

Composing in COVID-19

What is the impact that COVID-19 has on composers and their creative output?

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Introduction

On 23rd March 2020, the United Kingdom was put into a state of lockdown that affected every single person in the country. The rest of Europe and indeed the world has entered similar states of lockdown with “more than three billion people in almost 70 countries and territories” (Langton, 2020) being asked to stay at home. This has affected people’s financial situations, their ability to socialise and by extension their mental health. It has been compared to war by world leaders (Kettle, 2020) and it has demanded a response. As in times of trial gone by, many a person has put pen to paper; brush to canvas; filling the air with music. This paper seeks to find the impact of COVID-19 on the creative output of composers in the western world. Has the output changed, inspired or repressed creativity?

Literature Review

What is creativity?

Boden, M. A. (2004) states that “creativity is the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are *new, surprising and valuable*” It also appears to involve a process; Boden (2004) repeatedly refers to people “coming up” with ideas. This is through a chain of links through the unconscious mind; linking things that previously appeared disconnected (Boden, 2004, pg15).

The creative process can be divided into distinct steps. Wallas (1926) identified four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination and revision. These four steps are preceded by the identification of a need/deficiency. Harry Boam (2016) commented on this noting that it introduces a link between creativity and problem solving. This “need/deficiency” can be anything; and in the case of COVID-19 it could be one of many things: a need to express pain; a desire to raise money through music; a deficiency in morale. Boam (2016) identified five factors that mediate his creative process: time; correspondence; physical environment; technology; and budget. In a time of crisis any of these can be greatly affected, this could disrupt the creative flow of someone who regularly and actively engages in the creative process, and open the gates for someone who is less actively involved in creative processes to produce a higher volume of creative work.

Who is/can be creative?

It is widely understood that “every one of us is creative, to a degree” (Boden, 2004, pg1), children think of new things and ask challenging questions demonstrating the creativity that is in everyone. Why then do some people appear to be creative and others not? “Every child is an artist until he’s told he’s not an artist.” (Fawcett, A. 1976, pg55) People become focused on historical creativity while more broadly disregarding personal creativity in all but children, leading to the perception that some people are creative, and others are not.

Historical Examples of trials unlocking creativity

Plato said that a poet is unable to be creative “until he has become inspired” (Boden, 2004, pg14). Boden (2004) compares the brain to a computer; because the output of a computer is affected by its inputs you can infer that a person's own circumstances affect their work output. Evidence suggests that nothing inspires the human mind quite like different trials, throughout history, major events are recorded in creative ways as far back as written records go.

Biblical Responses

Some of the earliest records of creativity are found in the old testament of the bible:

1. David hiding from Saul wrote several Psalms including Psalm 57.
2. The Israelites in Exile wrote Psalm 137
3. Jeremiah in Lamentations 3:19-23

These responses are chosen because they seem to characterise three types of biblical responses. David does explicitly mention “those who are pursuing” him but his focus is not on the problem itself, rather on God; it is for that reason that he says “I will sing and make music... I will sing of you among the peoples. For great is your love” (Bible, New International Version). In contrast, the writer of Psalm 137 has their eyes fixed on the problem: their circumstances. Because of this they ask, “how can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (Bible, New International Version). This writer is tormented and sorrowful, speaking of weeping. Finally, Jeremiah characterises the middle ground, his sorrow is enormous having Jerusalem destroyed by invaders. He fully recognizes his situation and the utter loss he, and his whole nation, has suffered.

*“I remember my affliction and my wondering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I remember them,
And my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind
And therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed,
For his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.”* (Bible, New International Version)

His outlook is transformed because of his faith in his God.

J.S. Bach

Bach wrote music during the time of the 1720 plague; Huizenga, T. (2020) said that his music could comfort in times of distress. His Cantata No.25, titled *There is Nothing Healthy in My Body* (Bach J.S., 1723), laments the loss of 100,000 people. The text takes the listener down a similar path to that explored in Jeremiah; first making an exhibition of his plight and then choosing to praise his God in the final chorale. Bach also, in the very first section, included a plea for healing physically and from his fear and anxiety.

