Transform

NEW VOICES IN COMMUNITY MUSIC

Exploring Best Practices in Online Community music

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative study with the primary aim of exploring best practices in online community music as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was undertaken in the first few months of the pandemic as part of my studies in the MA Community Music at the University of Limerick. The literature review explores issues of language, accessibility, and community music values applied to an online setting. I also draw from interviews with three current community music practitioners who have moved their projects online. I respond to the question: How can community musicians best serve the people they work with in an online setting?

Introduction

I first wrote this paper as a student pursuing a Masters in community music at the University of Limerick. In March 2020, our university physically closed due to COVID-19. I wondered how community musicians might respond, and how we might adjust projects accordingly. Embarking on my new career, I asked: how can community musicians best serve the people they work with in an online setting?

Typically, community music relies on groups of people making music together in the same room. While there is no single definition of community music, Veblen (2007) notes:

> CM programs characteristically emphasize lifelong learning and access for all. There is a strong understanding in many programs that the *social and personal well-being of all participants is as important as their musical learning (if not more important)*. CM leaders frequently emphasize the power of music to *bring people together*, and to nurture both individual and collective identity. (Veblen 2007, p. 2, italics added)

If community music values emphasize 'social and personal well-being' and '[bringing] people together,' we need to translate these ideals to an online setting (Veblen 2007, p. 2). How can community musicians create a social space for making music together from different locations?

While there is research on virtual music making, especially in the field of music education (Albert 2015; Biasutti 2015; Bayley and Waldron 2020; Cayari 2020; Parrti 2014), at the time of writing, there is a gap in research for online community music. What defines community music for many people is being together - in person. Community musicians have worked quickly to bring their projects online, which raises other issues - how many participants have access to a computer, a phone or reliable internet? How many participants have the luxury of a quiet space without interruption? And how many participants have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic – across race, gender, and disability lines? As we meet this new challenge, we must learn from fellow community musicians, and open up the conversation to ask, 'what is *online* community music?'

In this paper, I conduct a qualitative study to learn about the territory of 'online community music,' through a literature review and interviews with three community music practitioners who moved their projects online in the first months of the pandemic. By drawing from research about online musicking (Small 1998), I ask: how can community musicians best serve participants in an online setting?

Literature Review

Language

The use of language surrounding 'online' music is varied. Terms include: online, in-person, face-to-face, offline, virtual, synchronous, asynchronous, pre-recorded, live, blended, and convergent. Bayley and Waldron (2020) explore and compare the benefits of 'online [pre-recorded tutorials] and face-to-face [offline] learning experiences' as well as the use of 'convergent' modes of learning (p. 47). They suggest a convergent learning model: [A]dult learners often prefer to use multiple resources when engaging in music-making - accessing the digital world one moment and choosing to participate in a group face-to-face learning experience the next (Bayley and Waldron 2020, p. 48). Biasutti (2018) discusses the differences between 'virtual environments and real-world experiences in education' in terms of 'collaborative online music composition' (p. 474). She notes the distinction between 'synchronous' - live; everyone is online together interacting at the same time - and 'asynchronous' sessions - pre-recorded, in which participants engage with materials and contribute at their convenience (Biasutti 2018).

Michielse and Partti (2015) discuss the importance of 'small creative acts' in 'online' composing (p. 27). Their online music platform allows users to draw from the 'collective intelligence' in what is 'an inherently social process' (p. 36). In this case, 'online composing' could be done synchronously or asynchronously. Michielse and Partti discuss 'community interaction, creative production and sharing,' and the 'musical participatory culture' that derives from the online music platform (p. 27). Waldron (2018) discusses 'online music communities,' proposing that they 'can function as significant spaces of Community music activity,' including 'illustrations of practice from current online and convergent music communities' (p. 109). She notes that 'Community Music researchers and practitioners have not yet fully realized nor utilized the power of online music community—but the future holds enticing possibilities for Community Music practice for those who choose to go there' (p. 110).

