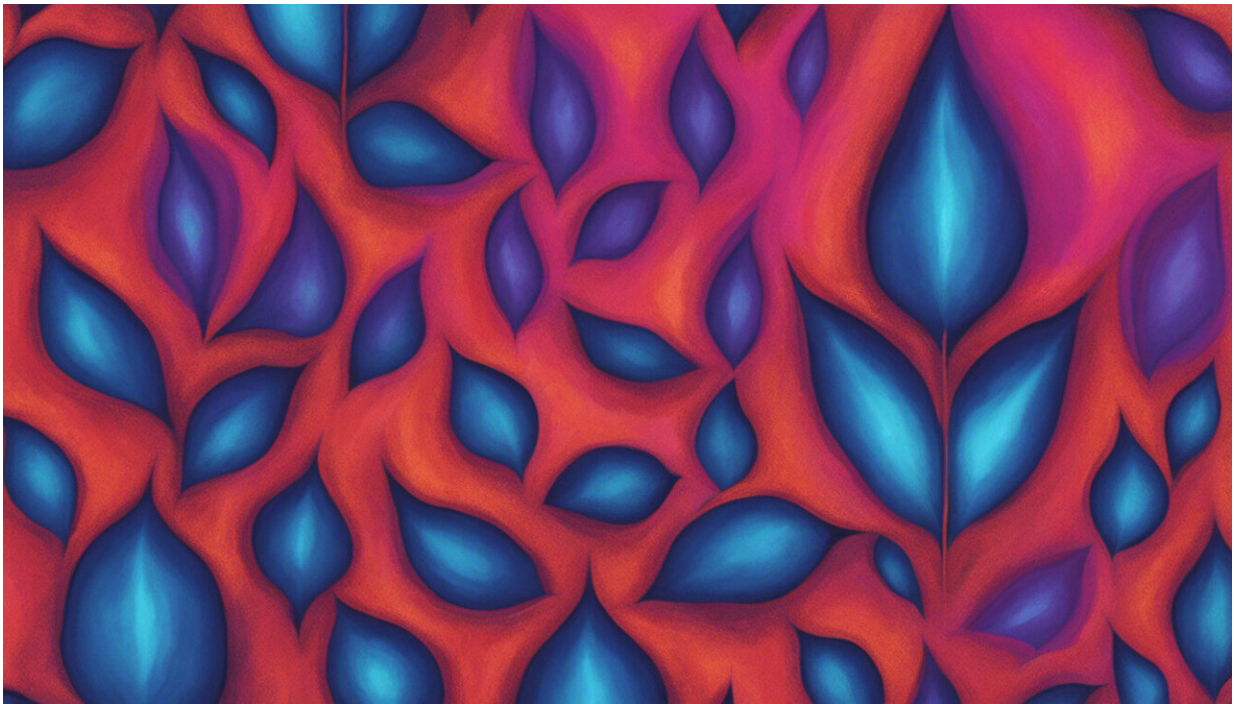


COVID-19 bears out the research: Music brings people together (socially and virtually)

March 30 2020



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the early days of the pandemic reaching Europe, the world watched as Italians emerged onto their balconies to sing the national anthem together, with the occasional performance by an opera star. But the effect is certainly not confined to Italians: COVID-19 has created an international musical reaction, a 'striking' response, which bears out

scholarship on the beneficial impact of music making, according to Professor Eric Clarke, Oxford expert on the psychology of music.

Around the world, where the pandemic has hit hardest, in Italy, Iran and Spain especially, people are making music together, even in the face of their physical separation. As Professor Clarke says: "It's very striking that, from early on in this serious phase, people have felt moved or motivated make music. Music is a collective experience which can overcome physical distance, since one of the advantages of the auditory domain is that physical distance doesn't necessarily impede social togetherness."

Research has shown that making music can be beneficial for people in a number of ways—including creating a [sense of control](#) over own lives and in establishing connections with others, Professor Clarke says: "Research shows that this does make people feel better and closer to others... When you sing with others, in particular, there is a palpable sense of social solidarity."

Professor Clarke reveals that he and his household were involved in an impromptu musical performance in his own street yesterday, with neighbors coming together in front of their houses and out on the street to sing and play along to the Bill Withers song "Lean on me."

"Having not seen our neighbors over the past few days it was great to see them again and renew that sense of social bonding and association," he says. "Doing something such as this gives people a sense of pleasure in exercising a skill, and bolsters their self-esteem. It's a kind of validation of both oneself and others. As some of my own research has investigated, music can be an important medium for empathy and inter-cultural understanding. 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."

The crisis is also inspiring people to reach for instruments they may not have played for years: "Finding they may have time on their hands because there are barriers to so many other activities, people are being thrown back on their own resources and they are rediscovering more solitary pleasures such as reviving their relationships with possibly long-abandoned instruments."

But the situation for [professional musicians](#) is of course very different—and extremely concerning: "This is having a profound and [negative impact](#) on huge numbers of musicians around the world, who have had their livelihoods curtailed pretty much overnight. The vast majority are self-employed, and will be finding it extremely difficult to find ways to survive."

For some, the internet may be able to support a degree of continued activity. Professor Clarke says he is aware of [music lessons](#) continuing through the use of internet-based applications such as Zoom, with an Oxford student, now back in the US, having violin lessons over the internet with her London-based tutor; and the Oxford Improvisers collective having one of their regular sessions with up to 18 musicians—all in their own homes—improvising together.

"I remember going to a conference around the turn of the century," he laughs, 'at which we were shown a pretty dodgy demo of two people trying to play [music](#) together over the internet... It seemed ridiculous!"

Provided by University of Oxford

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