

# Music and Art in Cyprus During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** *Cyprus, music and artistic creation have significantly expanded their presence in mass media, the Internet and social media because of the social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. As cultural expressions, on the air and online, they have reinforced their strong popular and intercultural character during this period since cultural activity embodies an unprecedented but common experience in an interconnected world. At the same time, music and art serve values that reveal their connection with the social and political context and prompt to re-examine their parallel or mutual definition. Various cultural agents and actors express themselves through original music, artistic and cultural spaces that present dialogue and bolder speeches often of a participatory nature. From this perspective, music and art in Cyprus during the pandemic present a case study of a critical polyphony that appears through the interaction of multiple spaces, discourses and values.*

**Key words:** *music; culture; pandemic; Internet; Cyprus.*

## Introduction

In 2020-21 the difficulties that artistic creation faces during successive lockdowns because of the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic require adapting culturally to a new way of life and creativity. This situation shows how music relates to its social, economic and political context. This environment restricts certain types of artistic production, not only professional, and reinforces others, concerning mass media, online social media or media and the web. These productions, related to physical restrictions (March 2020-) and social distancing, are inseparable from the virtual and physical environment that accommodates them. They show the relationships between different music and cultural agents, official and unofficial policies, production, promotion, reception of music and artistic creations in society. Most musical works incorporate a critical approach beyond their context by focusing on humanist values and new trends, regardless of genre. Music and art in Cyprus during the Covid-19 pandemic reveal a polymorphism of making music, critical of the perspectives they undertake and the means they employ, creating new types of communication spaces, discourses and critical values. To understand how music and arts in Cyprus constitute an essential form of cultural activity during this intricate period, we examine how the island provides a physical and virtual space that supports a plurality of different productions, activities, discourses and values,



then how all these elements operate during a pandemic. To understand how music and arts in Cyprus constitute an essential form of cultural activity during this intricate period, we examine how the island provides a physical and virtual space that supports a plurality of different productions, activities, discourses and values, then, how all these elements operate during a pandemic. Finally, we study how artistic production and cultural events on the web, particularly on the Cypriot web, carry a cultural critique through innovation and dynamic content.

### **Music Production in Cyprus in a physical and virtual environment**

If interculturality defines the result of interactions between different cultures and civilisations, the island becomes a space for hosting these interactions; especially during this period when the pandemic constitutes a common and shared experience. Cyprus intercultural character is due to the geopolitical position and the colonial history of the island. Without neglecting French or Russian languages, Greek and English dominate almost all kinds of music and art expressions in Cyprus, keeping up to date with the ever-changing landscape. Furthermore, we note the increase in means, tools and providers, in addition to the potential new audiences on the Internet. It also demonstrates the interconnection of different music cultures on the island, and the multiplication of encounters, in both the physical and virtual world that expand the island's rich cultural activity. Artistic production during this period is nonetheless inseparable from this environment, both virtual and real, at a national, regional and global level.

The distribution of music is possible with the expansion of the Internet, that increases audiences worldwide (Marruccia 2012). The potential audience reached has grown drastically since 60 percent of the world's population uses the Internet. This enhances the increase in the production of cultural data. Researchers focus on certain characteristics of this Internet expansion. Clement (2020) points out, for example, dominant factors concerning smartphones. We cannot neglect the rise of social media usage with 4,2 billion users in 2020 and the expansion of Internet activity linked to the pandemic, and the diversity of means and content. Thus, musicians and artists can easily share their work. Consumers can access the kind of music they like at ease and at minimal costs, sometimes even for free, therefore filling their time creatively during the lockdown.

