

# PROSPECTS OF MUSIC AS A FORM OF HEALING IN TIMES OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about rapid changes to all forms of human interaction and mobility from travel, work conditions, learning environments, to social activities. Around the world, individuals and communities had to deal with both health-related fears and stress, prompted by social distancing and isolation. While the health advantages of the quarantine order have been well documented, its emotional strain on people has had far reaching consequences. As a coping mechanism to deal with the stress of quarantine, the internet was suddenly flooded with posts and videos of people turning to music as a form of individual and communal healing. This paper looks at how communities around the world found solace in music as a form of solidarity that united people regardless of age, gender, nationality, creed and political affiliation. The prospects of music in presenting people with a sense of belonging in times of solitude is explored through the various accounts around the world on the healing power of music. Findings further strengthen previous works on the effects of music on a person's emotional stability and as a means of communal solidarity.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, music, health, society, sense.

## INTRODUCTION

From its first appearance in December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has today become a global public health crisis that has decimated the livelihood of people and crippled nations worldwide. The health care system in many countries around the world is on the verge of collapsing as health facilities are overwhelmed and understaffed. In some places that have alarming numbers of COVID cases and mortality rates, authorities have repeatedly imposed self-isolation orders particularly for those who might have had close contact with COVID-19 patients. While the imposed stay at home orders mitigated the spread of the virus, it inadvertently has led to numerous reports of people experiencing all forms of mental health issues. Prolonged separation from the outside world which denied people any form of human interaction

saw a significant surge of reported cases of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and loneliness particularly during the mandatory quarantine period (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Duan & Zhu, 2020; Killgore et al., 2020; Torales et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). These are serious public health issues that concern health experts, as loneliness has been associated with a wide range of mental health problems and can result in sustained effects on the community way past the pandemic (Ingram et al., 2020; Killgore et al., 2020). While the virus continues to wreak havoc, and disrupt political and economic systems worldwide, it has also strengthened the resolve of the people and their determination to strive as a community. In times like this, music related activities have proven to be extremely effective. It has been widely acknowledged that music can function as a form of healing to overcome loneliness and foster communal engagement (Bartlett, 2019; Conrad, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Martínez-Castilla, 2021).

This paper reviews and studies a series of videos and articles posted over the last one and a half years and aims to determine the prospects of music as a form of healing and its profound effect on communities around the world. Music has been said to be the language of the soul and during the worldwide lockdown, this could not have been further from the truth, as it has brought people together and helped many overcome some of their darkest moments. Music has created a sense of belonging and communal involvement as it became one of the only forms of communication that was ‘allowed’ and welcomed by many. It functioned as the antidote amidst a growing sense of panic towards prolonged quarantine impositions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The role of music on a person’s emotional and social wellbeing is an area that has received significant attention from various disciplines particularly the medical field. For example, studies by Rickard (2012) and Stensæth (2018) have examined the role of music in improving a person’s general wellbeing and mental health, while studies by Daykin et al. (2006), McClean et al. (2012) and Stanczyk (2011) looked at how music has helped cancer patients cope with their condition and Cuddy et al. (2017), Simmons-Stern et al. (2010) and Ziv (2007) have thoroughly studied the function of music in improving memory power of people with Alzheimer’s. Findings from these researches only goes to validate claims on the efficacy of music as a form of healing.

As a vehicle of expression, music lends itself many interpretations and it is left to the ‘ears’ of the beholder that render it value and meaning. Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle have been widely known to acknowledge music’s

ability to invoke moral and spiritual harmony (Whitfield, 2010). Research has revealed that the different music modes derived from ancient Greece, have unique sounds associated to them which have the ability to evoke different forms of emotions (Whitfield, 2010). Given its long-standing association to human emotion and its popular application in a variety of research areas, it is no surprise that the last year has seen a steadily growing body of literature that looks at music and its effects on a person's emotional psyche and the role music plays, in helping people overcome issues of anxiety caused by isolation (Bell, 2021; Calvo, & Bejerano, 2020; Grigoriadou, 2020; Martínez-Castilla et al., 2021; Yeung, 2020; Ziv & Hollander, 2021). Research has also shown that making music can be beneficial for people in a number of ways, in particular giving people a sense of ownership and control over their lives and in forging connections with others (Bartlett, 2019; Bell, 2021; Calvo & Bejerano 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative method to data collection. Material was gathered from secondary sources like YouTube videos, online blogs and newspaper articles to review and analyse the role music played in the lives of individuals and communities during the pandemic. A total of 10 YouTube videos, 15 blog articles and 15 newspaper articles were reviewed to gather information on how in times of turmoil, communities around the world turned to music in search of solace and comfort. The material gathered was then divided into four main themes and a thematic analysis method was employed to analyse the material as presented in the following subsections of this paper. The discussions within the themes were based on the various secondary sources gathered from the internet to examine how music plays a healing role within the different individual and social settings throughout the pandemic.

