

Critical Studies in Improvisation Études critiques en improvisation



SILENCE Arts Administration in the Time of COVID-19

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Volume 14, Number 1, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076315ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6421>

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Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Raczynski, S. (2021). SILENCE: Arts Administration in the Time of COVID-19. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(1), 1–2.
<https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6421>

Article abstract

This piece identifies some of the unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for non-profit arts administration. It profiles Silence, Guelph, a small music venue, art gallery and community space, and how we have experienced the pandemic and continue to learn from and grow through the challenges it presents.

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SILENCE: Arts Administration in the Time of COVID-19

Scarlett Raczynski

Skilled improvisers and arts administrators have a number of things in common. Both are known to be resourceful, creative, innovative, and no stranger to adaptability. Yet even an arts administrator who works for an organization dedicated to and rooted in improvisation will find facing the COVID-19 pandemic to be a unique challenge. With the increased reliance on virtual meeting places, how does an organization dedicated to connecting listeners to collaborative musicians and soundscape artists stay relevant?

Silence, Guelph is a not-for-profit, independent music venue and art gallery in downtown Guelph, Ontario. We are dedicated to presenting sounds and musical practices that are diverse, challenging, sustainable, and accessible through concerts, workshops, and improvisation sessions. Aside from our mandate to flow as many resources to artists as possible, we have a mandate to provide a space for community engagement and an intimate setting for audiences and musicians to craft meaningful experiences together. Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic has made presenting live music in a small space difficult. As a result of the pandemic, we've closed our doors for over six months and have had to cancel over a hundred scheduled events. Making the decision to close our doors for the safety of our community was a relatively easy one—but finding our way back is not as straightforward.

In the first days of coming together to discuss our pandemic response, the board and staff at Silence were energized and full of ideas on how we might continue operations and rise to the challenges presented to us by COVID-19 and social-distancing regulations. There was a strong call to go virtual, but to do so would be to reimagine our purpose, vision, and mission significantly. We quickly realized that what we had to offer musicians in these circumstances was not as significant as the direct-to-audience access provided by performing in the digital sphere. Of course, musicians are struggling too. It is incredibly difficult to monetize digital live-stream performances, especially by independent artists just hoping to retain their relationship to their fans. As a conduit organization, it's even more difficult as the need for space moves purely into virtual space in a virtual reality—something for which we, lamentably, can't offer much support. With these challenges seeming insurmountable given our capacity and limited DIY resources, we elected for a full two-month shutdown, including a lay-off for me, the Executive Director. Having returned to work as of June 1st, 2020, we now face the challenge of fundraising in an economy ravaged by the pandemic and a renewed desire to stay relevant in an ever-changing environment.

Perhaps one of the most difficult losses resulting from our decision, and ultimately the government mandate to close our establishment and put a pause on all programming was the cessation of our longest running program, Morning Music. Morning Music is a weekly community improvisation session open to musicians and improvisers of all kinds. Before COVID-19, Morning Music had run uninterrupted (with one exception when it landed on Christmas Morning) for almost 10 years. This was the first program I had hoped to find a creative solution for: I knew how important it was to the participants, but there was just no way to meaningfully reproduce its benefits through a digital iteration. Of course there are the obvious reasons: latency issues, gaps in access to technology and high-speed internet. But moreso, there were existential problems that remain unsolved in the wake of COVID-19. Morning Music is as much about noise making and crafting improvised soundscapes as it is about togetherness and embodying space and time with each other in community. While I would argue that physical

distancing protocols have not destroyed all forms of community, such as socializing or creative expression, there are certain intangible benefits to being physically and sonically close to one another.

Morning Music is our longest running program, and it is also the program that the organization is founded on. It makes sense then, that its incompatibility with the “new normal” is reflected in our decision-making regarding the rest of our programming. However, as we continue to live in a distanced reality where live music and small venues sit at the bottom of the list for reopening, we are faced with a stronger pull to reinvent and find new ways to strengthen our mandate. For us, this includes more collaboration with other community organizations, more brainstorming, dreaming, and anticipatory planning. We are no longer simply finding ways to weather the storm but trying to harness it to come out of this experience stronger as an organization and more fit to serve our community.

It has been a difficult journey full of uncertainties, surprises, and challenges. I can only see more hurdles as the path stretches out before us but now, more than ever, I am proud of the team we’ve assembled, the unwavering dedication we have to the artists and community members that we serve, our resilience in the face of adversity, and ultimately our natural inclination toward innovation and evolution. While we work on new and exciting ways to connect our audiences to music, togetherness, and collaborative creation, we have the opportunity to lean into our roots in improvisation, lean on and listen to each other and push onward into a more vibrant and diverse universe of live experience production.