

Alone Together
Musicking in the Time of COVID-19

Aram Bajakian

Volume 14, Number 1, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076330ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6332>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Bajakian, A. (2021). Alone Together: Musicking in the Time of COVID-19. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(1), 1–3.
<https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6332>

Article abstract

In this piece, Vancouver-based guitarist Aram Bajakian reflects on the ways in which the outer practice of performing for audiences and the inner practice of solitude are symbiotic for musicians, and the challenge of connecting with listeners in a virtual landscape.

Alone Together: Musicking in the Time of COVID-19

Aram Bajakian

My vantage point for writing this essay comes from two perspectives. For the past thirty years I have worked as a musician, both performing in public and practicing in isolation. These two practices: the outer practice of performing for audiences and the inner practice of solitude are symbiotic, and (barring some exceptions) are both needed in the development of artistry. The outer practice feeds the inner practice, and the inner practice feeds the outer. Sometimes, as a guitarist, I supported singers. In jazz contexts, I did this with vocalists Diana Krall and Madeleine Peyroux. In other contexts, I worked with Lou Reed and in collaboration with my wife, vocalist Julia Ulehla, in our project Dálava. I have worked with John Zorn and have performed his music around the world with Shanir Blumenkranz's band Abraxas. I have had the honor of playing many times at Zorn's club The Stone in NYC, where his monthly benefit concerts became a gathering place made up of musicians from different scenes who would come down for the night to play and hang out for a couple of hours. It was the antithesis of the isolation in which we now find ourselves.

Musicians are also conditioned to times of isolation: we spend hours practicing in solitude, in an internal space. In this Alone space, we are only equipped with our instruments and the greater spirit. Although it may seem unusual to the non-performing layperson, there is also a solitude that occurs when an artist is on tour and performs for audiences night after night. Performing for audiences—and having beautiful conversations with fans and people who work at venues—is an outward activity that is juxtaposed with time spent alone in hotel rooms, on train platforms at 5AM, and on busses or planes travelling to the next gig. Performing can be incredibly energizing, but the solitude that occurs on a nightly basis can also make it a profoundly lonely experience. The communion (and Together space) that emerges from isolation is something that we let audiences in on when we perform. The practicing of technique that happens in isolation allows for a deepening of connection, and a breaking down of the walls of ego both in the performer and audience. The best performers are vulnerable and hold space for audiences to be vulnerable as well. When the audience is vulnerable and fully present with the performer, magical things can happen.

There are YouTube and Instagram stars who are great at playing alone in their bedrooms, but put them on a stage at Carnegie Hall and see if they are able to hold that space. Even better, put them in a smaller room like Barbès in Brooklyn, and see if they can move the audience there. Wayne Shorter or Anohni could stand in either venue and not play a note, while still connecting profoundly to the souls in the room. That is the practice I am getting at.

Musicians have always struggled economically, but technology—while making it easier to engage with fans—also puts up many barriers. These barriers are in some ways becoming more apparent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe that most audience members viewing a livestream concert don't realize all the technological knowledge that needs to go into running an event smoothly. Musicians are now required to understand lighting, videography, and recording techniques such as mic placement, preamps, EQing, and compression. Of course, knowledge is a good thing, and learning about these things isn't necessarily bad, but each streaming platform has its own algorithms for sound and video which makes performing online a difficult process to navigate. For instance, YouTube compresses audio differently than Facebook, which compresses audio differently than Instagram. To make something sound and look good, the costs can also be prohibitive. There have been, however well intentioned, some horrible sounding and looking videos since the pandemic began. To have a decent camera,

microphone, preamp, ADC, high speed connection, and video editing skills costs thousands of dollars. To put in all this money, work and time is disheartening when it becomes apparent that Facebook and Instagram algorithms only show your video to a few fans. We create content for the platforms of billionaires, and our work is therefore often viewed in a void: covered up by paid posts, or by the posts of people whose content is deemed as “engaging.” Artists who can create within algorithmic frameworks get seen. Their voices are heard. Artists who don’t work within the algorithms are silenced.

In July, Norah Jones and Sasha Dobson, whom I imagine do have resources at their disposal, livestreamed a short concert from their living room and it was wonderful. I could tell they were just streaming directly through the computer’s microphone, but it was clear that they had spent some time thinking about the sound, and how it would be perceived by their audience. Near the beginning of sound recording history, musical groups would play into a giant horn, and the sound would be cut directly onto a shellac record. The louder instruments, such as drums and trumpets, would be positioned in the back of the recording room so they wouldn’t drown out the quieter instruments and singers. Norah and Sasha did the same thing. Sasha was further away from the mic, playing only a snare drum with brushes. Their harmonies blended beautifully—they’ve been singing together for years. So maybe, what this means is that musicians need to start thinking smaller. Instead of multi-cam and multi-tracked productions, think small with someone close. Someone whose soul you connect with.

