

Introduction: Surmounting Physical Distance

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The COVID-19-pandemic was a profound incision into the daily lives of the majority of the global population.¹ More than three years after the arrival of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in November 2019, COVID-19 continues to affect human existence in manifold ways, especially for those who live under and suffer from poverty, disease, or inequality. Beginning in early 2020, COVID-19 spread across the globe within only a few months. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, which has resulted in more than 600 million infections and 6 million confirmed deaths by the time of writing (December 2022). Adding to the global public health emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a global economic crisis. It adds additional layers to the challenging environment that many countries and communities in the Asia-Pacific region must confront regarding climate change and global warming, which is now being discussed as contributing to more favorable conditions of infectious disease emergence and spread, such as the novel coronavirus. The COVID-19 global health emergency is now officially declared over but the impacts of the pandemic are still being felt to date. Against this background, it is worth noting that many of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are not only related to a specific infectious disease, but also link to and arise from a multiplicity of interrelated and persistent inequalities and social struggles that predetermine the spread of a virus and its health impacts on specific populations.

The US-American ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice (2014:191) has argued for an “ethnomusicology in times and places of trouble.” Alongside war and conflict, forced migration, violence, and poverty, as well as climate change, environmental disasters, and the ecological crisis, Rice (2014) mentions “music, disease and healing” among the central topics for such a new trouble-oriented ethnomusicology. And indeed, multiple crises seem to be ubiquitous, and music scholars must consider these realities and incorporate them into their works and lives. The COVID-19 pandemic and its complex rela-

tionships to music research and music making contain the potential to create new and reify old fronts among ethnomusicologists. Some speak of a renaissance of an armchair ethnography within growing contexts of digital ethnography, while others embrace the situation in order to rethink ethnographic practices in the digital era. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly led to research limitations, but it also created a fertile ground for the emergence of new ideas and developments regarding how to undertake music research in a more ethically just way. If the climate crisis has caused ethnomusicologists to question their own privileges as an elite group and critically reflect on “academic flying” and carbon footprints (Grant 2018), what does the COVID-19 pandemic, as a global health crisis, do in that introspective sense? Apart from purely practical issues, such as the impossibility of physical field research due to closed borders and international travel restrictions, we are, first and foremost, and possibly more than ever, confronted with critical ethical issues. It is in that sense that the COVID-19 pandemic calls into question the situatedness of music making and music research within global structures and life networks on earth.

We attempt in this themed issue to address the unique challenges music practitioners and researchers face in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region. The contributions explore themes surrounding the ever-changing circumstances that transform ‘business as usual’ in both music research and fieldwork. Rather than only focusing on the pandemic’s negative repercussions on traditional research approaches (e.g., access to field sites, travel restrictions, community vulnerabilities), we also want to engage “opportunities to do different kinds of work, to collaborate and co-design, to reflect and innovate, to think critically about the present moment” (Smith 2021:449).

The SoundKnowledge project and the COVID-19 pandemic

The *SoundKnowledge* (SK) project of the Department of Musicology at Göttingen University launched in April 2020 under the light of the global spread of SARS-CoV-2. The SK project “aims to rethink music in Micronesia in terms of the procedural knowledge inherent in and specific to music making by exploring the latter as knowledge practices” (Abels 2021). Within three case

studies, we, as the SK team, address the issues of climate change, social alienation, and colonial trauma in specific parts of Micronesia by fleshing out the nature and dynamics of that knowledge (*ibid.*). As an ethnographically driven project envisioned to be based on on-site fieldwork, the COVID-19 outbreak produced very different implications for us as a research team.

Some team members are based in Germany, thus, in-person on-site fieldwork and travel to Micronesia became impossible for a while. Considering the backdrop of COVID-19, Pacific Island territories have chosen very restrictive pandemic policies, with public health emergencies in place and national borders closed. While remoteness is usually depicted in developmentalist discourses as a challenge for Small Island Development States, it seems to be advantageous at first sight in the context of a global pandemic. This is linked mainly to political status and the autonomous control over borders, which is, however, a double-edged sword. Due to a clear control over national borders, some Islands nations, for example, the Federated States of Micronesia, remained COVID-19-free until mid-2022. However, many Micronesians have become stranded in neighboring countries, such as Guam, without having many possibilities to return to their homelands and families. Closed borders and travel restrictions also appear to be opposed to the dynamics of a “native” (Teaiwa 2005) composition of Oceanic life and an epistemology of movement, where Pacific Islanderness is defined as a local and global interaction between roots and routes (Ingersoll 2016). Adding to environmental anxieties and the vulnerability discourse in relation to climate change and global warming (Diettrich 2018), Micronesians are now confronted with a similar risk discourse in the health context of COVID-19, posing further challenges for imagining a viable future in times of drastic environmental changes and an overall “ecology of fear” (Goodman 2010).

The COVID-19 situation had different implications for our team member from Guam in Micronesia, Andrew Gumataotao. Guam is an unincorporated territory of the United States, thus, did not have an autonomous control over in- and outbound flights and, instead, was subject to US measures and pandemic policies. Andrew Gumataotao conducted fieldwork in the Mariana islands and became mobile amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. “In a quite literal sense,” he reflects in his contribution to this issue, “my vaccination card marks the various stages of my fieldwork travels and the intersecting locales of my research against the backdrop of an ever-evolving global crisis.” Due

to the distance between the university where he works and the geographic focus of his doctoral research, he was vaccinated and received his booster shot in different locations, with the first dose on 1 April 2021 at the University of Guam field house, the second dose on 26 April 2021 at an emergency medical tent facility outside Saipan's main hospital and, lastly, after traveling halfway around the world, in Göttingen, Germany on 20 January 2022.

