

URGNT AND ESSENTIAL
Music in Times of Crisis

Mark Marczyk

Volume 14, Number 1, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076314ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6498>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Marczyk, M. (2021). URGNT AND ESSENTIAL: Music in Times of Crisis. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(1), 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6498>

Article abstract

Mark Marczyk describes the creation of the URGNT livestream series to broadcast from empty Toronto music venues in the early days of the pandemic.

URGNT AND ESSENTIAL: Music in Times of Crisis

Mark Marczyk

I've always believed music to be essential. So, when the first province-wide lockdown happened and shut down the majority of venues, festivals, and tours almost overnight, it felt like more of an existential crisis than a physical or financial one (though it was both those things, too).

I don't believe that we literally *need* music to physically survive. I understand that an alto sax solo can't vaccinate us against an infectious disease. Nor do I believe that an aria will prevent dehydration if you're lost in the desert, or that there is a bass drop so epic it could deflect the destructive path of a hurricane.

My belief in the essential nature of music is rooted in the widely accepted (though often neglected and, even more often, abused) notion that psychological and emotional health are as important as physical health. The impact of music on our health and wellbeing is harder to analyze and even harder to manage, but we've all felt its impact on our bodies and minds. Music colours our experiences and alters the ways we think about our own humanity. It's what we rock out to, what we study and work to, the soundtrack to our road trips and daily commutes, the ballads we lose our virginity to, the mixtapes we burn when we break up, the dances we share with our spouses on our wedding day, the last requiem at a funeral, and the first lullaby after a baby is born. Music gives deeper meaning to all of our life experiences, whether those experiences are essential to our survival or not.

Even if you consider music to be indulgent (discussed in detail below), that doesn't preclude it from being essential; the two terms are not mutually exclusive when it comes to music. The dictionary defines "essential" as "of the utmost importance," "something necessary, indispensable, or unavoidable," or "being a substance that is not synthesized by the body in a quantity sufficient for normal health and growth and that must be obtained from the diet." Each of these definitions applies to music, except perhaps the "must be obtained from diet" part. Although, if we consider diet to be what nourishes us, then music surely qualifies.

Music necessitates indulgence in that it demands our attention—it demands that we listen. It encourages us to empathize and forces us to confront our feelings in a way we often shy away from in our everyday lives: *I love this, I hate this, what the fuck is this, this is weird, I don't understand this, I've never heard anything like it, turn it off*. Music never judges our reaction. It just makes us aware of it. And that awareness is not only essential for personal psychological and emotional health, it can also be useful for working through shared challenges or issues. In March 2020, we were at the beginning of one such shared problem: the pandemic. Almost overnight, the government shut down the entertainment industry. Like I said: an existential crisis.

The preceding discussion may seem like a longwinded, somewhat unnecessary, and at least half-improvised introduction to what was supposed to be an essay on how URGNT's online concert series was born. But what happened next was all an instinctual reaction to this crisis and was rooted in the strong conviction that music is indeed an essential service.

Yes, there was constant contemplation, deliberation, and planning throughout our 60+ livestreams over the course of the first three months of the pandemic. But there was no infrastructure or budget or even a game plan. URGNT didn't exist before that point. It was improvised over the chords of the pandemic.

The basic idea was born over a single weekend, about 75 phone calls, and a couple hundred personal emails to artists, venues, presenters, publicists, promoters—everyone I knew in the Toronto music scene. Those conversations congealed into a core team of 5 people who were excited about trying to pull off a series of livestreamed shows in empty venues across Toronto in order to promote social distancing and create a curated platform to present and support the best of the city's musicians.

Promoting social distancing was key. At no point was there ever any intention to resist government protocol, deny the severity of the virus, or devalue the critical work being done by doctors, nurses, and other essential workers. This was our way to support our community and make the essentiality of music known and felt.

Our goals were:

- to unify the arts industry in Toronto in a safe and creative way;
- to raise money to pay a fee to all involved parties to help with lost gigs and wages as a result of the quarantine;
- to document and catalogue this unique period in history; and
- to make compelling local content available to quarantined audiences to support the need to stay at home.

Urgent times called for urgent creativity. And we were in urgent need of a brand if we were going to pull this off. (That's how long the "name" conversation was.) No time for logos—let's just make the actual video look urgent, drastic. Nothing is more urgent than bright yellow. Oh! And let's make the footage black and white. Like film noir or an archival documentary—this is history.

