

# Liveness online in deadly times: How artists explored the expressive potential of live-streamed concerts at the face of COVID-19 in Norway

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## Abstract

This study was initiated as the pandemic erupted in the spring of 2020, triggered by our curiosity about the wave of Internet-mediated concerts which followed in the wake of COVID-19. The article examines what kind of social and cultural phenomenon these events were, and how their presentational and participatory potential was explored within a few, hectic spring months. Basing our analysis on interviews with 13 performers and four promoters in Norway, we find that the performances transcended traditional modes of live concerts in innovative ways, while responding to the stresses associated with the pandemic crisis. We identify three performance strategies, intimization, intensification and expansion, which in different ways rearticulated established modes of live musical expression by fusing them with the liveness of mediated communication.

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## Introduction

When the COVID-19 virus spread in the spring of 2020 the most important way to counter the pandemic was to limit face-to-face interactions between people. Such restrictions raised huge challenges for activities that are based on precisely face-to-face interaction. The music sector and its concerts are a prime example. Concerts are a core activity for artists, as well as for their fans, and is the largest source of income in the music business (Wikstrøm, 2020). This is part of the reason why the spring of 2020 brought a formidable surge in attempts to stage concerts via the Internet using streaming technology. It was not the first-time concerts were streamed online, but the pandemic introduced new incentives and conditions for doing so, among which the most important was the need to isolate audiences from each other and from the artists.

The first question we ask here is precisely what characterized the challenge that the pandemic posed to the performance of Internet-mediated concerts. We then go on to ask how artists and promoters attempted to solve the challenge, and how they explored the expressive and communicative potential of live-streamed concerts. Lastly, we probe the long-term consequences of the challenge and its solutions, considering implications for the adaptability of the sector and the prospects of the concert forms that were developed.

The study was carried out in Norway, which is among the countries that were only moderately affected by the pandemic (in terms of disease and death), partly due to its various restrictions to face-to-face encounters. The same restrictions imposed huge difficulties for the music sector, and also for other cultural sectors. Early studies have documented how dramatic the shutdown was, charting the impact for the live music business (Gran, *et al.*, 2020) and outlined the significance it had for audiences to connect via online concerts (Onderdijk, *et al.*, 2021; Vandenberg, *et al.*, 2021). Here, we provide a qualitative study of how the artists themselves approached the challenge of performing live music for a distant audience. We have carried out interviews with thirteen artists, as well as four concert promoters, who all obtained substantial experience with staging and expressing live music during the spring of 2020.

Before we go on to present them, we will contextualize our study with insights into how the music sector has addressed challenges before, and how the concert format previously has been reworked and adapted to new media environments. We thereby

invoke insights into mediation processes and theories on presentation, participation, and liveness in concerts. These perspectives can pinpoint the extraordinary challenge of the global pandemic and can shed light on the ability of artists to adapt to it.



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## **Perspectives on the pandemic challenge**

For the music sector, COVID-19 represented a threat from the outside, which came rapidly and with unpredictable outcome. Over the years, the music industry has faced numerous external challenges, from wars to economic downturns, though none have contained the same elements as the recent pandemic. A recurrent kind of threat has been presented by entrepreneurs of new media technology, who have turned to musical content to promote their own values. For instance, early radio channels began to broadcast popular music to fuel their ratings without compensating the creators (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2017), and a century later online service providers set out to offer music for free (Erickson, *et al.*, 2019). A standard music industry response has been to extend copyright to the new forms of exploitation, thereby even turning them to their own advantage (Lessig, 2004). Challenges and responses of these kinds have usually evolved gradually, however, allowing for cooperation and refinement of effective musical formats. For instance, the length of songs has been negotiated to suit new media frames, be it the capacity of phonograph discs or the slots of radio stations (Katz, 2010). In comparison, the challenge of COVID-19 arrived more abruptly, and this time parts of the music sector itself took a lead in exploring the opportunities of mediating live music online.

The defining characteristic of the pandemic threat, however, was the unprecedented restrictions on face-to-face encounters. In addition to isolating people in their homes, it established a gloomy context of unemployment, disease and death. The staging of concerts had to overcome the distance between artists and audiences, all trapped in a deadlock situation. The Internet offered an opportunity to overcome the distance. Somewhat paradoxically, the same medium had been considered a grave threat to the music industry, one associated with unauthorized file-sharing and dropping record sales (Spilker, 2017). The rise of online distribution in the 2000s made it harder to claim payment for recorded music. However, the ability to sell tickets for access to concerts remained the same, thereby increasing the significance of live music. The live music business had therefore been through an extended process of innovation, reflected in the proliferation of festivals and concert concepts, including reunion tours and album celebrations (Kjus, 2018). The dependence on concerts intensified the

crisis associated with the pandemic lockdown, but it also meant that people working in the sector were experienced with innovative concert forms.