Accessibility

Online community music projects are affected by issues of accessibility - access to the internet, devices, and technology. On the other hand, online community music can be accessed by people who are unable to leave their homes. Waldron states:

> Community Music practitioners…give voice and place through music to communities outside of traditional power structures—the disenfranchised, the disabled, or the geographically isolated…Community Music practitioners [can] develop and empower online and convergent music communities. (Waldron 2018, p. 125)

Baker and Ward (2002) note that the internet provides access to community members - if they have it at home:

> The Internet...permits members of a geographically defined community to interact…without requiring a…physical or temporal presence. Moreover, the Internet allows people with temporary or permanent handicaps, who might otherwise be excluded from community membership, to be active participants. (Baker and Ward 2002, p. 210)

The internet can provide accessibility for some, but what does online Community music look like for people who do not have internet or a device at home?

Community music Values Applied Online

Higgins (2012) describes some of the traits of community musicians. Below are the values I believe we can directly apply to an online setting:

> Community musicians:
>
> • Are committed to the idea that *everybody* has the right and ability to make, create, and enjoy their own music;
> • Seek to enable *accessible* music-making opportunities for members of the community;
> • Seek to foster *confidence* in participants' creativity;
> • Work within *flexible facilitation modes* and are committed to multiple participant/ facilitator relationships and processes;
> • Recognize the value and use of music to *include disenfranchised and disadvantaged individuals or groups.*
>
> (Higgins, 2012, p. 5, Italics added)

These values inform practices in an online setting. What opportunities can we take advantage of during a pandemic? 'Flexible facilitation modes' are especially important in an online setting (Higgins 2012, p. 5). 'Including disenfranchised and disadvantaged individuals or groups' poses challenges in an online setting, and brings up issues of access (p. 5). How do we ensure that participants can access a device, the internet, and a quiet space for online community music sessions? If we are committed to the idea that 'everybody has the right' to make music, how do we make that happen (p. 5).

Interviews

Participants

I posed these questions in three 'semi-structured interviews' with community musicians who have moved their practices online (Leavy 2014)[1].

Ann Blake (Limerick, IE) is a community musician and artist. One of her projects is facilitating a Limerick-based choir for people with Parkinson's disease. Ann has been leading weekly sessions online throughout the pandemic, and plans to continue running sessions online.

Alysia Lee (Maryland, US) founded the El Sistema-inspired Sister Cities Girlchoir (SCG) for girls in Philadelphia, PA; Camden, NJ; and Baltimore, MD (SCG 2020). She describes SCG as 'an organization that uses music as a tool for social change' (Lee 2020, personal comm.). In June 2020, Alysia created a virtual summer camp called Girl Power 2020, and planned the 2020-2021 season of SCG to be entirely virtual.

Seonaid Murray (Belfast, UK) is a community musician who works as 'Outreach Officer' for Moon Base Projects, run by The Black Box. Moon Base Projects run weekly arts and music workshops for and by people with learning disabilities, including 'Moon Music' – a weekly Music workshop (Black Box Belfast 2020). In March 2020, Seonaid quickly transferred community sessions online using Zoom (Zoom 2020).

In August 2020, I met with Anne, Alysia, and Seonaid for a personal interview over Zoom. I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed these interviews to find common themes; creating community online, what works well, challenges, and new opportunities. I explore these themes further, citing examples from the interviews.

Creating Community Online

An essential theme for these community musicians has been figuring out how to create a sense of community in an online setting. In addition to making music, there is the social aspect of being together, chatting, and sharing a cup of tea during breaks. Veblen (2007) has noted that the social aspects of community music can be just as important - if not more

important – than the musical aspects. With this in mind, how do community musicians create a welcoming and social space in online settings?