WW1 Poetry

The First World War saw an explosion in the writing of poetry; Marsland, E. A. (2011) writes that although it disrupted the social lives of people; it did not disturb the flow of poetry. To the contrary, people became “poets for the occasion”. The Great War, as it was known at the time, was of such a scale as to impact the lives of everyone in Europe, inspiring an outpouring of creativity from both sides of the trenches. Although all four of the relevant factors that Boam (2016) identified as mediating his creative process were disrupted for people in WWI, this did not stem the flow. The international financial implications of war were extensive, men on the front line were moved geographically and emotionally and their regular correspondences from before the war were changed drastically. These changes left ordinary means of managing emotion, like speaking to a spouse, for many people, greatly restricted. The writings of the English were as a “secret vice” for them. (Marsland, 2011)

The effects of COVID-19 on people

COVID-19 has impacted the population of the world. In the United Kingdom, at the time of writing, the lockdown has been in place for eight weeks. People confined to their houses, many people unable to work, unable to see friends and family. The social-economic effects on individuals has been large, particularly on people within the entertainment industry where 70% of the workforce has been furloughed by employers (PwC, 2020). The live music industry has halted completely leaving many musicians out of work completely.

The Question

In what ways, both in terms of volume and contents, is COVID-19 is changing the creative output of Western composers?

People are affected mentally by trials. COVID-19 has been no different, but we will be able to probe the more direct causes of it and analyse the impact on the compositions. How does mental health have an impact on volume and content of composers musical output? Do any other intermediary factors affect the creative output of composers?

Methodology

The chosen method of collecting data was through a survey. It was posted online on the 29th of April 2020 and was shared on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and through a few academics via email. The survey was open to responses for 10 days to allow people a period of time to share it with other composers prior to data analysis. Questions were asked to ascertain the nature of the composers' normal work situation, and how their life has been affected generally by COVID-19; questions were then asked more specifically about their musical output to determine any change in volume or content. Finally, questions were asked about an individual's faith or belief system because of the large impact that faith had on the responses to previous events for some historical figures. The survey (Appendix 1) included sixteen questions: a mixture of closed; multiple choice; and long answer questions.

Overview of responses

Thirty-eight composers, from a range of professional fields and personal circumstances, responded to the survey. Thirty-five of the responders, 92%, reported an effect of some kind on their profession. Less than one in five are working as normal. More than half of them earn money from their compositions. The financial impacts were however, varied; with reduced time spent out, many peoples' outgoings have been reduced leading to some people having some, or even significant financial gains. The following charts (Figures 1-3) give an overview of how COVID-19 has directly affected composers.