The basic form of concerts entails artists playing music for an audience, all being at the same place at the same time. Following Turino [1], we may say that all concerts consist of the two interrelated elements of “presentation” and “participation”. With presentation, we refer to all the different aspects of the concerts’ musical content and expression, including the choice of song repertoire, dramaturgical direction and all scenographic elements. Furthermore, it includes the choice of venue itself, and, in the case of streaming concerts, the choice of online platform for dissemination. The concept of participation captures the fact that concerts presuppose an active audience. At physical concerts, a community is established by the circumstance that the artist and the audience are gathered here and now around an event. Such situations provide several explicit and implicit opportunities of interaction, allowing artists and audiences to approach each other directly as well as to view, interpret and adapt to each other’s reactions. For anyone aiming to carry out a streamed concert, both the presentational and the participatory aspects obviously create a set of new challenges. We will look more closely at these in the following analysis. To pin-point the character of these challenges more precisely, we will look into the meaning of the concepts of “live” and “liveness”.

The appeal of concerts will typically entail fresh ways of presenting the music, audibly and visually, and interacting with the audience, verbally and bodily. Recent years have also seen considerable innovation in terms of concert settings, from parks and castles to mountain tops, thereby establishing a framework that itself pushes the boundaries of artistic expression and interaction. Coming together, face-to-face, has been celebrated precisely for giving first-hand access to the artist and her musical expression. The attraction of music being played and shared here and now has been captured in the terms live and liveness (Thornton, 1995). Live concerts offer privileged access to “the actual production of the sound, and the emotional work carried in the voice,” according to Grossberg [2]. Liveness has also been associated more generally with aliveness and the lively characteristics of that which is not dead [3]. In fact, within the performing arts, a lack of immediacy, relevance and realness has been referred to as deadliness: “Deadliness is the product of a failed relationship between performance and audience,” Reason and Lindelof suggest [4]. While face-to-face settings may offer ideal conditions for a successful relationship between performer and audience, it is not guaranteed. Furthermore, the “ness” of “liveness” suggests that a concert that somehow deviates from its basic form (here and now) might also have its appeal.

It is an important insight that “live” and “liveness” are concepts that are intimately connected to media and mediation. In fact, the word “live” was first used with its

current meaning in radio broadcasts, in order to indicate to listeners that the content was not pre-recorded but transmitted in real time [5]. Theoretical work on liveness has identified various elements that condition the experience of liveness. Bundy (2014), for example, highlighted the significance of the relationship between performer and audience, awareness of the audience, authenticity of performance and risk of failure. Historical studies have demonstrated how these elements have been sought and managed in different ways throughout modern media history. There is a lack of research on the formation of specific forms and modes of liveness, however, examining the distinct character of the performer-artist relationship and evaluating the significance of music for their experiential and emotional connection (DeNora, 2006; 2000). We believe that our empirical material is well suited to contribute to the study of liveness in these respects.

The characteristics of live concerts were made noticeable when music was first recorded and electronically mediated in the early nineteenth century. Radio and then television producers eagerly explored the opportunities to transmit live music across to their audiences (Forman, 2012). They not only captured the performance of the artists but also developed techniques for conveying the responses of audiences, typically using a studio audience, that contributed to a sense of being there for those not present. The liveness of concerts was thereby made available for people in their homes, but the broadcast mediation of such events also added another layer of meaning. The media generate their own kind of liveness, according to Couldry (2004), by connecting people to the center and to societal reality. It is fueled by the “need to connect oneself, with others, to the world’s events,” according to Bourdon [6], who considers the notion of liveness to be intertwined with developments in media history. The liveness of media can, indeed, also be intertwined with the liveness of concerts, a remarkable example of which was *Live Aid* in 1985, when Bob Geldof initiated a fund-raising concert for the famine in Ethiopia which was broadcast to people worldwide.

Broadcasting has, for good reasons, been a primary way of mediating concerts to distant audiences. Broadcasters have an obvious interest in the attractive content of concerts and have therefore developed competent ways of broadcasting them, whether from their own studios or from external venues. For artists, such events generate publicity as well as payment, which is otherwise difficult to claim when there is no ticket-buying audience. The interplay of broadcasters and artists has taken numerous forms, including so-called “unplugged” productions that strive for an acoustic sound and an intimate connection with the studio audience. Another variant is radio programs that invite artists to the studio and ask them to perform their songs for the listeners, thereby emphasizing the radio channel’s live connection with society. Most

artists have more experience with these forms of live music mediation than with online concerts, although the Internet has offered a new gateway to audiences.

Up until the pandemic, online media were primarily used to communicate with the audience in between concerts. As Baym has pointed out, concert venues present “a brief moment of actual meeting” while online platforms offer “ongoing connections, with the obligations and pressures those entail” [7]. She is concerned with how social media have increased what she calls the “relational labor” of artists, referring to the development and maintenance of meaningful relationships with the audience. Bennett has traced how mobile media, such as smartphones, also have entered into the interactions taking place during concerts, particularly how concert-goers communicate with people who are not physically present. While this activity includes more people in the event, she also finds that it can disturb the engagement in the live performance, here and now [8]. Baym and Bennett thereby highlight how new media pose profound challenges to artists as well as their audience, which in the special case of the pandemic entailed live-streamed concerts.