Alysia Lee translated the 'essential elements' of her Sister Cities Girlchoir rehearsals to an online setting. SCG had an opening routine to start each in-person rehearsal. Staff members are waiting to greet students 20 minutes before rehearsals start. Students sign in and go to a pre-choir space, where there are more staff members making sure the students are comfortable. When rehearsal begins, everyone moves to a new room. Alysia says:

> I think [geography] is really important...there is a musical call to the circle...a short icebreaker…and then we go to the rehearsal space…everyone gets an affirmation of "I got your back" from at least four different singers...How do we recreate that - and that's taken us years to develop...how do we translate that online so that every kid feels: "When I showed up, someone greeted me, there was a moment where I got to see everyone assembled together, and remind myself of the safety of this space"...What's important is that those feelings remain...that's how we build community. (Lee 2020, personal comm.)

Seonaid Murray defines community music as 'a safe, positive environment to encourage people to express themselves creatively through music' (Murray 2020, personal comm.). She recognizes the importance of familiarity and routine when delivering online workshops:

> It's that sense of community that you should be able to create. I would always make sure there is a welcoming atmosphere - there's a friendly face, something familiar…the same routine - making people feel secure, because working online is unknown for some. (Murray 2020, personal comm.)

Ann Blake keeps her online workshop routines consistent with what she was doing in person. She says, 'It's quite ritualistic…I try to mix up some of the exercises...but I also realize people like structure.' Ann begins each online workshop with a few minutes of chat and check-in, to make sure that the social aspect is not lost:

> The social aspect - that's what's been lost. Normally, they'd arrive, we'd get going, we'd have a (half-hour) tea break in the middle - and so with that lost, it's very important they get to chat...they need each other. (Blake 2020, personal comm.)

Clearly, these community musicians have considered routines as essential community builders in the online setting. They take advantage of every opportunity to build community – greetings, pre-session rituals, break times, snack times – in addition to the music making.

What Works Well

In her online sessions, Ann Blake champions flexibility. She says, 'I'll be prepared...but I am in my house, and they are in their houses. Let's not pretend if stuff goes wrong. People like that there is an ease and flexibility there' (Blake 2020, personal comm.). Ann believes that reflecting on her practice is important, whether the sessions are virtual or in person. She and her colleague exchange voice messages after a session to reflect on how it went. Ann also stresses the importance of laughter, bonding, and a sense of normalcy:

> I think especially when you're ill…you have a lot of appointments, a lot of medications. So to go into a room and to just be a human being with a sense of humor…and to laugh…that's important. I think they are probably used to people tip-toeing around them a lot so I like to break that...fun is a big element. (Blake 2020, personal comm.)

Even in virtual sessions, Ann finds opportunities for humor and fun. She adapts games, for example, throwing an imaginary ball from one person's screen to another and saying their name, so that each person has a chance to hear their own voice and the voices of the other group members.

Ann's typical Zoom session starts with warm-ups, including physical stretches and vocal exercises. Ann says:

> One of the problems of Parkinson's is the voice loses power and the muscle gets weaker, so singing is really important - apart from the joy that comes with singing - physically, it's a very important thing. Because Parkinson's sufferers' bodies stiffen, moving and stretching and breathing…is very important. (Blake 2020, personal comm.)

Ann continues with warm up chants or rounds. She records herself singing one part of a round on her phone and sings along to it during the online session. This allows participants to hear the counterpoint even if they can't hear their fellow group members, so they do not miss 'the lovely magic that happens when [they] sing against each other.' For the online sessions, the participants can hear Ann and their own voices, but not their fellow group members,

because everyone is muted except for Ann. She wishes they could sing together, but time lag between devices prevents it. When teaching a new song, she shares her screen to display lyrics, because it forces group members to look up at the screen.

