

Guest Author COVID-19 – You Can't Stop the Beat!

Alongkorn Parivudhiphongs⁺ (Thailand)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise a myriad of artistic expressions on the internet and social media platforms. What explains this turn to music and the performing arts during the crisis? At least four reasons matter. Popular music, in particular, has proved useful in communicating key messages about COVID-19 and how to combat it to a broad audience. Music and other forms of artistic expression can help to create a sense of community and belonging at a time of uncertainty. They are powerful ways in which to express appreciation and gratitude. And they provide levity at a time of anxiety.

Keywords COVID-19, Music, Creativity

⁺ Alongkorn Parivudhiphongs, Lecturer/Researcher, Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. voice: +66(0)89678-4344 fax: +66(0)2218-2140 email: alongkorn.pa@chula.ac.th; alongnum@gmail.com.

Although the COVID-19 epidemic has been fraught with fears and a feeling of loss of control, the world is still alive with the sound of music. As seen on social media and internet platforms, people around the globe gather to perform morale-boosting songs to express a sense of communion and that “we are in this crisis together.”

At a time that tests human souls, singing songs, playing instruments and dancing can be simple acts of “togetherness,” as seen on a multitude of viral clips. While on patrol, Spanish policemen played guitar and sang for neighborhoods in quarantine; Italians were singing their national anthem from their balconies after the lockdown, and residents in the US sang hit songs from their apartment windows to generate a sense of unity in the battle with COVID-19.

Popular culture has also become a powerful and significant source of encouragement in this battle. Some world-renowned artists have composed new songs to show support for health professionals who fight against the new coronavirus. The internet is full of free concerts, and eminent singers and artists are beaming out art from their homes. Meanwhile, parodies of well-known hits – from Queen to Adele – have proliferated on Youtube (Menon, 2020), just as fun-to-dance steps have popped up on Tik Tok to show human creativity during the isolation period. Many online users have altered lyrics from popular songs to ensure 20-seconds of handwashing that is believed to kill the virus.

From apartment block sing-a-longs to online parodies, people from all walks of life across the globe have generated music together as the world has locked down to curb the spread of the novel virus. Why do we turn to music in this crisis and what are the roles of song and dance in times of uncertainty? A closer look at the roles of music during the epidemic reveals four perspectives.

First, music can communicate key information in an accessible fashion. Singing songs that remind people of the need to effectively clean their hands, to stay safe at home and to watch out for each other can be a very effective tool to deliver concise and easy-to-understand messages about self-protection and public safety.

As seen in the daily news reports of the Covid-19 pandemic, the coverage usually pays special attention to the numbers of infected new patients and the death toll. We have also been flooded with complex statistics driven by big data, promising scientific findings, and diverse professional medical opinions, and the pronouncements of public health organizations. These many mixed messages may not be easy for all to understand. So there is an effort to adjust such complex information into a compact form known as “infotainment,” including animation, poetry, short movie-making and song-writing. The integration of information through entertainment media has been used in journalism and online storytelling for decades. In addition to being entertained, audience can quickly get information on what to do to prevent COVID-19 infections.

For example, the principal of a school in New Zealand adapted “Do-Re-Mi” from a Hollywood classic, *The Sound of Music*, to teach young students how to protect themselves from Covid-19; and the clip received over 7 million views worldwide (Andelane, 2020). The Japanese comedian Pikotaro, noted for his children’s song “PPAP” (Pen Pineapple Apple Pen), altered his content to the coronavirus-related song, PPAP-2020 (Pray for People and Peace) for frequent handwashing advice (Kyodo, 2020). Rhyme of words can help audiences to remember key messages as quick and accessible communication.

Some governments also use music as part of their educational campaign. In Malawi, for instance, the state message for COVID-19 prevention on twitter with #coronavirus is being spread through a song and dance troupe that carries out civic education at a public hospital (Masters, 2020). While it must be noted that the information that has been adapted to this entertainment format should not be expected to become the main source of medical information, its compact content however can help shift audiences from fear to educational communication. Second, we can see how music may create a sense of community and unity. Amidst the active enforcement and endorsement of social distancing, music can actually help connect emotionally us and reduce a sense of isolation and such feelings as loneliness and alienation. As many mainstream and online media report, we see many people joining to make music from different parts of the world. Many sing together in an effort to encourage themselves and their neighbors to save their cities. The citizens of Wuhan sang “Keep it up, Wuhan!” and other patriotic songs from their windows (Langley and Coutts, 2020). In March, Italians stood on their balconies to sing the national anthem to boost morale on the fourth day of a nationwide lockdown (Horowitz, 2020), just like New York City residents on their apartment windows sang The Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine” to express their feelings when trapped at home (Brown, 2020).

Music can help reduce stress from working and staying at home. Some families have performed musical showtunes, for instance, “One Day More” from *Les Misérables* to mimically demonstrate their mandatory toleration to the lockdown and to boost their fighting spirit (Wamsley, 2020). The use of the human voice and minimal instrumentation or percussion reminds of some traditional forms of music when life has been difficult yet our strong spirits bind us together. In this way, music helps us to form cultural bonds and personal identity and provides the opportunity to express ourselves.