There are, to be sure, several examples of artists and venues that have live-streamed concerts and made them available via their own Web page or social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Such platforms also feature numerous examples of people playing music directly facing the camera, though with varying artistic ambitions and audience traction. Although the live-streaming platform Twitch has had a music section since 2010 and YouTube introduced live-transmission functionality in 2013, live-streamed concerts remained a dispersed, peripheral and largely marginal phenomenon until 2020 (Ask, *et al.*, 2019).

The arrival of COVID-19, however, meant that all concerts were called-off. This obviously affected the gathering of an audience, but also the interaction of artists, bands and concert organizers. The opportunities and challenges of online concerts were thereby cast in an entirely new light. The pandemic gave artists a historic incentive to explore the performance of music online, while also introducing the exceptional challenge of connecting with an audience comprised of individuals isolated in their homes, as were also the artists. Nobody knew how long this situation would last or, indeed, how many adjustments in the restrictions would follow, underpinning the challenge of establishing adequate ways of staging, performing, and mediating live music.



## How we approached the performers

On 12 March 2020, the prime minister of Norway held a press conference presenting “the strongest preventive measures ever introduced in peace time in Norway”, including a five-person limit on social interaction and two-meter distance in physical encounters. The crisis permeated both public and private life, and had dramatic as well as partly paradoxical implications for the live performance of concerts. Concerts, which are usually public events that are open for anyone buying a ticket, could now take place only in the privacy of people’s homes. Moreover, as the concerts were staged and streamed online, they became public events available for anyone, anywhere in the country (many did not even require a ticket). The live-streamed concerts were, then, a powerful instance of the kind of blurring of public and private contexts that the Internet is known for affording (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014).

In Norway, the conditions for mediating concerts into homes were relatively good. The country has an advanced digital infrastructure, upon which numerous online services are established, which are used by broad sections of the population (Spilker, 2017). Its artists are also experienced with online distribution, including social media and many are also invested in music production (Kjus, 2019). Few had prior experience with online concert production, however, as our interviews confirmed. That was also the case for most promoters, who in different ways took it upon themselves to facilitate concerts. Several of the artists we interviewed had performed in radio or television broadcasts earlier, but, in those cases, it was the broadcasting company that had the technical expertise and was responsible for set-up and direction. Many also had some experience with sharing videos of themselves through social media, by *e.g.*, disseminating samples of new music or other glimpses from rehearsals or recording sessions, but with varying degrees of professionalism, and it was still a long way from there to streaming an entire concert.

In this study, we set out to examine how performing artists perceived the pandemic challenge and how they acted on it. Through in-depth qualitative interviews we examined how several artists, within a wide range of popular musical genres, made sense of and explored the communicative potential of live-streamed concerts (note that our study does not cover the artist population as such). We also interviewed a handful of promoters who were involved with staging numerous concerts. We asked them various questions, probing their efforts to present their music and interact with the audience. Presentational choices comprised repertoire and style, including scenography, dramaturgical and choreographic elements. The artist also had to consider how to address and respond to his or her online audience, and how to use the mediated opportunities to (re)create the sense of community and participation associated with concerts.

Our questions generated numerous accounts of the work put into communicating with the non-present audience and strategies for creating an appealing live performance.

The extent of the success of the chosen strategy would, of course, be crucial for the continued time and investment put into such concerts, for the artists as well as for the audience. Developing effective forms of mediated communication is no easy task under any circumstances, as reflected in the resources that various creative industries (radio and television, for instance) put into establishing standardized formats through which content can be conveyed and communicated to the audience (Volmer, 2019). In this case, new forms had to be found fast and within a context that was constantly changing.

The current study, then, focuses on the communicative challenges of live-streamed concerts rather than economic ones (which we have studied elsewhere, see Spilker, *et al.*, in press). Still, it is relevant to note that the initial wave of concerts attracted a volume of audiences and donations that after a while shrunk considerably. This was a development that our informants were concerned with and which some of them related to the nature of the online concerts, making it an issue that we also will touch upon.

