



# Transform

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Fran Garry  
*Guest Editor*

Lee Higgins  
*Editor*

**Lost on the way: Online community music practice during the  
COVID-19 pandemic**  
Chi Ying Lam

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Est.  
1841

YORK  
ST JOHN  
UNIVERSITY



## **Lost on the way: Online community music practice during the COVID-19 pandemic**

*Chi Ying Lam*

The Royal College of Music, London

### **Abstract**

In order to cope with COVID-19's spread, schools and organizations in Hong Kong have moved their classes and workshops online and initiated remote learning and online facilitation of music making activities. This case study describes the experiences of two music practitioners who have tried to continue sharing their music making experiences with the help of digital technologies. Qualitative data was collected from semi-structured interviews and field notes. The result shows that music technology has a valuable role to play within certain contexts; yet technological solutions are not always a suitable substitute. Traditional musical engagement and the use of physical space are considered as more relevant and engaging experiences for both practitioners and participants.

**Keywords:** Technology, COVID-19, Community Music Practice

### **Background**

Hong Kong was one of the first places to report infections of the global COVID-19 pandemic outside of mainland China. Reminded of the experience with SARS<sup>1</sup> seventeen years ago, the community reacted quickly. Schools remained closed after the lunar new year break in January 2020. People began working from home and avoiding social gatherings, restaurants, public transport, and even touching lift buttons. Borders were partially closed and quarantine restrictions for travellers became the new reality. In addition, the city has been through a prolonged unsettled period. In November 2019, parts of the city were paralyzed for a week as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> SARS refers to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. In 2003, the epidemic of SARS affected 26 countries and resulted in more than 8000 cases, including Hong Kong. More can be found on <https://www.who.int/ith/diseases/sars/en/>

the political unrest. Many people in Hong Kong have, therefore, suffered from wellbeing problems. Ng (2020) used the term ‘mental health tsunami’ to describe the situation that was brought about by repeated and direct involvement in violent conflict between protesters and police, exposure to that violence, the disintegration of communities, the declining economic conditions caused by the protest, and now the pandemic.

Despite the social restrictions, a number of organizations in Hong Kong insisted on keeping music engagement programmes running. Many have started to roll out online music engagement initiatives<sup>2</sup>, hoping to encourage positivity in the community during this critical time. Practitioners whose work focuses on inclusive musical participation were asked to deliver various online workshops in order to support the local community. According to Sloboda and O’Neill (2001), music can be used as medium for people to express themselves and evoke mood change. Various researchers suggest that engaging with music offers a variety of benefits to health and wellbeing (Weinberg & Joseph, 2017). For example, it has been claimed that engaging in musical activities can reduce stress, and generate positive feelings such as joy, relaxation and empowerment (Toyoshima et al., 2011). According to Yehuda (2011), listening to music can help lower the amount of cortisol released in stressful situations. Musical engagement can also help with regulating and managing emotion (Hallam et al., 2017). Individuals with more positive emotions experience greater life satisfaction, better wellbeing and fewer psychological complaints (Datu & King, 2016).

For many practitioners, it was the first time they have been involved in ‘onscreen’ music making. They were practising social distancing in person, but at the same time building and connecting to a ‘new’ online community. In order to capture the practitioners’ experiences, this study focuses on a single research question: what do practitioners experience when carrying on with their community music practice solely online?

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<sup>2</sup> Organizations such as Haw Par Music and Music Children’s Foundation rolled out free online concerts and moved their music making workshops online.



## **Technology in Community Music Practice: Context-Dependent**

Technology has made music available and more accessible (Creech, 2019; Frid 2019). For example, both software and hardware innovations provide new opportunities to deliver music, allowing people to engage with music in various ways. For example, people can engage actively, as creators of music, or passively, as consumers of music. According to Howell (2017), in community music practice, technological advancements can offer solutions and create new possibilities, but it can just as easily create problems, and therefore become a burden instead of a resource. Firstly, if the facilitator is not comfortable with applying the technology, and working outside of his or her expertise, the unpredictability of technology will cause disruption of workshop flow and focus. Secondly, the equipment set-up required for amplified instruments makes group music making less portable and less spontaneous. Howell argues that choices about appropriate music technologies should be context-dependent. The use of technology during the workshop delivery should not act as a disruption to the promotion of active music making and the importance of the feeling of playing music. Moreover, Medvinsky (2017) suggests that music educators are the ones who should be responsible for the choices regarding the use of music technology. They should use technology to reimagine musicianship and design opportunities to explore non-traditional ways of being a musician. Medvinsky also argues that music educators need to embrace a growth mindset and envision new possibilities, foster divergence, and think differently.