In addition, the Web environment is linked with virtual communication, mediated by digital devices. It is a multimodal environment which accommodates text, image, audio and video combinations (Macfadyen et al. 2004). This particular communication is characterised by the plurality of means available online. Textual, vocal and visual elements dominate music and artistic productions on the Internet. There is also language diversity facilitated by translation and the instant translation tools available online. When a music production is available online, it is only necessary to have a smartphone with an Internet connection to listen to it. At the same time, the content produced is dynamic, as users can comment on it, critique, Like and Share, etc. TV, music channels, and radio stations are also widely available online. So, artists effectively keep in touch



with their fans by using mass media, the Internet and social media, especially during a pandemic. For example, even a song on YouTube has viewers' comments on the page and is not limited to traditional visual, audio or textual aspects. Musical and artistic productions are now part of a dynamic virtual, and spectacular environment that demolishes geopolitical boundaries, time and space (Shuter 2017) and promotes a participative, collaborative and democratic network that includes a wide range of products and activities. Music is available on many platforms and sites online, on both free and paid streaming or download digital service providers (DSPs). For example, on YouTube, one of the most popular websites on the Internet, the Top 10 most viewed videos of all-time range between 3-7 billion views. On YouTube, we often see music videos dominating even when the songs are not in the English language (Brad 2020).

When musical works are available online, they are not limited to specialised providers such as Spotify, Apple Music etc. They can be present everywhere, as on TikTok and Instagram, sometimes with comic musical skits and songs related to Covid-19. Musical awareness and new discoveries are available to everybody. At the same time, however, the traditional music media channels encounter a shift in their activity. Mass media, like radio and television, must strengthen their online presence during this period, especially on social media. At this point, the Cyprus paradigm and its intercultural characteristics are astonishing because more than 100 Radio stations and 14 TV channels broadcasted in the divided capital of Nicosia are in Greek, Turkish, English, Russian and Arab (many of them with exclusive music content). There are also a lot of free channels. So, the island presents rich intercultural activity and is an ideal, physical and virtual place for music expression. And the Internet is a perfect place for rich musical production on the island during a pandemic.

Schwartz brings up the question: "Can the coronavirus pandemic be used as an opportunity to study the effects of the scapegoat, social distancing and mass anxiety on intercultural relations?" (2020, 52). In Cyprus, during the pandemic, most musical and artistic production online distances itself from issues that divide and constitute the expression and acceptance of diversity and intercultural communication. For Lid-dicoat & Dervin, music and art help us "to go beyond seeing cultures as discrete and static entities and to see cultures as varied constructions, subjective and based on the power of lived experience" (2013, 7). Therefore, musical and artistic production is one of the essential topics of intercultural dialogue on traditional channels such as radio and TV and online.

New technologies and the Internet facilitate cultural communication and establish a new system of constantly renegotiated values because online, the means available define the user experience. And if music is a vehicle of culture, it means that music, art and culture coexist and are mutually influenced and redefined. This multimodal environment forges new types of musical content, images and visuals and, consequently, a new way of understanding the Covid-19 world. Different means of expression and different languages show this critical global spread of the virus, where masks or gloves function



as a synecdoche of the pandemic. Many musical activities are inspired by the pandemic, for example, competitions like the MAD Video Music Awards 2020, which started with an impressive dance inspired by the pandemic (MAD 2020).

In addition, each Web activity, private or public, has a collective character, since it takes place in an unlimited online space. Furthermore, collaborative projects break national and international barriers in the field of artistic creation, cultural and intercultural communication. At the same time, the multiple means available (live-streaming platforms, Facebook, Spotify, YouTube, TikTok, etc.) make this experience accessible worldwide in real-time. Artistic productions make full use of these means critically (see below). But undeniably, the Internet reveals the gap in official cultural information, organisations and policies. Nowadays, it has become the only democratic way of cultural promotion. For example, Diya Arishe, a Palestinian of Syria and recognised refugee in Cyprus, musically interpreted the poem “The mask has fallen” by the renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008). This work is advertised in online newspapers and posted on YouTube (Arishe 2020), where a clear political message is delivered.

Musical and artistic productions are reinforced when they regain this critical function in relation to a broad and dynamic intercultural framework (Liu 2016). Thus, the pandemic restrictions help us understand how artistic expression finds fertile ground and exercises multiple cultural activities related to pre-existing values, spaces, and discourses in Cyprus. Moreover, in this context, artistic production uses online channels so that artists or artistic institutions can continue to create and share their work. It is not only the number and accessibility of these artistic productions that reinforce their critical character, but also the vast content and form of these cultural and critical productions.