In May and June 2020, we conducted 15 qualitative interviews with 17 informants, involving 13 artists and four concert promoters, all of which had fresh experiences with live-streamed concerts, at the time. Through semi-structured interviews we sought an in-depth understanding of the informants' experiences, aiming for "thick descriptions" of live-streamed concerts as a social phenomenon (Mahat-Shamir, *et al.*, 2021; Aspers and Corte, 2019). Our sample spans over artists from a wide range of popular musical genres, stretching from acoustic and un-plugged varieties of country, folk and jazz; via energetic rock and popular (party) music; to more artistically ambitious acts within the electronic musical landscape. We also sought diversity among the promoters. The spontaneous initiative Brakkesyke 2020 (initiated by key members of the alternative music scene in Oslo) and the more locally anchored Tou Sessions (associated with the independent music community in the coastal town Stavanger) turned to the platforms of Facebook and YouTube, while inviting voluntary donations from the audiences (via online payment services such as PayPal and Vipps). The services VIERLIVE and STREAMY, on the other hand, were involved in longer-term operations, organizing professionally produced concerts from various locations that were communicated via their own streaming platforms and based on ticket sales.

The majority of the interviews were held online via video link (Zoom). In line with other researchers' experience of doing qualitative research during the pandemic (see Oliffe, *et al.*, 2021; Reñosa, *et al.*, 2021), online interviews provided some benefits in the recruitment process. As geographical constraints were reduced, it was easier to contact and interview relevant informants outside our immediate, local reach. Moreover, the informants seemed relaxed when talking in their living rooms, kitchens



and home offices, surrounded by their personal belongings, apparently inspiring them to speak “frankly and freely”. In general, the informants were eager to share their experiences, which our semi-structured interviews allowed for (they lasted between 60 and 90 minutes).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded through a theme-based qualitative analysis strategy (Ritchie, *et al.*, 2014). This involved identifying themes across the interviews to highlight similarities and differences in the views and narratives shared by the informants. Through an open and inductive coding of the transcribed interviews, different key categories were identified and used to synthesize and identify the analytical concepts on which we base our following discussion (Sarker, *et al.*, 2000).



## **Coping with the pandemic challenge**

A fascinating finding in the interviews was all the different comparisons with established and familiar forms of dissemination that the artists and organizers used when describing their experiences with streaming concerts. The comparison with “regular” physical concerts was not surprisingly the foremost frame of reference. But parallels were also drawn to a number of other types of dissemination: Some compared it to a television concert, some to live radio performances, some to social media stunts. One described it as “a blend of podcast and concert.” The most ambitious concert organizer, VIERLIVE, stated that their ambition was not to do “streaming concerts” but to create “live music videos” and “live music films”. Still others compared the experience of conducting a streaming concert with “the feeling after a good band rehearsal” or that it was “reminiscent of a rehearsal with extremely good sound.”

All these couplings tell a lot about the work the informants had to do to give meaning to a little-established form of dissemination, a phenomenon in development and without frozen content. You could not just say “I’m going to do a streaming concert” in the same way you could say that you are going to do a concert or a recording. The artists and organizers had to learn from each other and teach the outside world what kind of genre this is, and they use experiences with established formats to imagine it. Also, the established formats to which they related — as we will see later — revealed certain choices of direction with regard to their own streaming performances, whether, for example, they performed it with a podcast, TV concert, or music video as a mental model.

There was a lot to learn, a lot of challenges in terms of presentation as well as participation. Many artists seem to have approached the streaming concerts with a heightened awareness of the way in which the music would be presented. Some negative aspects of this were increased fear of “playing wrong” and a sense that “there is nothing to hide behind,” and “no charm quota for mistakes,” as one put it. Many assessments were made related to the sound, both how it should be captured on the artists’ side and how it would sound through the audience’s speakers. The increased self-awareness also related to the artists’ visual presentation, which was now to be captured by camera and displayed on individual computer screens. Artists and organizers told us about discussions concerning a choice between one and multiple cameras, stationary and moving or zooming cameras, and black and white and color renderings. While artists were somewhat familiar with challenges related to sound mediation, the visual mediation appeared to be a bigger challenge, which meant heavier investments in terms of both competence and equipment.

Both choice of physical stage and digital platform posed some additional challenges (and offered some additional possibilities) for the streaming concerts compared to “ordinary” physical concerts. Freed from the need to make room for a present audience, the concerts could in principle be streamed from anywhere (with adequate Internet connectivity). While most of the streaming concerts were, at least after a while, transmitted from established concert venues, several of the artists we interviewed chose to stream their performances from their own homes. Some also experimented with streaming from alternative locations, such as a closed highway bridge or outside the U.S. Embassy, locations that would not be possible with the presence of a physical crowd. The choice of digital platforms from where viewers could access the concerts constituted another new challenge. Our informants told us that they had had discussions about whether to use Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, YouTube or TikTok, or establish their own independent platforms. The great majority of Norwegian artists ended up using Facebook as the platform of choice — using either their own band sites, the sites of established concert organizers or new “covid hubs” — because they thought it was the easiest and safest way to reach the audience. An exception was the start-up company VIERLIVE (in English, WEARELIVE), which developed an autonomous platform for their arrangements.