Personally, I’m taking this time to move inwards and try out some new things. To experiment with new sounds so that when the time comes to start reaching outward again, I’ll have a new perspective about what to say. Of course, I’m writing from a position of privilege when I say this. Thankfully, due in part to Canada’s generous funding for artists and arts institutions, I am still employed. Although not without challenges and losses, the last few months have been comparatively easy for me and my family (I am writing this in August 2020). I have been employed for the past two years as a curator at Western Front in Vancouver, one of Canada’s leading artist-run centers for art and new music. The history of Western Front goes back to the 1970s: George Lewis used to come here in the summer for residencies, and Bill Frisell told me that one of his first solo guitar performances was here. Through our programming and work with collaborators, such as Coastal Jazz (Ken Pickering, one of Coastal Jazzes co-founders, was one of the first curators at Western Front), we are a place for musicians and artists to not only come and perform when on tour, but to create and take risks. This summer, Darius Jones was supposed to come and record the work that he spent four weeks in residence composing last summer. Nadah El Shazley was supposed to perform in April. Amirtha Kidambi and Lea Bertucci’s wonderful duo was scheduled for October, but I had to cancel that event in July. As we attempt to reschedule, a question arises: when will the Canadian border open again? In the meantime, the economic loss for these artists is immeasurable. A rescheduled concert is still lost revenue.

We’re now focusing our programming on local artists, and things are slowing down a bit, both of which are good things. There is less programming, but more in-depth programming. There are fewer tour stops and more residencies. There is the further development of long-term ideas with artists in our community, rather than balancing the ideas of the international, Canadian and Vancouver-based artists that we used to have.

Yet, my heart still aches. Having recently become a permanent resident in Canada, I appreciate that people here are struggling too. But having immigrated here from the U.S.A., I know that many artists there lack health care, lack benefits like CERB, lack the extensive arts funding that musicians here in Canada can apply for even in the worst of times. People often wondered why

I hustled as a real estate agent in NYC, even while I was playing with Lou Reed and Diana Krall, making “big money” on those fancy tours. I would always have clients lined up for the day after I got home from a tour. It’s because my family’s health care, even though it was discounted through the Local 802 Musicians Union, was still a whopping \$1600 USD per month.

This gets me to a point about the new burden that artists are facing: having to create content. When organizations, with the best of intentions, offer, say, \$500 for a twenty-minute live set, do they realize how challenging it may be for artists to create that content? Do they realize that it exposes the inequities to access that have been lying below the surface? Do they realize that the artists who are able to quickly produce this type of content may not be the ones who need money or help the most? When a video goes online, it’s there forever. That solitary hotel room after the gig, that loneliness, is in some ways a taking back of the Alone space—and separating the audience from the artist, is often something needed by both parties. With online content, however, that separation is never possible, because the videos never go away, whether they’re good or bad. This is an incredibly stressful thought for a lot of artists, many of whom may spend months or years developing their work. We were incredibly grateful when Dálava was allowed to reuse some content that we had already created for another organization again earlier this month. Having opportunities to write essays like this is, again, a nice opportunity to do something different. There’s a flexibility in it.

I’ll conclude with an experience I had in early April, when I was livestreaming a solo guitar concert for the Vancouver Improvised Arts Society (VIAS). I looked at the video, and one third of the viewers’ screens had turned green. Somehow, I hadn’t gotten the video settings right. Someone in the chatroom complained that the sound was in mono. I learned later that, despite my efforts to set up an incredible stereo sound with my beautiful microphones and high-fidelity interface, Facebook only livestreams in mono, unless you use another program called OBS. OBS is a quirky program, and unfortunately won’t run on my computer, because it only operates on an OS that my aging computer can’t handle. So, in order to livestream in stereo on Facebook, I’d need to buy a new computer. Thankfully, as I would at a concert where someone was complaining about something that in the grand scheme of things isn’t important, I was able to ignore that person’s comments, go into my Alone space, and start making something beautiful. After a few songs I saw that people from all over the world were commenting on the livestream, including friends in Europe and all over North America that I hadn’t seen in a long time. Even though I was in my room, with a wall a few feet away, and my wife and kids making dinner in the next room, I started to feel a connection with the audience. In some ways that connection was profound in a way that was different than a touring gig, because my family was so close. At one point my wife and daughters walked into the room and we spontaneously sang a song. After the concert, I put my guitar down and enjoyed a beautiful meal with them. My domestic day-to-day life and the person I am as a performer came together in a way that they never have before. I felt a connection with the audience, despite the mono sound, despite the green on the screen, despite my kids laughing in the background. All these people all around the world came to hear music and to be present with what I had to share. We were all alone together.