### **Musical activities and during the COVID-19 pandemic**

During this period, new critical trends appeared about a new imposed way of life. For Manderson & Levin (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed human activities, habits and behaviours. It also forces exceptional measures taken by nations like lockdowns, border closures and hygienic practices to prevent the spread of the virus. It proves that what we call culture, in its general acceptance, is closely related to human activity (Manderson & Levin 2020, 2) and the imposition of new habits. Indeed, culture is understood in context and through dynamic relationships, which are often influenced by political interventions or organised groups and individuals, especially on a small island like Cyprus.

The restrictions imposed on the artistic field during the epidemic mainly concern creation, that is to say, the material and physical specificities of the conception, production, distribution and reception of the music and artistic production. This activity takes place on mass media and online, where the majority of recorded productions are shared and where certain types of new productions combine pre-existing and trending practices. Radio stations and TV channels share a wide variety of music, not only as



entertainment but as a plural cultural activity. Thus, we can see the diversity of music proposals and the involvement of several institutional, public, private or individual agents in media, mass media and online. The characteristics of these productions are hybrid, and their participatory nature is for the first time highlighted. We have, for example, many TV concerts with a lot of famous Greek and Cypriot singers performing together to create positivity and solidarity through art, like Alexia with special Guests for the World Refugee Day Concert on June 20, 2020 (Vassiliou 2020). Meanwhile, international cultural events are advertised in Cyprus. Earth Orchestra (2020) established an exciting initiative. For the first time, 197 musicians - 1 from every country in the world record *Together Is Beautiful*, the most significant statement of global creative optimism for a generation. And Balconies concerts occur all over the world as an active response to lockdowns.

The promotion of artistic creation values then joins a lockdown world. Artists have the opportunity to support caregivers, the people who are at the forefront of the battle against Covid-19, by sharing songs thanking staff for their hard work during the pandemic. In April 2020, a video went viral on the Internet, where the dancers of the Opéra de Paris have taken an important initiative: dancing at home, saying in their own way “Thank you” to those who fight the virus on the front line (Opéra national de Paris, 2020). The video shows the multiple spaces, new habits, and values created soon after the pandemic outbreak in 2020, and Sergei Prokofiev's music from *Romeo and Juliet* unifies the various, fragmented spaces represented in this creation. Furthermore, new types of productions have taken place online (see, for example, Jean-Michel Jarre presents *Alone together*, on June 21, 2020, during the Fête de la Musique), productions that promote 3D art and technology in multimedia and online. These productions always have an innovative character and are open to the world, defined by the Covid-19 context, and difficult to imagine outside of it.

### **Cyprus physical and virtual environments**

Artistic productions in Cyprus and on the Cypriot Web reveal the cultural relationship of the island to Greece and the rest of Europe. The relationship explains the promotion and diffusion of socio-cultural events of the Greek, European and Western space in the eastern Mediterranean region. And these relationships predominantly highlight a reflective connection between the real and the virtual environment (Internet), different cultures and mass media, like radio and TV, where multiple TV channels and Radio stations exist in Greece and Cyprus and various other languages. The role of Cypriot online press, blogs or social networks during this period is crucial, as they constitute cultural communication and distribution of artistic productions. Significant current events which do not leave artists indifferent, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, are present in Cyprus. Cyprus mass media and the Internet create an intercultural communication space where music and artistic communication denounce social attitudes and practices and the absence of Cypriot, European and world organisations' official policies



relating to cultural promotion. Even if we admit that there is a kind of cultural promotion by institutional subsidies, it is delayed (European Commission 2020, UNESCO 2020) and limited. Artistic and musical production as an individual or participatory production, or social commitment as an expression, lead to new behaviours and practices in Cyprus, reflecting the Covid-19 era. These productions and their criticism fall within a framework that is both institutional and social. It concerns the conception, production, and distribution of those works about the COVID-19 context and the Web environment of social distancing, but they mainly target the abolition of borders.