However, the greatest challenge with streaming concerts — and the major difference from physical concerts — was how to create a sense of community and interaction with the audience (Turino, 2008). At the same time, today’s Internet offers a set of alternative interaction possibilities that did not exist for one-way media such as radio and television (Spilker, 2017). We were curious to what extent and in what ways the artists have taken advantage of these opportunities. Strikingly, the first thing every single artist mentioned when talking about these themes, was the longing for a live

audience. It felt strange and unfamiliar to play concerts in empty premises, and they missed the “energy” they would usually have gotten from the crowd. They described the experience in terms such as: “a very unnatural situation” and “a feeling of being completely alone.” Two members of a rock band found that streaming concerts were a poor substitute, and that the lack of an audience made it “suck” (although it “was fun in its own way”). This is how they describe the end of the concert:

So, I have nothing else to say but that, when the whole concert was over, we took out our ear plugs, took off everything, and then it was completely quiet in the room, and then we broke down in laughter. It was like it was uncomfortably quiet, sort of. [...] So when it's screaming loud in the monitor and it feels like you're playing crap hard and fast, and that everything is real chaos somehow, and then you just connect right out of it and meet two people standing there with their cameras and smiles ... [laughs]. It was a very strange experience.

Over all, the adjective “strange” was the most frequently used description of streaming concerts. A singer-songwriter said that she had thought carefully about how she should relate to the audience and that she did not want to make a point out of the fact that it was a strange and different experience to do a streamed concert:

I saw quite a few concerts myself and I gradually got a little tired of colleagues saying: “Oh, this was weird.” Because my experience was that the audience at home did not experience it as strange as you do ... I tried to be aware of not talking so much about it. And I really prepared mentally for that to be the case. But when I was in the situation myself, I felt it was incredibly strange. So, it may well be that I said it once [laughs], that this was a little strange.

Despite this basic experience, and despite all the work and all the investments the artists had to make to set up the concerts, it appeared that a majority of the artists had gone to the streaming concerts with a positive attitude. They saw streaming concerts as a new artistic challenge, an opportunity to try something different and acquire new skills. Most had reflected on possible strategies to compensate for the absence of a physical audience — or, to put it more positively, to deal with the presence of an online audience.

Social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and TikTok, have over the past decade become an important arena for communication between artists and audiences.

In connection with streaming concerts, social media make possible contact between artist and audience both before, during and after the concerts. Many said that they had been more active on social media before the concerts than usual. It was strategic both to promote the concerts, and also to engage the audience and to regain a sense of proximity and contact with the fans who had otherwise disappeared. In this way, it seems as if a larger part of the community work — establishing an “us” in connection with a situation or event — was done before the concerts themselves. Two members of a fuzz-pop duo were highly aware of an important distinction between streaming concerts and ordinary concerts: At ordinary concerts, the audience is defined by those who have bought a ticket and who are physically present. At streaming concerts, the audience is potentially unlimited in number and independent of geography. The reach was therefore different “since you talk to the whole world and try to get them to come to a concert.”

During the concerts, there were substantial differences between the artists in how they addressed the audience. A few artists said that they spoke more often and more loosely to the audience than usual and emphasized that they were trying to create an informal atmosphere. One of the informants even made her communication with the audience via chat a key element in her concerts. Her home concert was arranged as a release party for her new album:

It worked great. It was simply a real upswing. I had invited people to eat cake and celebrate. Also, they could buy records and I could sign records along the way and we could talk a little. I have received a lot of good feedback that people felt that they got to know me better, and that they got to take part in the celebration that took place at home in my living room.

While this informant took care of the chat all by herself, some of the most popular bands had hired extra crews to filter the chat, who could both answer questions themselves and convey some of the questions to the artists. While some thought it worked well to use chat as a tool to interact with the audience, others were more negative, stating that it felt very artificial compared to a normal concert situation. Thus, some of the artists deliberately ruled out the possibility of chatting with the audience.

An interesting observation is that streaming concerts seemed to have a longer and more intense after-life compared to ordinary concerts, in terms of artist-audience communication. The informants said that they were surprised by the amount of feedback they received after the concerts. The feedback exceeded the “normal” by far, if one thinks of written feedback through social media channels. There are probably

two explanations for this. First, it may have to do with the fact that the audience sat in front of their screens when they watched the concerts and thus had a direct feedback channel to the artists immediately at hand. Second, it may have to do with the national (and international) spirit of community and solidarity that arose in connection with the corona closures in the spring of 2020, and that the audience wanted to show extra support to artists who were in an artistically and financially difficult situation.

Overall, the pandemic seemed to increase the interaction of artists and audiences, particularly in between concerts, echoing and amplifying what Baym (2018) found to be the case in “normal” times. For several artists, however, the relational labor of combing live performance with mediated audience interaction was taxing, even when it was attempted in between songs. Our study resonates with the work of Bennett (2014), who found that mediated communication can disturb the engagement and immersion in concerts, while it can also expand their reach and inclusivity. In fact, the live-streamed concerts reached people who did not usually attend concerts, whether it was due to geographical distance, age, physical disabilities or social anxiety (a point highlighted in journalistic coverage). This remarkable capacity was reflected in the feedback from the audience. For example, one of our informants, a singer-songwriter, was contacted by a guy in “in the remote forests of Finnskogen” who reached out after such a concert and said that “this was the best thing that had ever happened [to him].” Other artists shared this experience, stating that streaming concerts had opened up new possibilities of “reaching out to people in a different way.”