Work situation during the lockdown

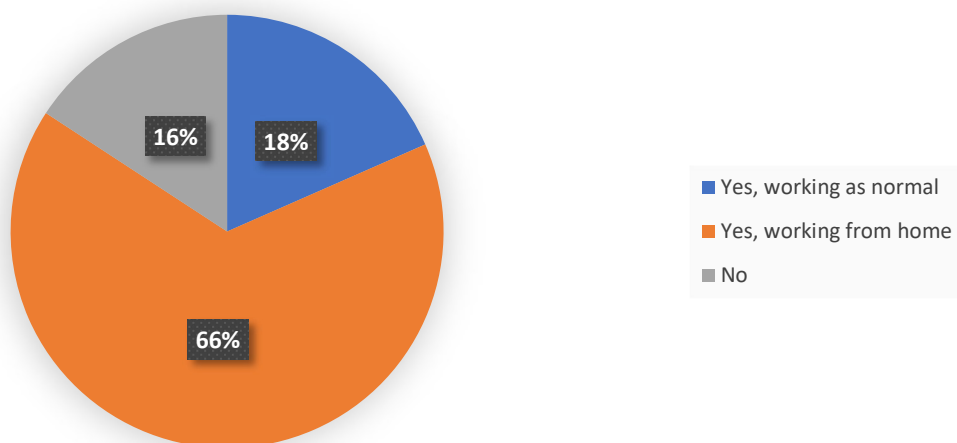


Figure 1

Financial effect of COVID-19 on participants

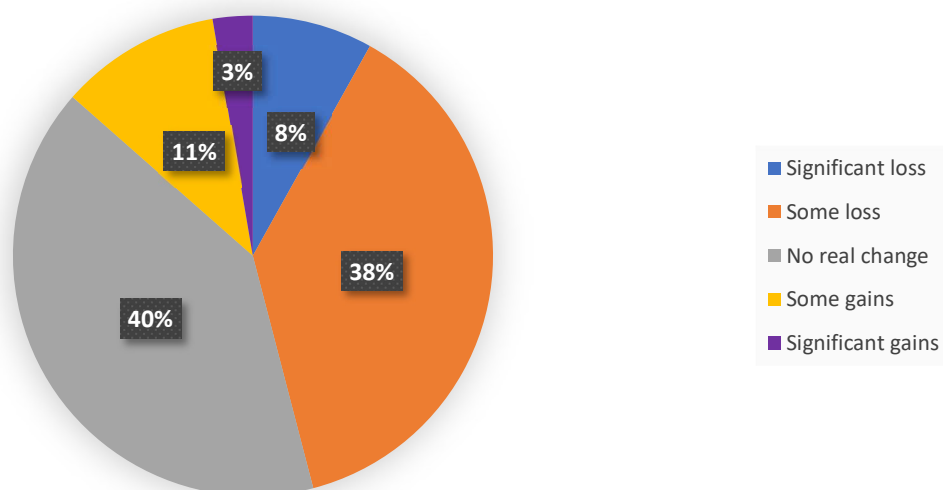


Figure 2

Do you compose/produce music?

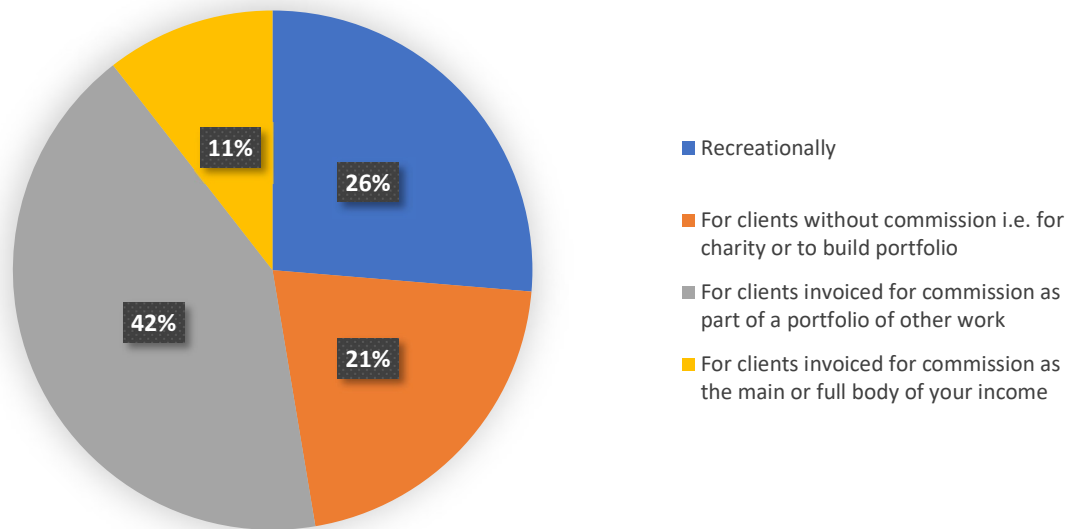


Figure 3

Analysis

Disruption of factors mediating the creative process

The four steps within the creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination and revision, as outlined by Wallas (1926), can be disrupted by events such as COVID-19. The five factors: time; correspondence; physical environment; technology; budget mediating the creative process of Boam (2016) are also affected; in a more easily analysed way.