Thus, during the Covid-19 pandemic, official cultural policies were criticised as ineffective since the pandemic was and is, above all, a public health problem. Therefore, it has become a public and political affair. But, as in all critical events, it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate culture from political and social issues. Physical and social distancing, confinement for many people, fear of the unknown or the financial crisis have given music and artistic productions and criticism a new dynamic. Anything is open to criticism. Some state cultural policies regarding cultural promotion came under heavy criticism during the lockdown. And artistic creation, on the margins of official institutions, is also an indicator of norms which operates within socio-political systems (Surgiu 2018). For example, in 2020, the Republic of Cyprus celebrated its 60th anniversary, so many cultural events took place in celebration. Many of them took place online, and Cyprus Symphony Orchestra (CYSO) offered tribute this anniversary, as well as to the 250th anniversary of Ludwig von Beethoven's birth, with his masterpieces *Eroica* and *Egmont Overture*. According to the Orchestra's press release: "Both works composed during the first decade of the 19th century are most fitting for the occasion: *Egmont* overture exalts the heroic sacrifice of Count Egmont for the independence of his nation, whilst the masterful *Eroica* exalts the resilience of the human spirit" (CYSO 2020). The musical and artistic productions behind these events, in a specific context, play an integral part in the political, social and cultural aspects of Cyprus.

During the pandemic period, several questions which concern the status of art and music within official policies and constitute a critique of official institutions dominate the news and appear on the Internet. It is astonishing to see the complexity of the factors concerned. The Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture is often a target of this criticism. The situation obliges, among others, the Cypriot President to announce the creation of a new Ministry of Culture on July 8, 2020. The discussion operates in clear and organised ways between official institutions, the public and the private sector. Questions about the artist's status in Cyprus reappear. Therefore, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus started preparing a law on recognising the stature of a professional artist in 2020. This procedure is the subject of several discussions which have lasted through 2021. These complex institutional issues may not find a definitive solution. The online artistic discussions concerning these issues reveal the necessity of organising the professional artists, then the need to consider the evolution of the sector during a pandemic and its needs, and finally, the need for enhancing cooperation among the cultural sector professionals. These debates, mainly online and on mass media, create virulent



institutional criticism. They also challenge the level of culture, which in return constitutes a global problem.

The interconnection of people interested in cultural activism or culture globally is possible thanks to the Internet. The Support of artists (2020) is one of the many web pages which shows a struggling sector. If the stature of culture is not a priority for states, the harmful consequences do not concern only the artists but the societies and the countries without culture. Cultural promotion can be a solution to the crisis of values that our time is going through. The Leventis Municipal Museum of Nicosia in Cyprus hosts online programs and activities proposing art as the “cure” for the pandemic (Leventis 2020), and music activities are part of this program. Covid-19 is just one episode of this crisis, but at the same time, culture professionals and their work are disadvantaged. This period clearly shows the vital role that institutions play in promoting culture and artistic activities concerning a complex environment, real and virtual, which is constantly evolving.

Artists of Cyprus (2020) is a private Facebook page with over 2,700 members. Cypriot artists from all sectors come together and point out the institutional issues concerning state cultural policy. Members collaborate to encourage the state to participate in the important decision-making in cultural policy and artistic creation. Artists, in this way, function as a critical tool in forming cultural policy decisions. Cultural criticism cannot, in any case, be restricted on the Web, but it is connected, directly or indirectly, to the pandemic context.

