note 13) Digital communication has the function of providing people with more social opportunities during an epidemic, giving them access to content and experiences they would not have had access to in person, among other things, and the benefits of a paradigm shift in community music organisation in the context of an epidemic will be explored in more detail in this article, using specific examples.

4. Paradigm Shift and Benefits of Music Organisation in the Covid-19 Period

Music organisations can play a key role in encouraging people to go online and 'provide people with safe, non-threatening experiences they can learn about the technology of the digital environment.' (Moffat, 2019). (Note 14) As it turns out, during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, many music organising bodies creatively adapted their original modes of activity to continue their music creation. (Note 15)

Music charity Purple Patch Art is a good example of this. The music organisation 'has been working to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities and autism, and the professionals who support them, by providing innovative, inclusive, creative learning experiences'. (Note 16) It uses drama, dance, music, art and multi-sensory activities to engage learners and aims to develop participants' confidence, independence and social skills to reach their full potential. In response to the outbreak of Covid-19, Purple Patch Arts began offering its Lifelong Learning Programmes through Zoom, posting daily activities on the website such as 'A Spring Adventure', 'Adventures in Poetry & Rhymes', etc. Participants are encouraged to complete the tasks in the activities at home and take videos or photos to share with others in keeping with the weekly theme. Lorna, the organisation's programme leader, has also drawn up a number of beautiful 'coloring pages' for participants to paint to relax. Purple Patch Arts also uses lockdowns as an opportunity to reach out to people outside the local community, hosting a monthly Zoom disco that is open to all. This paradigm shift in the delivery of activities via online platforms adds more opportunities for people who are unable to attend due to a lack of transport, inability

to leave their homes because of physical or mental health reasons, etc., this new way of interacting with others greatly increases the prospects of accessibility and inclusivity. Without these online activities, Purple Patch Arts would not be able to fulfill their mission as a charity at this particular time. In addition, it seems to be an easier way for people with autism to talk as Anya Lawrence says,

As the conversation developed, I found myself growing to like this new method of communicating. I no longer had to grapple with eye contact and body language: all I needed to do was look at the screen! And because only my head and shoulders were visible, I could stim freely without feeling embarrassed, guilty or ashamed. I found the intrinsic time-lag in video calls was not only useful for structuring conversations, it also bought me precious extra seconds of processing time to help keep pace. Most of all, I found on Zoom I didn't have to continually battle with the many sensory stimuli that I found so overwhelming in conventional conversations. (Note 17)

It can be noted that this new model is undoubtedly an effective way to help reconnect people who were isolated during the lockdowns, and it may be even better at meeting the requirements of some special needs users.

As well as increasing accessibility and opportunities for inclusion, another benefit of using digital technology is that the increase in online events means more time and geographical flexibility is offered. For example, the Fife Youth Jazz Orchestra (FYJO) opened its doors to music players from across the UK during Covid-19 by using Zoom to rehearse online every Thursday from 7pm to 8pm. (Note 18) The orchestra leader uses Zoom's breakout rooms to divide the musicians into playing groups based on instrument type, thus providing one-to-one coaching and performing in the same way. This online rehearsal format allows band members to have more diverse choices for interacting with the group. Participants can choose to play or simply focus on listening to other members with their microphones turned off. This means that if at some point the participant is not fully integrated into the group, it is still possible to maintain some level of participation. This gives members more flexibility and control - they are able to choose how they want to join the group. As with the online choirs, there were acknowledged downsides to digitalization, such as delays in internet speed and loss of contact with members who did not want to or were not able to access the internet - but having acknowledged these downsides, most participants were quick to insist that there were many benefits to this model that they had not experienced before. FYJO persevered and was pleased with the results of its transition to digital delivery: 'It took quite a bit of effort but it's safe to say it turned out better than we thought it would.' (Claire Martindale, Secretary) (Note 19)

5. Paradigm Shift and Benefits of Individual Teams of Musicians in the Covid-19 Period

As the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, other music groups are also exploring the benefits of a paradigm shift in organisation.

An example of this is the 'virtual choir' alternative adopted by Edinburgh-based Loud & Proud Choir. It is a model of spoken interaction and/or singing using conferencing software such as Zoom. (Note 20) In some cases, the team found that digital platforms gave people social opportunities that they had not previously considered when they met in person. Some participants said they would deliberately schedule time to meet up with each other during online rehearsals. This seems to have become a habit that will continue when rehearsals can be held offline. Zoom's breakout rooms randomly assign people to different rooms, which create opportunities for team members to interact with other members they don't know. Therefore, the digital platform becomes a great way to facilitate communication and foster friendship among team members.