Time

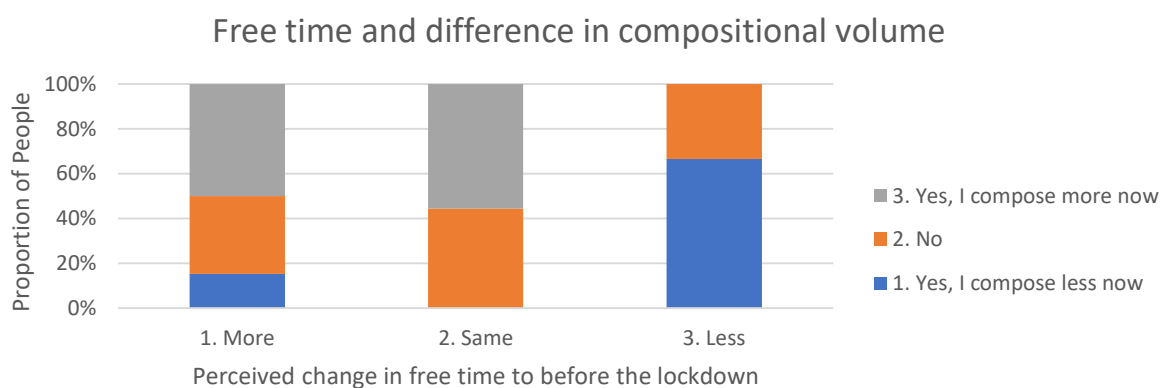


Figure 4

COVID-19 has also had a range of effects on the amount of free time that composers have. For those who regularly commute and are now no longer able to, the amount of free time has increased; this is not however always the case for those with children who are no longer in education as a result of the

lockdown. A disproportionate number of those who have less free time are those who said they have children (Figure 5). The survey didn't ask about children, but five people mentioned children in their answers. There is insufficient data to tell conclusively if those with children are proportionally writing more or less than those without. However, those who now have less free time are generally writing less. Children seem to be a significant factor, worthy of further investigation in further studies.

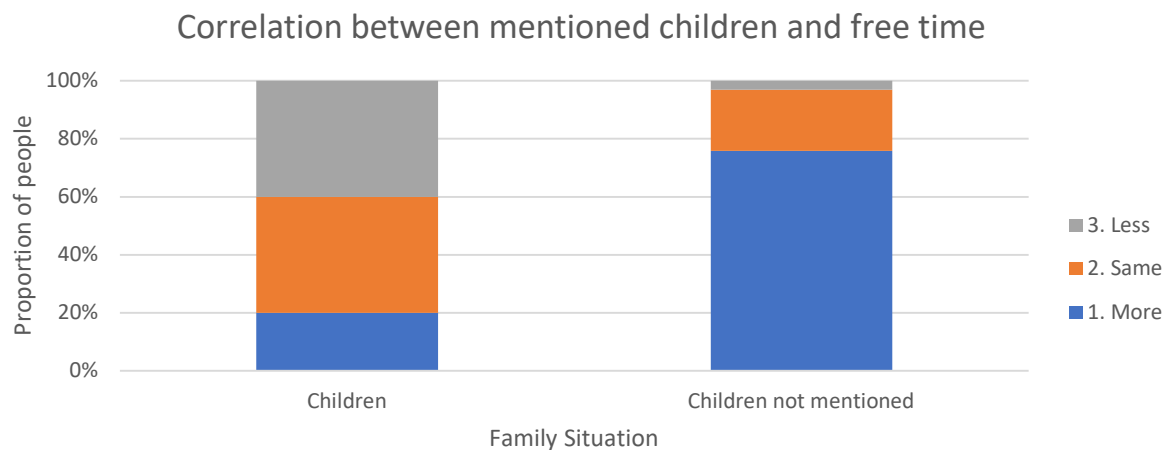


Figure 5

Time appears to be the largest, easily quantifiable factor contributing to the increased volume of compositions; but perhaps more interestingly, it has given the opportunity for people to experiment more, contributing to the change in contents of their compositional output. “I don't feel my style of writing or the actual content has been affected by the current circumstances. It's more been about the time and opportunity.” One responder attributed their new ability to “think far more freely and constructively than usual” to the “opportunity to step back from the usual cascade of activities” in everyday life.