Then we started the GoFundMe campaign. Within a couple of days, we had raised enough money to do one show. Then Kathleen Ryan came on board. She heard about URGNT through a friend of a friend. (She produced the Junos; it was kind of a big deal for me that she had noticed what we were doing.) She got Solotech on board and they gave us broadcast cameras and a switcher (like 50k of gear for free). I called Measha Brueggergosman. I saw that she was already doing a livestream show from home so it would be the perfect culmination of her short series. Then I called the Great Hall, and they were into it too. Maclean's and iHeartRadio were next. Then I called every camera operator I knew and found a few that could operate the gear. My mom mixed disinfectant and hand sanitizer in mason jars (enough for the Great Hall) and made masks out of Ukrainian scouting scarves.

By the end of that show, we had enough money to do another three. We had some of the most iconic venues in the city on board, from Koerner Hall to the Dakota Tavern . . . but the COVID restrictions thickened. As I said, we were not anti-maskers looking to throw a party; we were fighting to show how essential music and the arts are. Proving our worth meant adapting to the new chord changes.

Home concerts. We really didn't want to do them. They were already becoming a thing and, for the most part, they SUCKED. Those shaky iPhone pyjama party livestreams that all had terrible sound (because they were recorded through the phone) and the speeches about how "this is so weird" and "I've never done this before" and "I lost everything." Most livestreams made even the

most dynamic big festival performers look like bad karaoke.

We decided if we were going to do it, we'd have to figure out how to get three cameras, incorporate B-roll, and get better sound. It took us some trial and error, but within a few shows, we had a template document that we sent each artist and we talked them through how to capture high quality audio and video—using what they have at home—that we could later edit. It was a compromise: we decided that the intimacy we could create if we got several good camera angles, sound that didn't distract with its bad quality, and artist-shot B-roll would far outweigh the intimacy of a livestream with one static shot and compromised audio quality.

Then we started to run out of money from the crowdfunding campaign, so we had to think of a way to really make it stretch if we wanted to keep going. That's when we started partnering with festivals and presenting organizations who were keen to dip their toes in the "livestream" pond, but were way too inundated with their collapsing schedules, budgets, and staff to learn and manage a new system so quickly. We started to expand north and west and we built a lot of great relationships. Many festivals and arts organizations contacted us, mined us for information, and developed something modelled on the URGNT series in their own communities. That may have irked me for a day or two, but it ultimately inspired me to keep going.

Eventually, the series ended. We ran out of money and got burned out. By that point, people were starting to get screen fatigue and livestreamed shows were being watched less often, so it's just as well. I sank into my first bout of pandemic-induced depression, which many people had gone through while I was busy producing the concerts that helped them get through their low points. I listened to a lot of music and eventually decided to build that home studio I never had time to build while I was constantly on the road. My loaf of home-baked bread, I suppose.

In the spirit of continued indulgence and improvisation, I want to finish with a quote from Norman Bethune, a Canadian doctor who came to prominence for his service as a front-line trauma surgeon during the Spanish civil war. In addition to being an absolutely essential medical worker and important early advocate for socialized medicine about a century ago, he was a very perceptive writer, one who helped me grapple with the existential crisis brought on by my vocation being deemed non-essential early on in the pandemic:

A great artist lets himself go. He is natural. He swims easily in the stream of his own temperament. He listens to himself. He respects himself. He has a deeper fund of strength to draw from than that arising from rational and logical knowledge . . .

The function of the artist is to disturb. His duty is to arouse the sleeper, to shake the complacent killers of the world. He reminds the world of its dark ancestry, shows the world its present and points the way to its new birth. He is at once the product and preceptor of his time . . . In a world terrified of change, he preaches revolution—the principle of life. He is an agitator, a disturber of the peace—quick, impatient, positive, restless and disquieting. He is the creative spirit of life, working in the soul of men.
(Clarkson 82-83)

Gender-exclusive pronouns aside, these words capture some of the reasons why we need music, especially in times of crisis. With the URGNT series, we tried to arouse the sleepers and shake the complacent, reminding them—and ourselves—that music is indeed an essential service. We need it now more than ever.

Works Cited

Clarkson, Adrienne. *Extraordinary Canadians: Norman Bethune*. Penguin Canada, 2009.