

# (Ethno)musicological Research Here and Now<sup>1</sup>



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The pandemic is generating changes at global level on the background of an intensive and extensive use of digital technologies. These changes occur both in everyday life organization, through the boom of teleworking, e-commerce, delivery and the search for new ways of communication and mobility, and in the negotiation variables and conditions relating to macroeconomics and politics. The pandemic is also revealing the magnitude of the differences between the rich and the poor, the fragility and ineffectiveness of healthcare systems, the insensitivity of various governments when having to weigh people's lives and companies' earnings, medicine manufacturers' purely mercantile behaviour, political parties' profiting from people's fear and uneasiness, everlasting individualism, now fed by dread, and other kinds of meanness. But it is also conceiving the antithesis of all that sordidness: here and there, solidary, disinterested, collective actions are blooming, ruled by the principles of equality and justice. Around this type of attitudes, a utopia is being chiselled, which spreads as fast as the virus. It opens the possibility of boring through the pre-pandemic established order, of breaking its perversity to the environment, of banishing its mercantile essence, of boring through its elitist mark, and of reorienting its wealth accumulative and concentrating drive. This utopia is not totally new, we already know it. But now it finds new and urgent reasons to revive in sensitive people and in concrete actions. The complaints, reports and proposals of an international collective mainly made up of intellectuals, scientists, activists, political leaders and artists, under the name of *Progressive*

<sup>1</sup> Because of expressive economy, with this term I refer to various disciplines interested in music and sound, such as ethnomusicology, musicology, philosophy of music, sociology of music, popular music studies, and psychology of music, among others.

*International*,<sup>2</sup> are examples of laudable actions aimed at preventing that utopia from becoming extinct within the limits of the imagination. We are living through anguishing and uncertain circumstances, and saddened by the losses and impoverishing of subalterned sectors. Perhaps, because of all that, this is, at the same time, a particularly favourable situation to start forging, as the *International* promulgates, a democratic, ecological, peaceful, post-capitalist, prosperous and plural world.

Now, which disruptions is the pandemic causing in the development of research on music and in the diffusion of its achievements? Since March 2020, in various countries, access to repositories which are essential to the advancement of research and to zones where fieldwork is carried out has been banned. Also, personal contacts and cross-border mobility have been reduced, when not suspended, which has significant consequences on education and in the realization of academic interchanges, research stays, scientific meetings and other activities. In spite of all these obstacles, thanks to the search for creative solutions and to the maximum use of digital networks and devices, in general, research and the diffusion of its results have not stopped. However, undoubtedly, many comfort areas have had to be given up and objectives limited or reformulated.

But the urgency does not lie on defining the most effective strategies to continue with research in a scenario of health restrictions, or to make a balance of achievements and losses. The dramatic world situation created by COVID-19 sets an agenda of responsibilities for all disciplines. Particularly, in the field of the humanities, the priority of that agenda is a debate on the value itself of the work of their disciplines. In the areas which concern us, that debate turns around the role which (ethno)musicology might have to alleviate the effects of the pandemic, to revert the conditions under which it appeared and is being dealt with, and to avoid a devastated, fragile and even more unequal post-pandemic scenario. A radically honest approach, without any vested interests, unconnected to personal situations, seems to lead to declaring the uselessness of (ethno)musicology under these circumstances. It is uselessness here and now which recognizes that the expertise of this discipline is unarmed to face the virus and all the havoc it causes. It does not seem to be possible to revert this state of affairs by means of the voluntarism which proclaims “I help with what I know how to do”, or by forcing academic routines towards more decolonial, collaborative, deconstructive or dehierarchized positions. None of this will prevent the spread of the virus and its consequences. Even

<sup>2</sup> <https://progressive.international/about/en>

when those positions have indubitably demonstrated to have considerable critical and transforming potential, their efficacy must be rethought in these circumstances. In the last months various research programs aimed at diminishing the effects of the pandemic have included funding for the humanities. That attitude seems to have originated more from an effort by the institutions to remain on the path of what is politically correct than from real trust in the solutions or palliatives those disciplines can offer. The research and courses on the present and post-pandemic state of musical activities and of musicians which are being carried out or promised for the future, taste more of opportunism and individual survival than of the search for solutions which affect the collectives involved.

If it is accepted that (ethno)musicology does not have a specific repertoire of tools and theoretical postulates which are useful to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and/or to model a more equitable post-pandemic scenario, what is it that they can contribute? As other disciplines, (ethno)musicology has woven extensive networks and created different diffusion channels and organs through which the results of its research circulate, and which might transitorily transmit the type of discussions which are being carried out in social sciences at global level. In order for that to occur, it is necessary to empty part of its contents, that is to say, we should provisionally stop doing musical analysis, speculating about the social character of music, making an effort to catapult our names to the scene foreground by generating neologisms, inventing sub-disciplines all the time, creating “an (ethno)musicological perspective” for everything, and doing many other meritorious and less meritorious actions. The vacuum which may leave not dealing with those subjects or not doing those actions could be filled with urgent questions relating to people’s present and future living conditions and, consequently, to the conditions of research and teaching. It is time to draw (ethno)musicology away from the humanities and nearer to social sciences, and to use part of its dialogue channels to approach the subjects about which these sciences debate today: the price of water in Wall Street’s futures market, the solvency of states as a political question,<sup>3</sup> wealth redistribution, the appearance and growth of political parties which cultivate authoritarianism and racism, the meddling of pharmaceutical laboratories and other multinational corporations with the decisions of sovereign states, unequal access to healthcare, and many other equally critical and urgent questions. In short, this proposal consists of temporarily devoting some pages to demonstrating our responsibility towards

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/seven-secrets-revealed-by-2020-by-yanis-varoufakis-2020-12>

that part of the world which always takes the full brunt. Will we be able to do it? Will we be able to face the consequences which this may generate? This editorial aspires to open a debate in that direction.