The different amount of free time also impacts mental health. One person who regularly suffers from anxiety, has broken the trend of increased anxiety; this despite some financial loss; this improvement in mental health was attributed by the participant to their increased free time.

Physical Environment/Technology

During the lockdown, there is nowhere to compose, in the UK, apart from within the home. Studios have been shut down, and this restricts some people. However, this restriction isn't affecting everyone to the same extent; some of the respondents compose exclusively at home under normal circumstances. For them, neither the environment nor technology available is impacted. One response reveals this minimal change in routine: “I'm used to self-isolating and being creative.”

For those who would usually use studios, the lockdown has changed the means with which they compose; some view it as a restriction, and some use it as an opportunity to try new techniques. One person says that it's affected them professionally not having the equipment they really want to work efficiently; another person in response to the same question said that they had found “various ways to be more creative.”

Budget

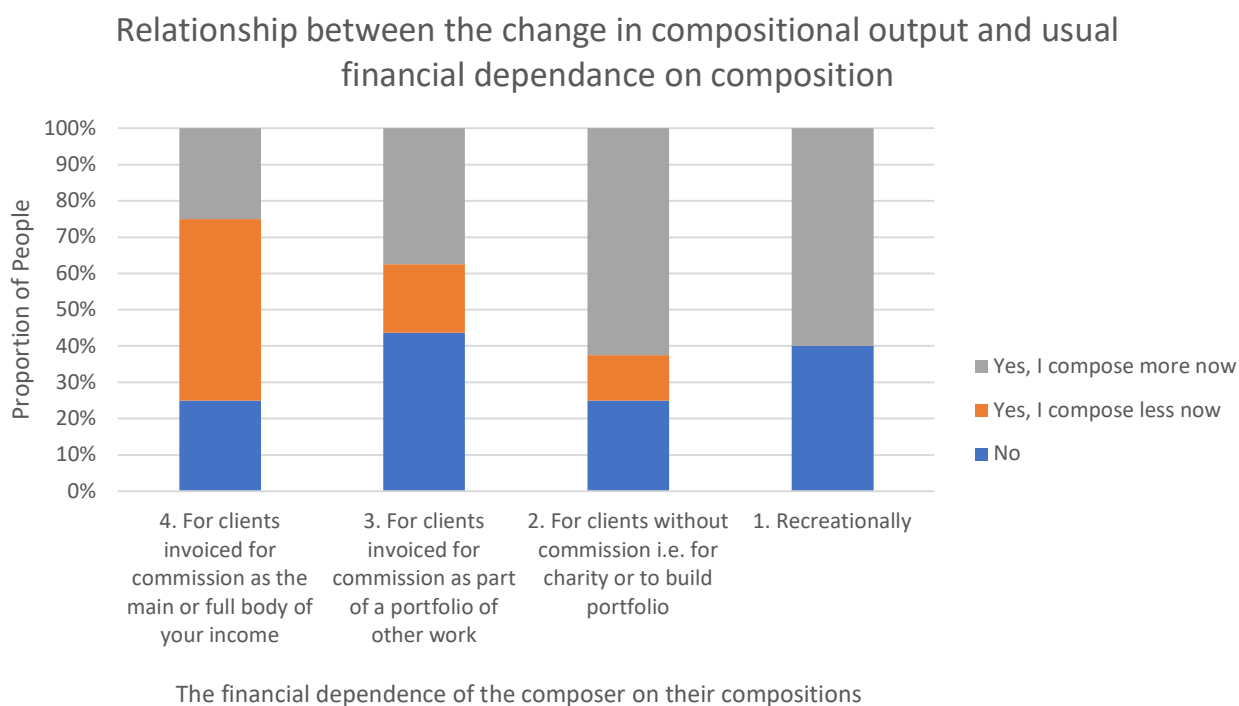


Figure 6

The lockdown has also affected respondent's compositional output differently depending on the individual's relationship with composition (Figure 6). A higher proportion of those whose primary means of income is dependent on composition compose less during the lockdown. The group where the most people's compositional volume increased was those who compose for clients without commission. One possible explanation for both things is the interruption to the regular daily schedule of all parties; those who have a routine of composition have had this broken; those who compose without commission all had other professions, with their routine broken opportunity was given to compose more. An alternative explanation is that those who compose full time would require additional hours in the day to compose more, whereas those who compose recreationally or without commission spend comparatively less time composing, leaving more scope to increase than decrease. This could simply be regression to the mean.

