

Liveness online in deadly times: How artists explored the expressive potential of live-streamed concerts at the face of COVID-19 in Norway by Yngvar Kjus, Hendrik Storstein Spilker, and Håvard Kiberg

Abstract

This study was initiated as the pandemic erupted in the spring of 2020, triggered by our curiosity about the wave of Internet-mediated concerts which followed in the wake of COVID-19. The article examines what kind of social and cultural phenomenon these events were, and how their presentational and participatory potential was explored within a few, hectic spring months. Basing our analysis on interviews with 13 performers and four promoters in Norway, we find that the performances transcended traditional modes of live concerts in innovative ways, while responding to the stresses associated with the pandemic crisis. We identify three performance strategies, intimization, intensification and expansion, which in different ways rearticulated established modes of live musical expression by fusing them with the liveness of mediated communication.

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Introduction

When the COVID-19 virus spread in the spring of 2020 the most important way to counter the pandemic was to limit face-to-face interactions between people. Such restrictions raised huge challenges for activities that are based on precisely face-to-face interaction. The music sector and its concerts are a prime example. Concerts are a core activity for artists, as well as for their fans, and is the largest source of income in the music business (Wikstrøm, 2020). This is part of the reason why the spring of 2020 brought a formidable surge in attempts to stage concerts via the Internet using streaming technology. It was not the first-time concerts were streamed online, but the pandemic introduced new incentives and conditions for doing so, among which the most important was the need to isolate audiences from each other and from the artists.

The first question we ask here is precisely what characterized the challenge that the pandemic posed to the performance of Internet-mediated concerts. We then go on to ask how artists and promoters attempted to solve the challenge, and how they explored the expressive and communicative potential of live-streamed concerts. Lastly, we probe the long-term consequences of the challenge and its solutions, considering implications for the adaptability of the sector and the prospects of the concert forms that were developed.

The study was carried out in Norway, which is among the countries that were only moderately affected by the pandemic (in terms of disease and death), partly due to its various restrictions to face-to-face encounters. The same restrictions imposed huge difficulties for the music sector, and also for other cultural sectors. Early studies have documented how dramatic the shutdown was, charting the impact for the live music business (Gran, *et al.*, 2020) and outlined the significance it had for audiences to connect via online concerts (Onderdijk, *et al.*, 2021; Vandenberg, *et al.*, 2021). Here, we provide a qualitative study of how the artists themselves approached the challenge of performing live music for a distant audience. We have carried out interviews with thirteen artists, as well as four concert promoters, who all obtained