## **The Neurobiological Aspect**

With technology such as digital technology development that enables online learning, we can still certainly develop skills and techniques, but we cannot learn how to communicate with each other through music in the same way that we can in face-to-face environments. According to Camlin et al. (2020), this is because of the relational aspects of music making, the attunement and entrainment of our neurobiology, which is an important part of musical communication. Musical entrainment refers to a



situation where two or more independent rhythmic processes synchronize with each other (p.5), just like soldiers marching to the same beat (Knight, 2009). I suggest that this interpersonal experience has changed since workshop delivery has moved online. For example, varying speeds of internet bandwidth would make this process impossible to achieve. Siegel (cited in Camlin et al., 2020), refers this kind of neurobiological implication of music making with others as ‘limbic resonance’. The limbic system is the pathway for us to connect with others. It is also described as an ‘open-loop arrangement’ as it only functions healthily in one individual when it is attuned to another’s (p.4). In most instances of music making activities, it is precisely this neurobiological attunement which makes musical experience powerful. However, referring to the online music making in the current situation, it could be argued that the technology removes this neurobiological layer of intimacy and makes music making ineffective, especially in group settings.

## **Method**

A case study approach was adopted as the appropriate methodology for this study. According to Stake (2000), a ‘case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case’ (p. 435). The case study approach was selected here because the focus of this research is on understanding the perceptions of the practitioners. A relatively small sample size has been used in order to write a complex, descriptive account of music making during the pandemic. The sample for the project has been selected using ‘purposeful’ techniques (Creswell, 2007). Denscombe (2007) writes that this term ‘is applied to those situations where the researcher already knows something about the specific people or events and deliberately selects particular ones because they are seen as instances that are likely to produce the most valuable data’ (p. 17). Following the principles above, the practitioners have been selected as case studies for this paper for three reasons. Firstly, neither has prior experience with online distance facilitation. Secondly, as indicated by the open entries in their social media channels, their attitudes to the application of technology evolved significantly during the lockdown period, and these changes illustrate that such attitudes may successfully be challenged



in the research question. Thirdly, they were both asked by the organizations they work with, to continue to provide regular music making workshops for communities during the pandemic. Their backgrounds are listed in the table below. Pseudonyms have been used for both practitioners.

	Name	Main Practice	Technology Application
1	Cherry	Community choir, vocal class	Google Classroom, Live Online Concert, Zoom Class
2	Daisy	Drum circles, music therapy	Facebook Live, Logic Pro/music editing software

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection took place between January and March 2020. Interviews and informal conversations with the two music practitioners served as the primary source of data. The two practitioners are based in Hong Kong while I, the researcher, am studying in the United Kingdom. The interviews were carried out using Skype, recorded, and then transcribed. The interviews were carried out through a mix of Cantonese and English. I transcribed the interviews, translated them to English and sent them back to the practitioners to confirm whether the translation adequately conveyed their meaning. The informal conversations occurred using WhatsApp or Facebook chat after my observations, following each online session, were recorded in a research diary. As the researcher, I joined some of the online sessions as a participant. Field notes were also taken as I was observing the sessions.

Inductive analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 453) was used to examine the interview and informal conversation data. This approach allows findings to emerge as themes, rather than organizing the data to fit an existing framework. The data were organized into categories which later became my emergent themes. Finally, I reviewed the field notes and aligned them with the emergent themes from the coding. To ensure the



trustworthiness of the data interpretation, all participants verified the transcription of the interviews. Moreover, by collecting data from different sources, I was able to triangulate responses to increase the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Patton, 2002).

## **Findings**

The findings demonstrate that the use of technology can be viewed as good and/or bad and is very much context-dependent. It has provided space for practitioners to reflect on their practice, and to build a shared community by sharing knowledge about practice. However, it has also led to the problem of practitioner isolation. Practitioners are lost on the way while trying to engage in online music making activities.