Evidently, we can cope with uncertainty because music help provide us personal comfort and a sense of belonging to our community. Hence performing music can be a social balm to sooth anxieties and enhancing a sense of togetherness in defiance of the virus’ threat to the global community.

Third, music delivers messages of appreciations and support to health-care workers who take risks in the front line. During the corona virus crisis, the internet has been jam-packed with songs performed on Zoom, different dancing on Tik Tok and spontaneous musical flash mobs with coordinated displays of gratitude to health

professionals. In fact, some musical displays features just singing, clapping, and banging in order to recognize the efforts of grandiose the so-called heroes fighting to save patients' lives.

Artists in the showbiz also acknowledge the merit of these health-care workers. In the US, over 20 songs – varied from country to rock and rap – have been newly-composed in order to address issues emerging from the epidemic, to promote self-protection and public hygiene, and to lift human spirits in time of adversity (Fekadu, 2020). This includes Bon Jovi's "Do What You Can," Mike Campbell's "Lockdown," and Drive-by Truckers' "Quarantine Together." Like their western peers, Asian artists from Thailand (Marukatat, 2020) and Lao People's Democratic Republic (Mixayboua, 2020) have composed new songs or done covers of songs with messages of encouragement and gratefulness to the medical heroes fighting against COVID-19. Such melodies provide reassurance that those in the medical professions are being supported by the community in this time of need.

The bonding that arises through COVID-19 related music is reciprocated. Patients in some American hospitals heard songs from some doctors and nurses (A. Yang, 2020; Jividen, 2020) who chanted their own music for an extra boost during their working hours to handle their stress and encourage their patients to recover. Health-care workers in Nairobi, Kenya kicked off their risky days with Zumba class and belting out to prompt physical alertness and mental strength before returning to treat Covid-19 patients (Youtube, 2020). Finally, music is, simply put, an entertaining tool that alleviates public concerns about COVID-19. Besides health-care workers, we can rely on our laughter as best medicine. If the crisis makes us sick and lose control over our daily life, the joy of music can help us gradually regain the life we used to live and the world we know.

The British comedian Dana Jay Bein mutated Queen's epic "Bohemian Rhapsody," altering the beginning of the song to "Is this a fever? Or Is this just allergies?" He went on to amend the popular lyrics into "Mama, I just killed a man. I didn't stay inside in bed. I walked past him. And now he's dead" (Sullivan, 2020). Meanwhile, YouTuber Jon Pumper racked up more than two million views for his cover of the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive," titled "Stayin' Inside," and YouTuber Chris Mann has two popular song parody videos of Madonna's Vogue to Adele's Hello expressing physio-psychological distresses during the isolation session at home, as well as satirizing the government's decisions (WXYZ, 2020).

Some artists modify their famous songs. Neil Diamond has parodied himself! His classic song "Sweet Caroline" has updated lyrics in light of COVID-19 (R. Yang, 2020). Gloria Estefan offers "Put Your Mask On!," a re-working of her upbeat 1989 single "Get On Your Feet" to remind you about a necessary accessory; while To-drick Hall features "Mask, Gloves, Soap, Scrubs," remixing his original song "Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels" (Fekadu, 2020).

Some artists offer live performance from their living rooms, making the experience so much more real and personal, while asking for donations to support those

in trouble as a consequence of COVID-19 lockdown. Whether this is just another creative way to lessen anxiety or another form of infotainment, such music parodies and new songs give voices to humanity in that they address problems and solutions, as well as express concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The many music forms that have emerged during the crisis also reflect, if not represent, the endless creativity of humans. Creativity can be viewed in many ways, such as initiative. We often emphasize that creativity is the use of human imagination or originality in creating works and arts. We value new ideas that have never known or occurred before – like composing a new piece of music. But as human civilization evolves, we can consider creativity derived from inspiration from existing methods and concepts to create new things, usually called “copy and develop” – as seen in altering the lyrics of old songs to fit the new meaning in the face of COVID-19.

Today, creativity may also be a result of “mix and match” in that we take initiatives of the past to deconstruct their essence in order to reconstruct a new, creative meaning – just like the parody of hit music or group music-making. This is surely a way to create something different and useful to solve a puzzle in life and a problem in the society. Using digital platforms such as Tik Tok and Youtube adds new values and innovative implication to the original definition of music in the face of COVID-19.

Clearly creativity stems from an attempt to solve a problem. The creative and intelligent use of information in the form of entertainment, be it new songs, parodies, amended refrains, or group singing, center on maintaining the essence of physical health and happiness during the pandemic. Music proves to be a valuable creativity-driven source that keeps people engaged and positive. It is a remarkable phenomenon to see how humans employ music to spread messages of hope and reassurance that we will fight this war together.

The world is dealing with something larger than life. The current Covid-19 pandemic is enough to daunt even the strongest, but music and dance, with their unique power, are serving as expressions of hope and positivity to bring relief. So Covid-19, you can't stop the beat of music in human hearts.

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