In Cyprus, state support of cultural activities began in July 2020. For example, ReCOVer20 (the title already shows the correlations established with Covid-19) is an aid program launched in early June by the Cypriot Youth Council (a state institution with a powerful cultural character). ReCOVer20 promoted cultural activity projects between July 2020 to March 2021. In the same way, other institutions are subsidising specific areas of cultural production and are mobilising by launching projects online. The Rialto Theatre announced a new program called “FlashArt@Rialto” (2020) which constitutes a new type of artistic action, live and digital shows lasting 30 to 60 minutes. These evolve in new conditions caused by the pandemic, such as containment, isolation, and the lack of direct social exchanges, and highlight the growing importance of technology in the arts. Under Flash@Art program, musical events such as the tribute to poet Nikos Gatsos by Elena Hatziafxenti took place. The performer interacted with the poet’s work in a musical-theatrical dialogue in a unique way. These actions highlight that art establishes a critical distance from its context and aims to support film, music, theatre and dance productions.

Cultural criticism dominates works funded by institutions, such as projects promoted by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus. Available online, 50 selected short films deal with life during conditions of confinement and the global crisis (Covid-19). The strong presence of music is confirmed in many short films, evident by their titles, for example, in Papavassiliou Kyros COVID WALLS/ A SONG MY FATHER BUILT



(Filmingincyprus 2020). The artists exposed the harsh reality and what they experienced during the lockdown. They reveal, of course, human weakness, their inability to resist, their powerlessness, but they denounce a system that does not live up to the circumstances. The producers believe that this project promotes the creation during this period, but at the same time, the support is insufficient (Loui 2020). *Space*, a film festival project (Spaces #1, # 2, #3), repeats the same concept by inviting select filmmakers to be inspired by the book *Species of Spaces* by George Perec and the days of quarantine. These short films help us understand the inseparable relation between spaces and music, action and inaction, music and noise in a pandemic by abolishing all kinds of borders. Thessaloniki Film Festival took place in April-May 2020, with the participation of some of the finest international filmmakers. The project is present on the festival's YouTube channel alongside the Minister of Culture and Sports of Greece (Festival 2.0 2020).

Several music festivals were forced to cancel in 2020-21, whilst many others broadcast online, like the Montreux Jazz Festival. We very often saw the message of a global call for multilevel cooperation and action. For the concert Global Goal: Unite for our future, artists, leaders, medical experts, and scientists joined together in a global event for all people worldwide to help end Covid-19 on 27 June 2020. The event was broadcasted all over the world and was available for online streaming on several digital platforms. The organisers mobilised around 7 billion dollars to support the world's most vulnerable. The impact of those activities can not only be limited to the advocates of the event (10 million for Global citizen) or the participants (famous singers and political audience, fans) but, mainly, it reveals the symbolical interconnection of the whole planet for a common purpose and the call for action. Music is an action, music increase awareness of significant problems. In Cyprus, almost all the festivals were cancelled and postponed for 2021, except the *Kipria International Festival* in September 2020, which took place under strict COVID-19 measures. Others broadcasted live via online channels, such as the 4th Cyprus New Music festival, which included four concerts and took place from the 19th to the 22nd of November.

In Cyprus, music is part of multiple organisations which also takes into consideration the island specificities. Many public sector organisations, such as the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus Theatre Organisation, undertake online music initiatives involving children participating, like *A song*, when Children Sing for the Next Pandemic Day (THOC 2020). The Internet allows the expansion of those organisations beyond the physical limits of the island. Cypriot children's orchestra Sistema Cyprus which includes 45 children, played music online for Queen Elizabeth, performing in celebration of her recent 73rd wedding anniversary. Since 2018, this orchestra has offered music education to the children and adolescents of Cyprus, including migrants, refugees, and underprivileged youth, and ensures that these groups are respected, recognised, and included in society. Sistema Cyprus's mission keeps ongoing during the pandemic.