One of the functions of community music is to use music for some social purposes. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this purpose was relevant to the epidemic. For example, The Marsh Family, a musical family group based in Faversham, Kent, released many remixes or parodies of songs during the epidemic and created their YouTube channel on 14 April 2020 to share their music publicly. (Note 21) One of the songs, 'Have the New Jab', is a parody of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, with 'biting humour' in its lyrics:

Maybe there's a plan above to implant things into our blood
 But why on earth would Bill Gates want to rule ya?
 And it's not a trick to get you spayed! It's not some change to our DNA!
 It's a Covid-fighting weapon! Have the new jab. (Note 22)

The video, released in January 2021, encourages those who were hesitant about getting the Covid-19 vaccine. The song was applauded by medical staff, with Sarah Dickens, who led the research for the Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust, saying, 'Well this may be the best thing I ever saw.' Nadhim Zahawi, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Covid-19 Vaccine Deployment, praised the song on Twitter, 'That has to be it! That has to be the theme tune for this national vaccination drive. Well done the Marsh family.' (Note 23)

23) One of their YouTube viewers commented, 'I'm a frontline doctor from Sydney, Australia, in the middle of the worst blockade the country has seen since the pandemic began. This brought so much laughter and relief at such a desperate time. The upbeat lyrics were accompanied by such harmonious and beautiful singing. What an amazingly talented family you are. Thank you!' (Aileen Liu) (Note 24). It is evident that The Marsh Family's music creation based on the epidemic was effective in alleviating negative emotions such as panic and anxiety for the audience, bringing them emotional relief and, in the case of the vaccine, an important and potentially life-saving message.

6. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic was a great crisis and challenge for humanity as a whole. Its impact on the cultural and arts sector was shocking, but as the saying goes; 'in danger there is often opportunity'. In this particular period of the lockdown, the traditional ways of organising activities of the cultural and artistic sector no longer worked and new organisational models emerged.

The Covid-19 pandemic and its associated embargo has led many community music organizations or music groups to look for creative solutions to keep events on track and continue to keep members connected to each other. They found creative ways to rationalize the use of online communication mediums such as Zoom for their online activities. As Jane Mackey says, 'Everyone has the right to lead a culturally rich life, and it is essential to ensure that everyone is able to access enriching arts and cultural experiences, whether they are engaging in person or online.' (Note 25) For many people, participating in creative musical activities with others during the Covid-19 pandemic was able to bring positive impacts on both physical and mental health, and even enhance a sense of well-being in life. This is something that has inspired music organisations and groups to continue to explore more effective ways to organize during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated the pace of digital innovation. In some cases, increased digitisation has increased opportunities for participation by people who cannot physically engage in creative cultural activities, for example, this new way of interacting with others has greatly increased accessibility and inclusivity for participants who cannot be present for many reasons; secondly, the shift in the organisational model gives participants more diverse options for interacting with the group, more flexibility and control, more ability to meet the varied individual needs of each person and to maximize the participation of everyone in the group in an inclusive way; furthermore, digital platforms grant people the ability to reach out to as many people as possible by giving them social opportunities that were not previously available. What's more, the music that was created in response to the epidemic helped to alleviate the negative emotions of people and to enhance their happiness and well-being. In conclusion, there is no doubt that the digital innovation of community music organisations or music groups during the Covid-19 pandemic was beneficial.

However, digital innovation also faces a range of barriers, such as a lack of awareness among participants, a lack of skills for digital access, a lack of confidence or motivation, and a home environment that may not be conducive to online participation; some music organisations may have internal barriers, such as a lack of infrastructure to provide digital resources, a lack of willingness or expertise to provide digital services, and difficulties in providing an inclusive experience for all participants. For most participant groups, therefore, with the easing of restrictions in the post-epidemic period, a 'hybrid approach' combining face-to-face and digital offers an opportunity to move away from the Covid-19 pandemic in a more inclusive and accessible format. They can learn useful lessons from their online participation experiences, find their own ways of participating that are more suitable, and find a wider range of collaboration opportunities; For community music organisations, like Purple Patch Art and FYJO, this 'hybrid approach' allows them to continue the spirit of exploration and experimentation that characterized the epidemic, to be creative in their practice and to find the tools that work best for them. At the same time, strategic adjustments are made to address the barriers to digital innovation, with the aim of removing them to the greatest extent possible.

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