In this section, we have seen how the artists experienced that doing streaming concerts in many ways differed from ordinary concerts, in terms of presentation, participation, and interaction. In order to set up, perform, and disseminate these concerts, artists had to relate to new types of challenges, invest in new skills and equipment and, more fundamentally, rethink the concert format. The latter was especially related to the fact that streaming concerts are stretched out in space and time: in space, because of the potentially limitless and geographically unbound audience reach; in time, because the concerts had a potential double life, as both live and on-demand, and because audience participation and interaction seemed to start earlier and last longer than for physical concerts. In several respects, this opened up some new opportunities that the artists, by and large, approached with a positive attitude. After a while, however, several of the artists appeared to be somehow fatigued with live-streaming, an impression that they also picked up among the audience. To present their music adequately while also interacting with the absent audience was a taxing challenge. It was essentially a challenge of (re)creating the expressive appeal and liveness of concerts in a meaningful way; they tackled this challenge in different ways.



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## Online performance strategies: Intimization, intensification, expansion

In the spring of 2020, artists were faced with the double challenge to explore a new online dissemination format while at the same time doing that as part of an interpretation of and reaction to the pandemic. Fundamentally, artists had one of two choices: either to go on and pretend that it was just like any other concert — or to develop strategies more suitable to the new format and the new situation. Our material clearly shows that those who tried to do the first, are the ones who had the most negative responses to streaming concerts in the first place and at the same time they are those who reported the most negative experiences afterwards. However, the majority of artists displayed a more active attitude and took on the task of inventing suitable strategies for a new format.

In our material, we have identified three strategies, that all represent attempts at rethinking and adapting the concert format for live streaming: *intimization*, *intensification* and *expansion*.

*Intimization*. The first strategy we will denote intimization. It was probably also the first if we were to order these strategies in a timeline, due to a number of reasons. It was arguably the easiest way to set up a concert under severely restricted conditions and with limited technical and other resources. At the same time, it corresponded well with the collective feeling of anxiety and vulnerability which dominated in the first phase of the pandemic shutdown. Some artists chose to intimize their musical expression, *e.g.*, by stripping down their arrangements or being more personal than usual. In the early wave of live concerts, we found a number of solo artists in genres such as country, jazz and folk. These artists were accustomed to performing alone and took responsibility for their own sound and staging. In this tradition, expressing oneself in a direct and authentic way is a value in itself, and in their approach to streaming concerts, these virtues were further accentuated. One of our informants, a famous Norwegian jazz singer, was among those who started playing concerts from home:

I was looking for another way to get close to the audience and felt that I could create a form of intimacy through the screen [...] I chose to keep the music down a bit so that it would come out more clearly to the listener on the other side. It was probably also exciting for my fans to see a concert that went directly from my living room.

Later on, she also held concerts from traditional concert venues, but also there, she emphasized the intimacy of the performance and the notion that both the artist and audience member were alone, together:

When I played at Sentralen, I asked those who filmed if they could film me really close up, showing much less of the surroundings [...] I did not want to create unnecessary distance by standing alone on the stage with no audience present.

In the same spirit, several artists within the “singer-songwriter” tradition sought to cultivate a simple and stripped-down presentation of their music. One of the singer-songwriters represented another approach to intimization than the jazz singer. He wanted to have only one camera, fixed and not zoomed, and recorded in black and white. He wanted to let the music speak for itself, without introductions or other connecting elements. Thus, he cut off what is otherwise a key participatory element in the blues/country tradition within which he is working, namely to talk between the songs. He explains his decision in the following manner:

I felt that it was very difficult to use humor as a tool. Usually, I do a lot of that when I play solo concerts, but then it is based on the specific response from the audience. And it takes a very short time before I turn things around, if I notice that the response fails. But when I had no opportunity whatsoever to know if what I said worked or not, then I chose not to. And then I was just quiet instead.

Focusing on the music and its live presentation was thereby also a way of compensating for the compromised interaction with the audience.

*Intensification.* Some of the other artists chose a strategy that was about intensifying their performances. As a response to the pandemic shutdown, the strategy in many ways represents the opposite of intimization: Instead of acknowledging and “giving in to” feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, intensification can be seen to address co-existing, pent-up feelings of frustration and anger. The artists who experienced the transition to streaming as the most challenging and “absurd”, were artists in genres such as pop and rock, where dancing, cheering and singing are central. Refining the presentation of the music seems to have been a way to compensate for the loss of participation. Some of the artists in the latter genres solved this by banging-on with greater intensity and greater use of sound effects than ever. This was confirmed by one of our informant who usually has a festive audience:

You have to keep the energy up in a different way. You have to pound away and own the situation, in a way. When you get to a concert and you have a lot of pyro with you and you have your band there and you just push loose, sort of — then you can have a bad day at work without anyone in the audience able to perceive it. But you cannot have a bad day at work in a streamed performance from an empty room. Then you have to “get in the ring”, right? Otherwise, it will be damn embarrassing. I actually feel that the slightly raucous things I do fit a bit into this format.