Also, new music and art festivals showing activism appear on the Cypriot Web. These events constitute a critique of dominant value systems such as patriarchy. Artists organise online festivals that denounce patriarchal structures such as “Aphrodite speaks: I’m not making you your coffee”, which included 100 participants from all over the world through Zoom. Meanwhile, from August 1-8, Queer Wave responds to the problematic and chronic absence of LGBTQI + films in the Cypriot market and emphasises films that have never been shown before in Cyprus. The festival aims to establish a new platform that becomes an annual institution: nourishing the spirit through art, breaking down stereotypes of gender and sexuality, embracing and promoting freedom of expression, multiculturalism and solidarity, and improving the quality of cultural activities in Cyprus (Queer Wave 2020). In this sense, the pandemic constitutes a global experience that could / should be seen as an opportunity for mutual understanding and respect. Online communication during this period is proof of what characterises the Internet as the place of democratisation and freedom, something which does not promote the absence of criticism but welcomes its reinforcement. Music and sonic environments do not have an accessory role. Instead, they constitute active elements of those revolutionary artworks.

Eleana Alexandrou’s performance SPIRIT is an innovative artistic proposition where live music is a protagonist and pushes the unfolding of thought and movement. SPIRIT - a four-hour dance performance - was created amidst the pandemic and under lockdown conditions. It is designed to be broadcasted live on spectator screens on June 27 and 28th, from the Rialto Theatre. The viewer, although not physically there, can actively participate in the show. They can respond, publicly or privately, to thoughts, comments, and questions posed live to the performers and create a dialogue that accompanies the artists during this marathon race (SPIRIT 2020). With SPIRIT, artists on stage negotiate their availability towards the viewer, their relationship with the viewer, time, space, movement and action. The show then constitutes a critical action and engagement, which involves all the participants in the events happening on stage. The show not only criticises what is happening in a pandemic world but recreates it and goes beyond the limits of social distancing that characterise this period.

The various art projects online are an effective form of communication, a communication that helps people come together and find new ways to become closer. Online communication works as a constructive dialogue between people around the world. In this context, new types of images, visuals, and alternative connections are invented and exhibited online and used in artistic projects. Online communication during the pandemic is not isolating. Artistic production is a globally shared experience. New universal values are promoted, such as respect for healthcare and human life. The Internet is becoming a space for exchanges that promote and reflect the universality of experience, strengthening, on the one hand, cultural promotion and on the other, cultural criticism. And music and artistic production are present. Let us not forget the online concerts organised selflessly by artists, such as the “TogetherAtHome” virtual concert organised by Lady Gaga to support the efforts of the World Health Organization (WHO) health



workers and medical workers in the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In Cyprus, we also have many “Stay at home with” proposals, for example, with CYSO. The 65th Eurovision Contest was also different as it was cancelled on 18 March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and postponed for 2021. After a year off, Eurovision went live in May 2021 and proved how music spreads unity and hope, in Europe and worldwide.

Different artistic spaces are created, and online music dialogue with those spaces promotes cultural activity. This period offers a “displacement” of cultural production, according to the call for proposals of Buffer fridge 2020 (Home for Cooperation 2020). Likewise, this context requires a reflection on the limits of art - a reflection that questions new discourses, spaces and values that appear in this particular Covid-19 context. Certainly, the predominant characteristics that we have developed will highlight the importance of artistic creation through new forms and means, which critically rethink what is taking place (Kouroupaki 2020). From this perspective, we see that the term “space” (Together 2020) is often used for online art projects because the space of online artistic creation defines an intersection point between the real and the virtual and as a space of work and action. However, these spaces can only be grasped by a critical reflection of other spaces (real and virtual), other values (humanist or dehumanised) and other discourses past and present, to come.

## **Conclusion**

Artistic and music production on the Web, Cyprus Web and mass media during the Covid-19 pandemic clearly show us adapting to a new, physical and virtual environment. They highlight technological advancements and tools which reflect the complexity of cultural contacts in the contemporary era. Music and art promote the cohesion of society, creating a collective vision of life that weakens individualism. Any study on this subject must not neglect the plurality of means and contents which emerge. This research sheds light on the specificities of cultural production on the Web and mass media regarding Covid-19. This period reveals various cultural activities and the creation of multiple positive spaces, discourses and values. Cultural expression, either as a public or private matter, calls for a profound reconsideration of human activity by searching for alternate methods of expression.

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