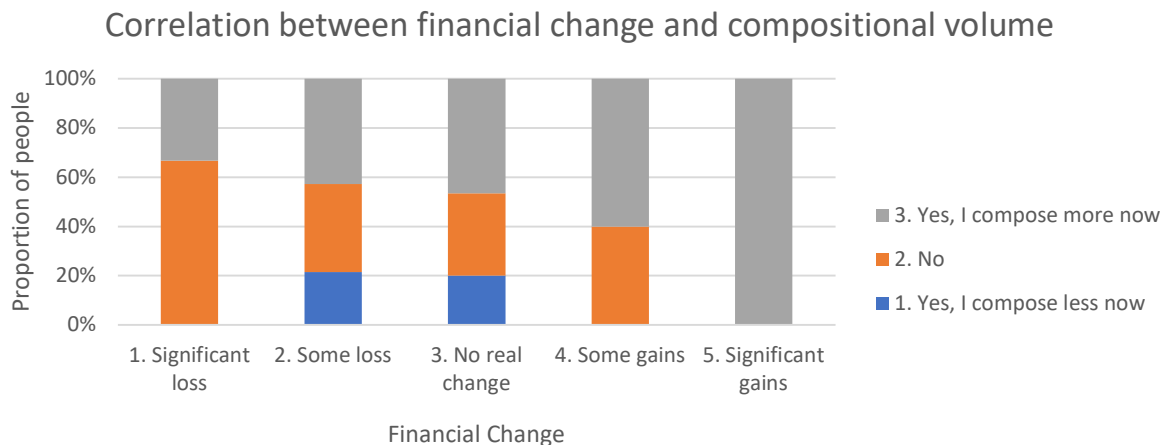


Figure 7

Finances have a more visible correlation with the volume of music produced by composers (Figure 7) than their ordinary financial dependence on composition. A plausible intermediary factor to explain this correlation is the role that mental health has on the volume of compositional output, and the stress that can be induced by financial uncertainty. Those who have made greater monetary gains spend less time worrying about their financial situation and therefore have more time to compose.

Mental Health

Participants were given a list of seven stress indicators¹ from WebMD (2016), and a free text box for any other symptoms that they felt were relevant. Twenty-eight of the respondents reported some of these indicators of stress. The mean number, out of the seven options, of indicators that the participants selected was two and a half; therefore, a number greater than two is being considered a more severe stress response, and two or less an ordinary stress response. There seems to be a correlation between levels of stress and the amount of music that is being produced; a greater proportion of those writing more selected less stress indicators than average (Figure 8). However, this same trend doesn't appear within the longer answers as clearly, with some people giving answers to the contrary.

"I seem to write more and better when I'm feeling down. Which COVID has increased."

One other response included further notes about sore skin and lungs as a result of stress; this severe stress response has not limited the amount of music being produced, instead the quantity has increased, and the music has become more experimental. As another person said; *"It's hard to go a day without worrying about a worldwide pandemic."* Another response type is distraction; one person said that they were using composition as an escape; this led to them writing a more cheerful piece of music.