Intensifying the expressive act can also be seen as a way to compensate for the loss of “energy” from the audience. However, this strategy demands more from the auditive and visual presentation, as well as a larger apparatus on the organization side.

*Expansion.* The third strategy demands even more resources and apparatus. This strategy is not about intimization or intensification of the musical performances but rather about exploring and developing new expressions made possible by the streaming format. Looking also at this strategy as not only an answer to how to do streaming concerts, but as a response to emotions aroused by the pandemic, we would argue that this strategy engages with desires to escape, to get detached, to experience something aesthetically different, to be led somewhere else. Actually, our prime example of this strategy is the Easter 2020 streaming “festival” which was entitled “A completely different place”, arranged by the start-up streaming concert organizer VIERLIVE. The festival included ten of the best-known young artists in Norway, including the internationally renowned stars Aurora and Sigrid. As mentioned earlier, VIERLIVE preferred to say that they were not arranging streaming concerts but creating “live music videos”. For several of the artists, this implied an intensified focus on the visual and narrative aspects of the concerts — described in this manner by one of our informants representing the electronic musical scene:

I would rather make a performance that was more about visual impressions and a kind of storytelling, than that people could just sit and watch me play. It was more about acting, in a way. In retrospect, my main take-away, what surprised me most, is that I first started thinking about the music itself just a few days before we were to play. I only thought about pictures and narrative and who I wanted to work with and what we should wear and what we should do ...



The informant adds that he perceived early on a certain tiredness with concerts where you simply play your music in front of a camera, while VIERLIVE wanted to put the director and musician together to create something new and interesting for the audience. Many of the VIERLIVE concerts were characterized by an exploration of narrative and scenographic possibilities. Not least, they have been creative in the use of original sites for the performances — away from the concert stages (and the “at-home-with-concept”). The Easter festival “A completely different place” streamed its shows from different locations every day — *e.g.*, a hotel suite, outside the American embassy and on a disused highway bridge. These mediated events thereby explicitly transcended the place-boundedness that the pandemic demanded. They offered an imaginary escape from the isolation, while also inspiring contemplation on what liveness might be in the time of Internet-mediated concerts.



### **Rearticulating liveness: Implications and prospects**

We started this paper by specifying the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic posed to the performance of Internet-mediated concerts. While it isolated both artists and audiences in the gloomy context of disease and death, the Internet offered an opportunity to overcome the distance and address the distress. We framed this communicative and expressive challenge in terms of “liveness”, which within media studies as well as music studies has referred to the establishment of direct and meaningful relations between performers and audiences. Our interviews with artists revealed several inventive attempts at (re)connecting with the audience, which also entailed various kinds of friction in the combination of presentation with participation. In our rich material, we were able to discern three kinds of strategies for performing concerts online that together show the scope of how opportunities were explored: intimization, intensification and expansion. We argue that these strategies cultivated different “modes of liveness”, thereby emphasizing different aspects of the relation between artist and audience in an online setting.

The intimization strategy took as its premise that both artist and audience were fundamentally alone, but alone together. In order to reflect this reality, the performers zoomed in on their basic expressiveness, including “the emotional work carried in the voice” [9]. It is this strategy that to the greatest extent overlapped with liveness understood as a way to reconnect and tune into a shared reality (Couldry, 2004). We will call this mode of liveness *alonetogetherness*. Intensification, on the other hand, focused not on recognizing aloneness but on breaking through, on overcoming mediated distances by focusing on the performers and their expressive gestures and

stage antics. We can say that it promoted a mode of liveness that can be denoted as *liveliness*, boosting the various aspects of the artists' actions (rather than stripping them down) in an attempt to make an impression on the audience. The final strategy is about expanding beyond the stifling confines of the situation by way of exploring audiovisual styles as well as places and temporalities. It is liveness understood as an experimental nerve and movement out of the ordinary. We might call this form of liveness for *thirdplaceness*, an attempt to create an aesthetic experience outside the habitual everyday of both the artists and the audiences, allowing them to reconnect afresh.

These performance strategies and their related modes of liveness were responses to as well as interpretations of the pandemic challenge, in terms of mediating music as well as responding to what society underwent. A societal crisis, such as the covid spread, can trigger a range of emotions, from anxiety and vulnerability, through anger and frustration, to the desire to escape and disengage. Music has the important quality of offering resonance and relief to such emotions (DeNora, 2006). As we found in our study, artists and producers wanted to create streaming experiences that reflected and gave emotional expression to the difficulties that people and their community were facing. For example, when VIERLIVE denoted their easter festival "A completely different place", it played on the desire to escape from the everyday life of the lock-down.