### **A Pause in Life for Reflection**

Both practitioners shared some positive thoughts regarding the pandemic situation. Cherry commented:

The pandemic is a perfect pause in life. The whole world is united in fighting against a common enemy. Home-working and e-learning result in more family cohesion. Of course, there are lots of struggles with it, but at least we have time to pause and reflect. (Cherry, Personal Communication, February 2020)

She appreciates that conducting the sessions online means she can save travelling time, so can offer more sessions. Because of that, she can now use spare time to provide free sessions to people who need support for their mental health:

Why can't people look into positives? Yes, it's quite tiring when you need to face the screen instead of having live interaction with people. Yet this is a pause in our routine stuff, a new change and possibility is here. (Cherry, Personal Communication, February 2020)



Daisy, on the other hand, thinks that the online model can enable her participants to engage with an even wider range of input than usual:

In addition to my video session, there have also been a wealth of professionals from the industry that have been uploading excellent content and live sessions. A lot of the sessions are free of charge. It's a good opportunity for them to explore the world. My video is now also available for other people who are interested. Everyone is welcomed. (Daisy, Personal Communication, February 2020)

The use of technology, which enables online delivery during the pandemic, has given Daisy and Cherry space to reflect on their practice, to act, and to deliver sessions which welcome any type of learner at different levels. However, one also needs to be aware of how the use of technologies might risk excluding and further disadvantaging some members of the communities as, according to this study, it failed to address their specific needs, which will be discussed in the next section.

### **The Shared Community**

The two main challenges mentioned by the practitioners were physical distance from the students and/or not knowing where or how to begin online classes. Both of them reported turning to the internet to search for initial resources. However, even though Hong Kong was one of the few major cities to avoid a lockdown, stricter measures on social distancing had taken effect ahead of other cities. It has been difficult for the practitioners to find resources to support their needs. Cherry, who has a school-teaching training background, decided to seek support in 'blended learning tools' (Bonk & Graham, 2012), a learning approach that mixes various event-based activities. Through the internet, she has connected with educators who are comfortable switching between approaches in conducting learning and teaching activities:





Choral training is always aiming to build communal experience, at least traditionally. I was not sure how to do it until the internet helped me to connect with people who have had these experiences. I understand this is just a change of approach of facilitation, but this is not going to affect my belief and my practice. (Cherry, Personal Communication, February 2020)

Daisy, during the pre-COVID-19 times, occasionally tried online learning for specific purposes, but suddenly it has become the only way of doing things. This switch has led to great fear for her:

I worry about how my participants will get on to the system. Even in my organization, they only have a very few systems and processes in place for an immediate and comprehensive switch to online sessions. (Daisy, Personal Communication, February 2020)

Practitioners are in a very special position during this time, as their practices have been encouraged and promoted, which can help the unsettled community. However, in the mixed background communities that these practitioners are working with, often with those who are vulnerable, one needs to be realistic about the technology that participants have available to them and the reliability of their internet connection. The technology has added a new dimension to inequality, especially with the low levels of digital literacy in some communities.

Daisy shared her concerns on social media channels and, very soon, she received a response from a travel company which was willing to sponsor her organization and participants by providing free rental of portable Wi-Fi during this time in order to ensure stable internet connections. Since most of her participants are school-aged children, parental involvement in setting up technology is crucial to her sessions. Her participants are mainly from under-privileged families whose parents usually work long hours. Due to the restrictions, many parents have been forced to take unpaid



leave in order to take care of their children. This means that they are now able to observe their children participating in Daisy's sessions:

It's nice to see the response from kids and parents. At the beginning, parents think the kids are wasting time as they should be doing their schoolwork since school has been switched to online... The kids won't have the drum [*djembe*] at home, so I have asked them to use every day found objects to create music. Slowly you see how parents are moved by their kids' excitement. Some of them even join in. (Daisy, Personal Communication, March 2020)

For both practitioners, the digital technology encouraged the preparation for online teaching as a shared process, where 'shared' involves a deeper and richer experience as it builds a community beyond the practitioner and the participants. This shared process encompasses family, co-workers and collective identities such as community, culture and training backgrounds. This process is also, in fact, the learning culture of the Chinese student. It is a fluid structure dependent on many variables, but it always references the family and community rather than the self (Salili et al., 2001, p. 208). These cases illustrate examples of ways that participants and facilitators utilized their learning community to support their music making.