¹ Referred to as "psychological impacts" in the survey – Question 13

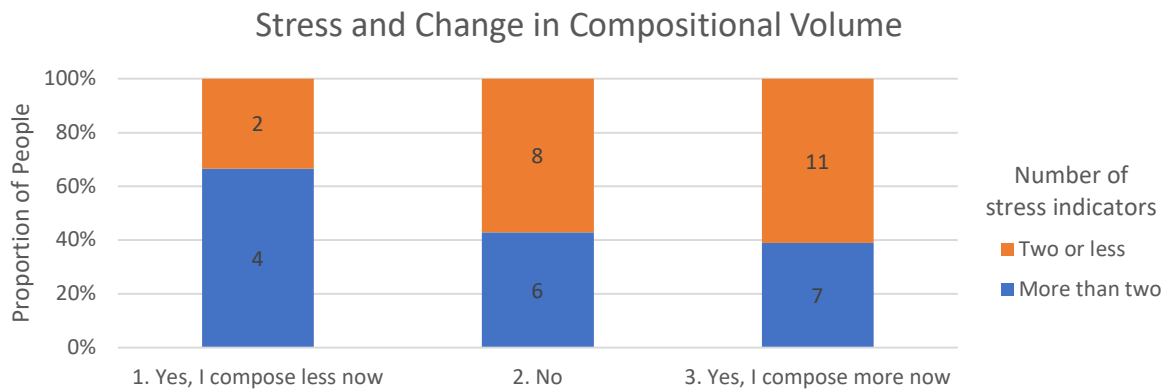


Figure 8

Direct response to the crisis

There is a distinction between a change in volume of musical output, and stylistic change. There is a separate distinction between directly COVID-19 inspired changes, to either volume or style, and circumstantial causes for the same apparent changes. Everyone polled has experienced some sort of change to their life to a greater or lesser extent, and factors such as their quantity of free time, or the structure of their day, can influence the musician's output.

This distinction is important because it highlights a surprising result; only two of the thirty-eight people who responded said that their music had changed as a direct response to the crisis, the other seventeen people who said that their music had changed put it down to the change in circumstances dictating to them. Those who said that their response was directly inspired by COVID-19 saw it as important, stating that it "needs to be reflected in the music we create". Only one other person attributed the change to their feelings; another person commented that it is nice to have something to take their minds off the situation. Everyone else attributed the change in their output to other reasons such as increased free time. Historically, an individual's musical trajectory changes in response to a crisis of similar proportion; it is interesting to observe that, in this situation, less of a direct musical response to the crisis is apparent. However, this perception could be explained in part by associations; if a piece directly references an event, then it will be more strongly associated with it than if it is merely written as a result of it.

I would conclude in saying that those composers whose musical output has changed in some way, fall into one of three categories:

1. Circumstantial change
2. Compose to escape from the situation
3. Compose as a response to the situation

Further thoughts

There is a difficulty for researchers; knowing about someone's personal struggle with stress and anxiety while unable to approach them to offer help. Ethics dictate that you must not approach someone on the grounds of something that they have shared in the context of an anonymous survey. I personally hope that the process of writing their thoughts and feelings will help them process the situation.

Shortcomings of my research

Individuals tend to socialise with those who have similar viewpoints and interests to themselves. Unless care is taken to share the survey widely a higher than representative proportion of responses could be from within the same demographics as the originator of the survey. Therefore, a survey could produce results that are specific to a narrower cross section of society than intended. To minimise this potential source of bias in the results, the survey was shared using different platforms in order to reach a wider range of people. The survey didn't include a question about the age of the respondents so it is speculative to make assumptions that they were all of a similar age; nevertheless, it would be unlikely to reach older composers who are less likely to use social media. In any further studies it would be interesting to ask for the age of the respondents as this would help to demonstrate whether or not the demographic surveyed was representative of the targeted group.

This piece of research has been constrained by the time available; the largest impact of this was on the time that the survey was open for response. Unfortunately, the number of responses wasn't as high as would be preferable. The target sample size was fifty, this would have allowed more confident conclusions to have been made. However, even in this smaller data set significant trends did arise.