## MUSIC AS A FORM OF COMMUNAL HEALING

In a time of sheer uncertainty and turmoil, the opportunity to participate in communal activities presents people with a sense of solidarity as it brings people together and gives them a sense of purpose. *'This COVID-19 crisis is a vivid demonstration of just how quickly people have turned to music to express and participate in a sense of social belonging'* (University of Oxford, 2020).

In January 2020, social media feeds were abuzz with videos emerging from Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, of people singing patriotic songs and chanting Wuhan *jīāyóu*' (*South China Morning Post*, 2020). Literally

translated as ‘add oil’, the phrase was meant to cheer the people on and encourage them to keep fighting and to save their city from the deadly virus. The videos received mixed reviews from viewers in the comment section, as some deemed it unsafe for people to be out in the balconies but the core message of the video was the unifying and healing power music had to offer the people in times of uncertainty. People from all over the world started commenting on the videos and gave words of encouragement and support for the people of Wuhan. K Spirit commented “*The human spirit is the strongest thing. It can do miracles*”, while Absorb CODM commented “*very sad to see this but glad that they unite all the same to support each other. All our prayers from Ireland*”. People were left feeling desolated and depressed with the compounding despair surrounding the deaths of relatives, friends and neighbours. In the midst of this turmoil and helplessness, banding together as a community was their only resolve to show strength and unity. They rallied to cheer and shout out calls of encouragement to reassure their neighbours but more so themselves that there is hope at the end of the day.

Two months after the Wuhan videos, new videos emerged showing residents in Italy playing instruments from the balconies and banging pots and pans from outside their windows to show solidarity with one another in these times of great duress (*Guardian News, 2020*). It was a clear message indicating that although the pandemic kept them isolated and confined to their residences, there was still a way to come together and that was through the power of music. The video postings were again flooded with messages of encouragement from around the world as people came together to be in solidarity with the Italians. One viewer from Romania wrote, “*I’m so proud of the Italian people, everything is gonna be ok, this hard time are going to pass. Sending love from Romania*”. Kiriza 22 wrote “*This is a beautiful side of humanity, much love from Uganda, Africa!!*”. A research conducted on the effects of making music on balconies, revealed that this communal activity functions as a means through which communities can overcome disaster to derive a sense of collective strength (Calvo & Bajerano, 2020). In commenting about the people of Italy coming together as a community, Davide De Luca, a reporter said “*We showed that in this hard time we can stick together, ...we are a community, not just a bunch of individuals*” (Horowitz, 2020). The healing power of music resonated through the various instruments as videos showed people actively participating in this mass gathering of musical ecstasy. The harmonious cacophony that erupted from the balconies was a clear indication of how, despite adversities, music is able to comfort the unsettled mind and heal the troubled soul. The people coming together reflected their resilience and spirit as a nation facing one of the worst state of emergencies since the Second World War (Horowitz, 2020).

Just weeks after the videos from Wuhan and Italy, social media feeds were once again flooded with videos and posts of people around the world coming together through music. This time not as Italians, Chinese or Americans, but rather just as people and citizens of this world. In March 2020, Pub Choir who are a musical act founded in Brisbane, Australia, created a video that featured over 1,500 strangers from 40 countries presenting their rendition of *Close to You* by The Carpenters (Pub Choir, 2020). This group that called themselves the Couch Choir during the pandemic, garnered over 800,000 views and over 20,000 likes in just under a week. Filling the void of social interaction, music has the power to unite and the sheer volume in participation just goes to show how eager people are to participate in communal activities that will uplift spirits. COVID has created an international musical response among its global citizens who are all striving towards the same goal, a sense of comfort and some form of human connection.

### **MUSIC AS A FORM OF INDIVIDUAL HEALING**

On March 22, 2020, Neil Diamond did a parody of his hit song Sweet Carolina which became an instant hit among netizens. He tweeted a video of himself sitting by a fireplace with a guitar in hand and urged his online audience to socially distance and keep washing their hands (NBC, Washington, 2020). Where the lyrics normally went, “hands, touching hands/reaching out, touching me, touching you,” Diamond changed it to, “hands, washing hands/reaching out, don’t touch me, I won’t touch you.” Diamond started off by saying, “I know we’re going through a rough time right now, but I love ya, and I think maybe if we sing together, we’ll feel just a little bit better” (NBC, Washington, 2020). His comforting words resonated with millions of viewers and messages were pouring into his Twitter feed as people thanked the legend for using his voice and music to send a powerful message to the people, particularly at a time when Americans were defiant towards socially distancing themselves and wearing masks. During these uncertain times, where connections are more virtual than physical, musical engagement offers a sort of participatory engagement that is crucial in helping individuals and communities maintain a sense of sanity.