### **The Isolated Practitioners**

In community music practice, creative group work is emphasized, as opposed to individual undertakings. There is usually a lot of room for 'active and creative musical doing' through which individual contributions to the whole are embraced (Higgins, 2007). Research related to group singing and music emphasizes its social dimension (Welch et al., 2014). At the heart of the music making activity is the co-construction of a social reality through music:

I definitely think it is a wise choice to move everything online and practice physical distancing. It's not perfect but, to be honest, I won't feel safe for both

myself and the participants to meet regularly during this turbulent time. We need to protect each other. (Daisy, Personal Communication, March 2020)

In the quote above, Daisy discusses the significant role of the online session. She has accepted this as an alternative, as the intimacy of face-to-face music making is no longer possible due to safety concerns. Currently, Daisy pre-records a series of backing recordings for her group participants' personal practice, providing different mixes with different vocal parts. Her participants report that they find these very useful for rehearsal, as it gives them a feeling of singing and connecting with other real people instead of just singing to the computer screen. However, she sadly added: 'The only downside of music making exclusively via online is missing out on the relationships and bonds that form as a result of 'live' jam sessions' (Daisy, Personal Communication, March 2020).

Cherry's view also echoed with this comment. She felt as if she was losing the participants as she was not able to connect and react to their act of music making immediately:

When you are in a group setting, no matter how many people are in the room, you were actually still able to critically assess situations or things and notice something unique of your session which could help guide the decision during the process. I found myself start to lose this ability when I sat in front of the screen. The participants become very passive and sometimes I am not sure if the session is still meaningful to them. (Cherry, Personal Communication, March 2020)

According to Camlin et.al (2020), group singing is entangled with interpersonal neurobiological intimacy as it provides people with the opportunity to experience the healing potential of feeling connected with others but without the deep intensity of intimacy becoming overwhelming. However, the online delivery removed this layer



of intimacy. This also led to a common theme from the data revealing how the online practice made practitioners feel like an ‘other’. The practitioners in the study have used terms like ‘stranger’ and ‘isolated’ to describe how they felt about themselves in the online setting. The online software tends to give more control to the facilitator/teacher, for example, by muting the participants’ microphones or controlling the display on the screen alongside other things. However, they felt like they were leveraging their position of power to impart change for their students, which is quite different to the notion in live sessions where group work and collaboration is emphasized. Cherry is actively engaging in discussion with her colleagues regarding exploring new ways to help ease the tension. While she agreed the pandemic has not allowed enough time for her to prepare herself, in order to provide a pleasant online community music practice experience for her participants, she has refused to complain or be passive. She thinks practitioners need to voice their needs and aspirations in order to inspire the technology that will continue to improve in order to meet their needs.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

As digital technology connects people in their homes, its limitations for learning are all there for the world to explore. With the popularity of online practice, we can see inequalities within the community. This not only refers to those who have the devices, a good internet connection and living space, but also to those who have the ability to self-direct their learning. This leads to a possible future research area on student self-direction in digital music making contexts. It is also a great reminder of the critical importance of practitioners’ work: it is not just about music making but about socialization, care and coaching, community and shared space - not things that can be too easily addressed by technology at this moment.

The pandemic is giving us, as technology-users, a massive insight into what music making can look like in the future. As mentioned by the practitioners in this study, one can see different opportunities ahead. However, a strong community in which practitioners can support each other is crucial. Currently, there are a lot of negative



comments associated with online practice during lockdown, since people are experiencing different levels of frustration due to a lack of preparation and support. In other words, people are lost. When the pandemic is over, music making practice may be revolutionized by this experience. Or it might revert to the traditional ways of making music. But the world will have changed, and, with the economic recession, it will demand more. We can be slow to change but the post-pandemic economy may demand it. However, real changes often take place in times of crisis. It may be a transformational experience for the world, where practitioners will have to step up and be the agents of change.

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