Opportunities for Further Research

Eleven out of the thirty-eight participants said that their faith had an effect on their musical response to COVID-19 in some way; this is significant and worthy of further study. The same groups arise from the survey as those highlighted in the biblical section of the literature review. Joy and security in God was expressed by one participant who was writing with "themes of struggle and security in God"; yet another noted that "as a Christian, I firmly believe that my life is safely in God's hands". The responses characterising the sorrow and pain are more bountiful, one individual finding that life struggles are often the theme of their music.

- a. Confront it head on with joy from something else (James1:2)
- b. Complain about it
- c. Escape from it

Finally, a large proportion of the people surveyed identified as being a Christian of some sort allowing a brief look into any correlation between their faith and the response they have to the crisis. It would be interesting, given a large enough sample size, to see if the observations I've had specifically regarding Christian beliefs, occur in other faiths as well; or is Christianity unique in its persistent hope, even in the face of trial?

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Questions

Section 1 of 3

In what ways is COVID-19 affecting contemporary composers?



Thank you for your interest in this survey. The results of this will contribute to a research paper investigating the effects of COVID-19 on contemporary composers. This is part of a University of Huddersfield final year undergraduate module; Researching Music, Technology and Performance.

The aims of this study are to determine the nature of any quantifiable relationship between COVID-19 and music being written by musicians living during the pandemic, and to find what other factors influence this.

This is a survey. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The data collected remains anonymous and you will not be identified in the paper for your participation. The data will only be presented within an academic paper and not elsewhere.

By continuing you are consenting to the use of your answers as part of my research.

My supervisor for this research is Dr Elizabeth Dobson

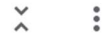
If you have any further questions then please leave your email below and I will contact you.

Email address (optional)

Short answer text

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Survey Questions



This survey has 16 questions

1. What work do you do professionally? Either as a musician or otherwise.

Long answer text

2. How has COVID-19 affected you professionally?

Long answer text

3. How has the lockdown affected the amount of free time you have?

Long answer text

4. Have you been able to work during the lockdown? Either from home or at work as normal

☐ Yes, working as normal

☐ Yes, from Home

☐ No

...

5. Have you been effected financially by COVID-19?

- ☐ Significant loss
- ☐ Some loss
- ☐ No real change
- ☐ Some gains
- ☐ Significant gains

6. Do you compose/produce music?

- ☐ Recreationally
- ☐ For clients without commission i.e. for charity or to build portfolio
- ☐ For clients invoiced for comission as part of a portfolio of other work
- ☐ For clients invoiced for commission as the main or full body of your income

7. How often do you usually compose music?

- ☐ N/A
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Regularly

8. Has the amount of music you compose changed during the lockdown?

- ☐ Yes, I compose less now
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, I compose more now

9. Why do you think that is?

Long answer text

10. Has the content of your musical output changed as a result of the lockdown?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

...

11. If yes, how do you feel that the content has changed?

Long answer text

12. If yes, are there reasons that you can outline?

Long answer text



13. Have you noticed any psychological impacts of the lockdown? Tick all that apply

- ☐ Lack of sleep/sleeping too much
- ☐ Depression/Anxiety
- ☐ Feeling overwhelmed, unmotivated, or unfocused
- ☐ Anger, irritability or restlessness
- ☐ Racing thoughts or constant worry
- ☐ Problems with your memory or concentration.
- ☐ Making bad decisions.
- ☐ Other...

14. Does the virus present you with any worries or concerns? Please elaborate.

Long answer text

.....

Faith/Religion



Thank you for answering these questions. Based on a long history of religious responses to a significant national crisis, such as war, I am also interested to explore the relationship between music output and religion/faith. Please could you outline:



15. If you have a faith or practice a religion could you provide a brief outline

Long answer text

16. If you feel that your faith/religion has influenced your practice as a composer under these circumstances.

Long answer text