Ann encourages participants to use nearby objects to accompany themselves. In person, they'd have access to instruments and shakers. She tells them, 'Bring something to hit or to shake, or clap your hands. You've all got [pill bottles!]' She incorporates actions into songs for online workshops because she realizes that they help people focus when seated at home. Alysia Lee decided to run a virtual summer camp called Girl Power 2020 - not only for SCG singers, but free to anyone who signed up. She wanted to bring the diversity of experiences (a staple of in person summer camps) to the virtual camp. She and her staff brainstormed topics, called for presenters and ended up with 43 facilitators leading workshops from all over the world. She planned an entirely virtual SCG season for 2020-2021, so members of her staff served as 'stage managers' for each Girl Power 2020 workshop as practice. She says:

> [You] have to feel confident in the platforms...just like you do in your physical classroom. If something goes wrong then you can say, "Okay, well everybody turn over here, and let's do it this way"...but you can't fall apart. I wanted the teachers to have an opportunity to gain that facility without being on the spot. (Lee 2020, personal comm.)

Alysia and her staff stretched the limits of Zoom to engage the students in Girl Power 2020. After the virtual camp concluded, Alysia met with her staff for a reflection session, discussing the technology, presenters' input, and applications for the upcoming SCG virtual season.

In the 2020-2021 season, Alysia used Padlet as an online composition tool for SCG members (Padlet 2020). Students uploaded their ideas to Padlet and documented their compositional process. The framework guided students through five stages ('Inspire, Explore, Elevate, Assess, and Present') as they gathered ideas, artifacts, and resources. In each stage, there were questions to answer: 'What do I know about the big idea so far? Why does this idea matter to me?' There were spaces to receive feedback, to reflect on work, and to present final songs. Alysia says:

> This helps people talk about their work. Often when we work with kids, and we say "tell us about your work," they say "I don't know"...it puts them on the spot…but you can just share this information [on the Padlet]…I think it's so much more important - the crafting of the work than the work itself. (Lee 2020, personal comm.)

This creative map framework allows people to fully explore their creativity, providing structure and consolidating online storage.

For Seonaid Murray, the transition from in-person to online workshops happened practically overnight. She found that many of the tools she used in person were transferable to an online setting, except for 'the main one, which is playing and singing in unison' (Murray 2020, personal comm.). The group members love to chat throughout the sessions, so she only encourages people to mute themselves if someone is performing a solo. Seonaid created an etiquette for online sessions:

> 'Try to be comfortable at home, try to figure out how to mute and unmute yourself if you want to hear better'…Our group so far have really enjoyed *not* being muted…[they] are all adults with learning disabilities and we want the sense of group ownership that we have worked so hard to establish…However, if there is a guest facilitator playing something soft and someone is talking in the background, we…mute them [because] it's really hard to perform if someone is talking. (Murray 2020, personal comm.)

What has worked well for Seonaid is using 'call and response' songs - something Moon Music used frequently before the pandemic. While it is not possible to perfectly line up everyone's voice, there is a rhythm to the call and response - each member is waiting the same amount of time before repeating what they hear.

Seonaid has found that having a theme for each online session provides opportunities for creativity. If the theme is 'the beach,' she lets the group members and volunteer team know in advance and everyone is invited to bring 'an idea, a poem, or a sound to the session.' She also uses her instrument - saxophone - during online sessions, and finds it to be a good leveler because it is loud. She has shared with the group members, 'If you want to be heard, make a really loud sound, and then the little green line on Zoom will frame your image and your sound will be heard above the others.' She has been giving her group members tasks, such as leading the group in an activity. Seonaid, the volunteers, and the group members are all learning and becoming more comfortable with the online platform together.

Challenges

The challenges of bringing community music online are many and varied. Ann notes that she has less control in online sessions, as opposed to when she is physically in a room with

people. Trying to 'read the room' online is more difficult, especially when group members are muted. In person, Ann can hear when group members are struggling and adjusts accordingly. Now that she can't hear them, she has to trust her instinct. She says, 'We are not a choir at the moment - we are a number of individuals singing into the abyss together' (Blake 2020, personal comm.). She notes that 'Online, especially with Parkinson's and when they are older…sometimes they fall asleep - that's a tendency, so [getting] people engaged is [trickier].'