Artists with different genre affiliations appeared to develop different performance strategies, cultivating modes of liveness that resonated with different types of emotion triggered by the pandemic. As we have noted, country artists and singer/songwriters were prone to refine the intimacy of their performance, playing on feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, while rock acts gravitated towards intensification, giving an outlet to frustration and anger. More experimental artists gravitated towards expansion, trying to offer a get-away and a detachment. The table below shows, heuristically, the relatedness of performance strategies, modes of liveness, and emotional resonance:

**Table 1: Strategies in live musical performances during the pandemic.**


<b>Performance strategy</b>	<b>Mode of liveness</b>	<b>Emotional resonance</b>
Intimization	Alonetogetherness	Anxiety and vulnerability
Intensification	Liveliness	Frustration and anger
Extension	Thirdplaceness	Desire to escape

Through these different couplings, at least partly connected to genre, artists harvested different experiences, which is also a point deserving further enquiry. The performance strategies that they developed during the pandemic probably also reflect the potential that they have to develop successful performance strategies for online concerts outside the pandemic context. It will be an interesting challenge for future research to examine the prospects of these concert forms, and to see whether or not the artists will continue to benefit from the creative (as well as technological) ingenuity that the pandemic prompted. By taking other genres into account, future research might be able to identify other strategies and the articulation of other modes of liveness in live-streamed concerts.

It is fair to say that each of the highlighted strategies achieved a fair amount of success, artistically as well as socially, though all the interviewed artists (and promoters) acknowledged severe difficulties in integrating the presentation of their music with meaningful interaction with the audience. In other words, the search for new and creative ways to take advantage of the live-streaming format took place under the constant threat of the *mode of non-liveness*, of the communicative dead-end that Reason and Lindelof (2016) have denoted *deadliness*.

This study has peeked into the backstage of the manifold aesthetic and technical considerations that artists, probably within any genre, have had to carry out to unite the immediacy of physical concerts with the extended communication of networked media. The audio-visual streaming format made several artists focus more on visual and narrative elements of their performance (some even decentering the auditive

expression), while also reconsidering the nature of their audience (one realizing that “you talk to the whole world”). They essentially faced the challenge of relating the liveness of music [10] with the liveness of media [11]. This is also a challenge to researchers. Over the last couple of decades, music and media researchers alike have developed substantial insights into contemporary modes of liveness, as reflected in the work of Reason and Lindelof (2016; see also Sanden, 2019) and Couldry (2004; see also Ytreberg, 2009). However, these strands of research have largely evolved in relative isolation from each other, one engaged in the expressivity of live music performance and the other oriented towards mediated connections and new forms of publicness. One way forward, we suggest, that might bridge these fields of interest, is to study the practices and experiences of the artists and audiences who are engaged in the various live-streamed concert hybrids, such as those that the pandemic has triggered.

Finally, a vexing problem, which we have focused on elsewhere (Spilker, *et al.*, in press), is of course the financial prospects of Internet-mediated concerts. The first wave of the concerts in response to the pandemic crises, which articulated the experience of being alone together, attracted numerous people who voluntarily donated substantial amounts of money. The size of these early gatherings and donations was most likely due to the immediate sense of crisis in society, which included the hardships of the artists. When the initial emergency and spirit of solidarity subsided, so, apparently, did the enthusiasm for attending and paying for these concerts. The subsequent waves of more ambitious performances, which appeared to address the crisis in musical creativity as much as the societal crisis, were also faced with moderate or failing ticket sales. These findings, though limited to the scope of our study, raise deep concerns about the viability of live-streamed concerts as a new avenue for artists and audiences, other than as a supplement or an emergency solution when traditional concerts cannot be staged. However, the value of these mediated concerts as alternative sites and modes of experience in times of crises should not be underestimated, and they might well prove their worth time and time again. 

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## Notes

[1.](#) Turino, 2008, p. 26.

[2.](#) Grossberg, 1993, p. 204.

[3.](#) Peters, 1999, p. 218.

4. Reason and Lindelof, 2016, p. 2.
5. Auslander, 2002, p. 16.
6. Bourdon, 2000, p. 551.
7. Baym, 2018, p. 27.
8. Bennett, 2014, p. 98.
9. Grossberg, 1993, p. 204.
10. Comprising “the actual production of the sound”, according to Grossberg, 1993, p. 204.
11. And the “need to connect oneself, with others, to the world’s events”, highlighted by Bourdon, 2000, p. 551.

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‘Liveness online in deadly times: How artists explored the expressive potential of live-streamed concerts at the face of COVID-19 in Norway

by Yngvar Kjus, Hendrik Storstein Spilker, and Håvard Kiberg.

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