This themed issue

After internal discussions and moments of emotional ups and downs, the SK team decided to embrace the situation and explore the various implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for music making and music research through ethics-centered workshops, international work meetings, informal conversations, and undergraduate teaching. This themed issue is the outcome of a two-day conference held online at Göttingen University, Germany, in May 2022. In this conference, which was entitled “Field Research and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Asia-Pacific Region: Building New Knowledge through Music and Sound,” participants and contributors discussed the challenges, problems, and dilemmas of music research and fieldwork in times of COVID-19. This themed issue also opens up spaces for highlighting aspects of music making and the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic by music practitioners themselves, which were often interrelated and connected with those discussions and reflections among music researchers. The themed issue is comprised of five contributions focusing on different geographic contexts within the broader Asia-Pacific region, from the United States to the Marshall Islands, Guam and the Northern Marianas, Japan, Indonesia, and Australia.

Muhammad As'ad, Dadi Darmadi and Anne K. Rasmussen's collective research during the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted over about seven months in 2021, offers important methodological insights into the challenges, opportunities and dynamics of virtual ethnography. They share their experiences during three focus group discussions on Islamic music and Quranic arts and document the challenges for music practitioners in a kind of field report. Four institutions and 30 participants shared their stories, ideas, perspectives, and everyday life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This led them to the following highly relevant questions: What are the long-term ef-

fects of the global pandemic on Islamic musical arts, Quranic arts, and education in both realms? And what is the long-term impact on the way we do research and engage in the creation of knowledge?

Trisnasari Fraser, Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, and Jane Davidson, an interdisciplinary research team combining disciplines including music therapy, music psychology and music education, explore their methodological adaptations of face-to-face ethnographic and participatory research approaches for the digital realm and examine emergent ethical concerns for music research in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. They followed the spread of online music activity aimed at maintaining social bonds during the physical distancing of the first few months of the pandemic and turned to digital platforms as the field of research. Their contribution critically engages with two discussion points that emerged during our workshop in May 2022: the digitally mediated contact in the study of music practices using methods of online ethnography and the ethical concern of applying extractivist practices while using content from online social media as research data. Fraser and colleagues conclude in their article that “technology has the capacity to influence and constrain action, on both the part of the researcher and the participants” and that “human agency plays a key role in determining the direction of research and forms of participation.”

Jessica Schwartz focuses on the Marshall Islands and Marshallese diaspora communities in Springdale (Arkansas) in the United States. She addresses music-based methodologies of the nonprofit Marshallese Educational Initiative. Using community-driven research, these methodologies were developed and applied within a music studio project called “Songs of Our Atolls,” aiming to “facilitate intergenerational communication and combat negative stereotyping by conversations and intergenerational learning (through songs).” Schwartz emphasizes the “ethical importance of paying attention to sound and music in terms of communal health and situating these transpacific forms of culturally appropriate information dissemination and intergenerational learning in the broader diaspora,” especially in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges of overcoming social and physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic were important in the work of the Marshallese Educational Initiative. Schwartz adjusted methodologically to the pandemic situation by participating and conducting interviews remotely through digital communication tools.

Focusing on Guam and the Northern Marianas, where in-person interactions were drastically altered during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Andrew Gumataotao explores CHamoru chant and music making as resurgent forms of sound-based cultural practices and points to their healing capacity as a form of “narrative medicine.” Drawing on Rose (2020), he defines narrative medicine as “a tool for Indigenous peoples to maintain connections and mend ruptures among kin” and argues that it “works as a mechanism which allows Indigenous peoples to simultaneously heal from and address normative colonial structures that underpin experiences of trauma.” Gumataotao shows by reflecting on a community film project how young CHamoru artists and activists use the medium of film to adapt to the situation of COVID-19, while calling into questions conventional parameters of ethnographic fieldwork.

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, William Donnie Scally was forced to return to his homeland after an eight-month on-site and in-person musical ethnography in Toyama City, Japan, for his dissertation research. Back home, he maintained contact with local interlocutors and additionally began to carefully analyze online materials, such as musical performances of chindon-ya, to supplement ongoing correspondences and prior in-person experiences. Scally argues that “recordings and other online materials differ from the events they represent” and that researchers familiar with the research context “may be able to tease out subtle clues indicating local sentiment, even from afar.” This is an important argument regarding applicability of online ethnographic methods. Early career researchers, typically unfamiliar with their respective research context, have a different point of departure compared to more established researchers, who can build on a strong network of local contacts and prior in-person experiences. Donnie Scally demonstrates the potentials and limitations of his ethnographically informed close reading of online materials with his analysis, and shows how they were informed by his prior in-person experiences with musical communities, reinforcing the importance of the latter in ethnographic practices and research.

All these contributions discuss music making and music research in the Asia-Pacific region in times of the COVID-19 pandemic within different methodological frameworks. They have in common that they inquire into the possibilities and limitations of bringing people together and of social re-

connection in times of physical distancing. Rather than merely separating people, it is in that sense that the COVID-19 pandemic has also torn down boundaries. It facilitated discussion among people who would never have come together outside of this exceptional situation. And while the world was digitally connected before, the COVID-19 pandemic has surely extended the use of digital media platforms also and specifically in academia and research institutions. The articles bring together experiences and possibilities of this kind of social reconnection, crossing local, regional, and global scales. They explore the boundaries that were created and those that were surmounted, while moving physical copresence into the digital realm. This issue not only describes the disruptions and challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought for music practitioners and researchers in the broader Asia-Pacific region. It also brings together various visions and ideas of how music research and fieldwork can be conducted differently, with a new set of perspectives that focuses on social relations, community building, and the creation of horizontal and accessible spaces for interlocutors to express what they have on their minds, whether in presence, in hybrid formats, or virtually.

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