Some group members can't grasp the technology or even access a device; 'If they don't have a family member who can support them, then they just can't engage.' Ann has lost quite a few group members since moving online. Another challenge for Ann has been helping her group members set up their singing spaces from afar. She wants participants' screens to be raised higher, so they are not looking down. She hopes to make an instructional video to show how to create a space that will be good for their bodies, so they are looking up and standing upright.

For Seonaid, working with people with learning disabilities has its own set of challenges in an online setting. She is concerned with safeguarding the group members, reminding them that joining a workshop from a public place broadcasts the workshop and all participants to onlookers. She encourages group members to set up quiet, comfortable spaces in their homes - but not everyone has a private space. Seonaid says, 'Group members maybe haven't fully understood that people can see into their space, which creates a bit of an unknown factor…Creating a safe, positive environment for people to express themselves in is much more challenging online' (Murray 2020, personal comm.).

The biggest issue for Seonaid is that some group members do not have internet access or devices. Moon Base Projects succeeded in obtaining funding from The Community Foundation of Northern Ireland and The National Lottery Community Fund for Northern Ireland – which enabled them to supply six tablets to the group members with greatest need. Seonaid believes that the pandemic has magnified digital poverty and other inequalities that were not evident before. The Moon Base team has reached out to group members in different ways:

> There are some people that we are not seeing in online sessions…I make phone calls to group members twice a week, send out activity packs and deliver art resources…[We] don't want to make people feel like they're missing out, but

> [we]…remind people that we miss them and we're thinking about them. Coronavirus has thrown up social injustices that were present in society already but make people feel more cut off…because of geographical location [and] socio-economic factors. (Murray 2020, personal comm.)

In addition to internet/device access, Seonaid and her team would like group members to have access to instruments. They have applied for instrument funding and hope to deliver handheld percussion instruments to participants.

For Alysia, one of the greatest challenges is the digital divide. She wants her students to have their own devices 'so that they can create something…and [not] worry that it might be deleted' (Lee 2020, personal comm.). She believes that 'Community Arts partners and arts educators have to work together' to access resources for students. Alysia managed to acquire 35 Chromebooks which she distributed to SCG members in Fall 2020.

For some choir members, even if they have a device, they still may not be able to access the internet if they live in rural areas. According to Alysia:

> The devices [alone] aren't going to cut it - there's no internet…no poles…no wires in the ground. Talk about a digital divide...In urban centers we are thinking about it in terms of poverty, but it's not always poverty - sometimes it is just location...Covid has really exposed [the divide] more clearly...Instead of us [arguing] about why certain people have resources and other people don't, I think it's become clear...this is not fair. (Lee 2020, personal comm.)

Clearly, for Alysia, systemic inequities contribute to the digital divide. Alysia believes that it is time to change the systems to create equitable access for everyone. She hopes that lessons from the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement will create lasting change.

'Accessibility' appears to be the greatest challenge for all three community musicians, and we must expand our definition of the word. The pandemic has brought to light a deeper understanding of 'access' – it's not just about accessing wires, internet, devices – it's dependent on geography, systemic inequities, and infrastructure. While some are seeking internet access, still others, who cannot leave their homes, can *only* access community music via the internet. Higgins' (2012) belief that 'Everybody has the right' to make music has shifted to 'Everybody needs access,' whether that means accessing the internet, a device, or making music from home (p.5).

New Opportunities

All three community musicians noted a geographic advantage to working online. While there are barriers for some to access online workshops, for others, online access is preferable. Ann has group members calling from other parts of Ireland, who could not otherwise join the Limerick sessions. Others in her group are too ill to travel, but can access online workshops (Blake 2020, personal comm.). The same goes for Seonaid in Belfast, who now has members accessing the workshops from outside of Belfast, from as far away as Spain and the USA. She says, 'Some group members were saying the online sessions suit them more because they don't have to travel...that's what we'll think about going forward - how to mix and match…and take a blended approach' (Murray 2020, personal comm.). Alysia appreciates that her choir members had a chance to meet students and take workshops with teachers from around the world during her virtual summer camp (Lee 2020, personal comm.). These opportunities would not have been possible to create in person.