Music has a profound ability to unite complete strangers and allow them to speak in a language that they automatically understand, and the essence of that conversation can penetrate the soul of someone else listening. A pianist in Barcelona, sat in his balcony with his keyboard to serenade his neighbours with Celine Deon’s, "My Heart Will Go On" and he was surprisingly joined by a fellow musician from a neighbouring block on the saxophone. You can hear the people cheering in the background as the two acknowledge each other from the distance

and continue to hit the right notes as they accompanied each other from different buildings. This spontaneous gesture by the two musicians is a clear indication of how through music people can still come together while staying apart.

The pandemic also altered the type of music people were listening to. In March 2020, Spotify published an article highlighting the changes in streaming habits. The article noted an increase in people streaming ‘chilled’ and instrumental music that was calmer and more relaxed. Although this may not seem like a deliberate action, the intuitive selection of these type of music to match cognitive and emotional needs is an indication of the palpable need for music in our lives. The article also reported a spike in people creating collaborative playlists which allowed them to share their music and keep friends and family informed about their wellbeing.

Professional musicians who had their concerts and tours cancelled resorted to offering virtual concerts for their fans. On 18 April 2020, as part of a global initiative called One World: Together at Home, hundreds of musicians came together to entertain their fans from the comfort of their own homes in an 8 hour long live virtual concert. Co-organised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and curated by Lady Gaga, the concert featured intimate performances by some of the biggest names in the music industry such as John Legend, Elton John, Billie Eilish, Chirs Martin from Cold Play and Taylor Swift who performed some of their greatest hits (Global Citizens, 2020). Some of these musicians even took requests from fans and engaged in small chatter. The concert was broadcasted live across popular platforms like Amazon Prime Video, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Aside from the obvious entertainment value, the concert raised almost \$128 million which was distributed among various charities and WHO’s COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund (Global Citizens, 2020). Although performing in isolation, the message the concert offered was strong and unyielding, as it revealed the unity among the people in fighting against the pandemic. The concert was in support of the brave frontlines and health care workers tirelessly working to save lives.

### **MUSIC AS HEALING FOR COVID-19 PATIENTS**

While the healing benefits of music for the general population during the period of lockdown is undisputable, its effects in helping COVID-19 patients have also been very promising. In light of the pandemic, numerous musicians have come together to offer a series of virtual bedside concerts. *Project: Music Heals Us* is a non-profit organization aimed at providing inspiration, education and healing through

live music performances to marginalised, disabled, incarcerated and homeless communities across the United States. However, in April 2020, the organization spread its wings and expanded their mission to help the COVID-19 patients who are currently the most isolated and vulnerable community (Easterwood, 2021). Their first project was with the ICU patients at New Yorks Presbyterian Allen Hospital. The team was contacted by Dr Rachel Easterwood who is a professionally trained musician-turned-physician who believed that while she was able to provide her patients with medical care there was more that could be done to help them emotionally and spiritually. With a group of musicians, she coordinated virtual classical music bedside concerts for her patients. The concert happens on facetime as Dr Easterwood holds her phone to the patient as the musicians play live from their respective homes. Dr Easterwood reported very promising results from the sessions as the concerts offered comfort to the patients especially when they were completely isolated from human contact (Easterwood, 2021).

Music in Hospitals and Care is a charitable organization that performs live music for patients to improve their health and wellbeing. Every year, the charity (comprising professional musicians) shares live music with over 100,000 people from across the UK. The aim of this performance is to provide an opportunity to people to enjoy a live musical prance as they otherwise may not have an opportunity to experience it. This includes people living in care homes, those living with dementia or who are seriously ill. Hence, when the pandemic hit, the team switched to online streaming platforms and expanded their performance reach as they also entertained COVID-19 patients.

Musicians on Call (MOC) is another organization that have performed for over 150,000 people virtually (Bliss, 2020). Musicians on Call's Virtual Bedside Performance Program engages volunteer musicians to perform for paediatric and adult patients, caregivers, and those in need of remote, live music through 1×1 intimate performances and hospital-wide concerts (Bliss, 2020). With the aid of technology, the musicians are able to reach patients in all areas. According to the article, for more than 20 years, Nashville-based non-profit Musicians on Call has brought live and recorded music to patients in hospitals and nursing care facilities. The organization is spread across the United States and at the time of this publication the program had 30 requests a month for live virtual bedside concerts. In 2020, Musicians on Call released the #MOCHeals Playlist. It is a compilation of music videos recorded by MOC volunteers. This playlist was shared with hospital partners to be played for their patients. The video is also available on YouTube and can accessed by anyone in need of a pick-me-up. Ever since then



there have been several virtual bedside concerts organised around the world for patients aimed at reliving isolation and anxiety caused by the pandemic. Such efforts by musicians and hospital personals only goes to show the positive effect music has on healing and offering comfort particularly at a time when people are in great distress and in need of human contact.

Numerous accounts by doctors and nurses have revealed how playing soothing music for patients helps them sleep better, as it calms them and makes them less anxious. In an article published in Boston 25 News, Dr Kathy May Tran was quoted as saying;

*“As a doctor, this is my expertise. I take care of hospitalized patients. I take care of patients with COVID every day, but despite that, honestly, a lot of times, I feel helpless,” ... “I don’t have a cure for COVID the way that I have a cure for other diseases. And I certainly don’t have a good treatment for the anxiety and fear and loneliness and worry that these patients feel”* (McCarthy, 2020).

She also noted that, *[The musicians] are spending their time, giving the healing power of music to these patients,*” Tran said. *“It’s invaluable, and it’s certainly not something I would be able to offer, were it not for this program”* (McCarthy, 2020).

On explaining the success of virtual bedside concerts, Enchi Chang a musician and a fourth-year medical student at Harvard Medical School, noted that *“It’s been a huge success. We’ve had multiple concerts where we have also been able to bring in family members from all over the United States, kind of letting people enjoy music all together,”* Chang said. *“For patients and staff, music kind of brings a moment that’s different from the monotony of the hospital life and some life and some joy to the environment there, too”* (McCarthy, 2020).

## **HEALING FOR FRONTLINERS**

While the emphasis has always been placed on patient care and their well-being, there is an important fraction of the community who although have been constantly praised as the unsung heroes of the pandemic, have received little relief from their strenuous workload. The stress in coping with the pandemic is momentous and has presented them with immense and unprecedented pressure. Prolonged periods of excessive stress can have dire consequences on a person’s mental and physical health (Idress, 2015). Thus, in times of the pandemic, we saw many frontliners participating in numerous music events online. In Malaysia, driven



by their passion for music, a group of medical front liners came together and presented the iconic song *Belaian Jiwa* by Carefree in an attempt to boost spirits in during Hari Raya (Yusof, 2021).

News of frontliners coming together in solidarity also appeared elsewhere as a group of Drs in Boston USA collaborated in song writing exercises as a form of stress release. The Drs turned their personal stories into songs that reflected their current reality battling the pandemic. The main aim of the exercise was to provide a safe and intimate space for front line workers dealing in trauma to talk, connect, decompress, and ultimately feel heard. “You deal with so many emotions and so many thoughts, and the heaviness of the job - it’s a way to process everything and to challenge it,” said Dr DaMarcus Baymon, who is the chief resident of Emergency Medicine in the Harvard Affiliated Emergency Medicine Residency program.

Music professionals have attempted to include the voices of medical frontliners in their creative works. In New York, songwriter and executive producer, Ken Freirich released a song “Healthcare Workers Rock!”. The song was written as a rock anthem in honour of all the healthcare workers and frontliners around the world battling COVID-19 and putting their lives on the line every day to help others. The video has a more profound impact as, every time the video is shared from the Random Acts of Kindness Facebook or Twitter pages with #HealthcareWorkersRock, a donation of USD1 will be made to #FirstRespondersFirst. At the time of the article the organization had raised up to USD100,000. Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter Mary Gauthier recently published a book entitled *Saved by a Song: The Art and Healing Power of Songwriting*. The book is particularly poignant as apart from narrating the healing and redemptive power of song writing, the musician has included real life experiences from medical front liners in her memoir and gives them a voice through her words.

The *Project: Music Heals Us* has also benefited medical frontline workers. On commenting on the benefits of music, Dr Kathy May Tran noted that “This program (referring to the *Project: Music Heals Us*) is as much a benefit to patients and families as healthcare workers,” Tran said. “It’s really nice to have this reprieve, because we are quite burdened during the pandemic with all the sadness around us.” While isolation and anxiety are often affiliated with patients, the doctors and nurses treating these patients on a daily basis and facing death almost every day also experience isolation and fatigue from working long days away from their families. Music is both personal and communal (Hesmondhalgh,

2013). It has the ability to stir emotions even with the absence of words. At the same time, music can even draw strangers together just through the frequency of sound and nothing else.

## CONCLUSION

The various accounts and numerous videos about music and its ability to bring strangers together further validates claims about music's healing ability. Making music provides us with a sense of control over the uncontrollable, as the comfort and peace that is derived from the act of participating in music. Making music together reminds us that we belong to a larger community of humanity. From people singing and performing on balconies, mass online choirs to virtual bedside concerts for COVID-19 patients, music throughout the COVID-19 pandemic created a form of collective mobilization by communities to stay united and persevere through times of uncertainties. The participation in a musical activity builds a sense of collective strength, as it offers people with an opportunity to own something that is uniquely theirs. It is a coping mechanism that helps communities deal with a crisis to only overcome together but also to heal together.

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