Ann's initial frustration with moving online quickly turned into an opportunity to learn to use technology to her advantage. She recalls:

> It's all about reading the room, so when I had to get over my initial "this is impossible!" reaction, I went "Okay, it's a different kind of room, but they're still here, and they can all engage". This is doable, but it's different. (Blake 2020, personal comm.)

Ann prepares for online sessions differently now, formatting lyric sheets to be easily viewed on a shared screen, and having all documents open and ready to go; 'I want to minimize them looking at me struggling with technology.' She also makes sure that she is well lit and visible to her group members.

Alysia found an online tool in Padlet that she is excited about; it keeps members connected and engaged, and she loves to see what her students create. She believes this framework '[allows] everyone to be celebrated' - whether they are 'deep thinkers' or have 'naturally beautiful voices' (Lee 2020, personal comm.). Seonaid's group members had the chance to put together their first music video as part of the virtual Féile an Phobail 2020. Some members recorded videos of themselves and sent them to Seonaid, while others contributed their photos and art. Though assembling the music video and mixing the audio was a lot of work, it was an exciting opportunity. Additionally, the Belfast group invited

members from the Coffeehouse Project (NY/NJ) to their online sessions to collaborate and socialize. Seonaid admits that these sorts of 'global working' opportunities were only available once they moved online (Murray 2020, personal comm.).

Conclusion

Each of these community musicians employs reflection, trial and error, and collaboration to make the best possible online experience. They demonstrate such values as flexibility, accessibility, and reflexivity (Higgins 2012, p. 5). The pandemic has impacted their work for over a year now, which poses a challenge for community music to continue sustainably online. Perhaps the future of the practice is blended, with greater agency offered in the choice between meeting in person or online. Looking ahead, Alysia will continue to advocate for resources the students need, and hopes that the digital divide will gradually decrease. In the meantime, she advises, 'You just have to land on something - pick a technology, and spend time exploring...and then push it to the limits. What we don't want …is…tons of different technology and no home base for the kids' (Lee 2020, personal comm.). For Alysia, that technology includes Zoom and Padlet.

Seonaid hopes to provide some blended online/in person sessions, although she is not sure if one person could facilitate that: 'I feel we should try online sessions…"real life" sessions and some mixed…then I run into the problem of having group members passively watching an activity – so perhaps…a designated volunteer [can] monitor the webcam while I am facilitating the "real life" group – just to make sure that everyone remains engaged – it will be an interesting challenge!' (Murray 2020, personal comm.) She hopes to deliver sessions in whatever way she can so that group members can express themselves, be heard, feel they are making a valuable contribution, and communicate effectively. Ann will continue online sessions if her group members want, or until they can meet in a room together. She meets their needs as much as possible online – participants experience a bit of community online and do physical and vocal exercises. When they can meet in person, Ann is considering a blended approach. Because some people can't physically attend sessions, Ann might set up tablets on chairs, to have people stream in and sing along from a distance. Ann says, 'That's just the next phase of madness that we are going to find ourselves in' (Blake 2020, personal comm.).

As we navigate the post-pandemic phase of online community music, we have tools to create the best possible experience for the people we work with. Online platforms may not be our first choice, but they are what we've got. Baker and Ward (2002) insist that 'ensuring that everyone is "hooked up to the Internet" cannot, by itself, create a community that does not, in one sense or another, already exist. Wires do not a community make' (p. 211). While this may be true, community musicians are clearly well suited to the challenge of creating community online. They are flexible, responsive, adaptive, and reflexive, always advocating for disenfranchised or disadvantaged groups. community musicians use their own struggles (i.e. technology challenges) to learn alongside their participants. If the internet is what we have at our disposal now, then our next challenge will be to extend its reach to those who have never been served before. The pandemic has taught us that the need for community and connection through music is stronger now than ever.

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[1] All three interviewees agreed to be named.