

# Imperfections and Intimacies

## Trebling Effects and the Improvisational Aesthetics of Pandemic-Era Livestreaming

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Article abstract

This article develops the concept of an improvisational aesthetic of imperfection and intimacy for “trebling-effect” music livestreams, or webcasts where listeners may interact with each other (and possibly with the performer) during the stream via text chat. I position the pandemic-era turn towards livestreaming within scholarly discourses of “liveness” and in conversation with recent work on the impact of audio streaming platforms on listeners’ understandings of the functionality of music. I also consider the affective labour required of performers to generate a sense of human connection via livestream, and discuss video mosaics, by which musicians separated by time and space perform together in an illusion of copresence. I conclude with a case study of the #CanadaPerforms livestreaming series, a public-private collaboration between the National Arts Centre and Facebook Canada.

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## Imperfections and Intimacies: Trebling Effects and the Improvisational Aesthetics of Pandemic-Era Livestreaming

Laura Risk

On March 10, 2020 Canadian banjo player Allison de Groot flew with her bandmates in the American roots trio Molsky's Mountain Drifters to Oslo for the first show of a ten-day Norway-Sweden tour. Ten minutes after landing, they learned they were heading home. As de Groot posted on Facebook three days later: "That was a crazy 48 hrs. We left the US on Tuesday afternoon, and by the time we arrived in Oslo, our gigs had been cancelled."

In Québec and across Canada, as elsewhere, the live performing arts disappeared overnight following the World Health Organization's declaration of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Theatres, clubs, bars, dance halls, and community venues closed their doors in tandem with hair salons, restaurants, and garden centres. While these latter spaces have gradually reopened (albeit in accordance with strict public health guidelines), as of July 2020<sup>1</sup> there had been little to no equivalent reopening for the live performing arts. A handful of venues have experimented with reduced seating and some bands are performing at drive-in movie parks, such as at the Ciné-Parc Châteauguay in Mercier, Québec and the Théâtre Ciné-Parc Royalmount in Montréal (Thibault; "Royalmount Drive-In Event Theatre"). But Montréal's legendary Casa del Popolo has turned to selling posters, art prints, jewelry, and stationary, and the Oliver Jones House of Jazz, also in Montréal, closed for good in June (Sigler; Bourgault-Côté "Le jazz"). Some spring tours were rebooked for the fall, but even that timeframe soon came to seem unrealistic. When *Le Devoir* profiled four "new faces of unemployment" in early April, the first was a freelance musician (Bourgault-Côté "Christian Leclair").

Online performance has moved, ostensibly, to fill the void, backed in Canada by a call from both national and provincial funding agencies for artists to reinvent themselves along digital lines. The Canada Council for the Arts and CBC/Radio-Canada launched a \$1 million Digital Originals program in April 2020 to "help the country's arts community pivot work to online audiences" ("CBC/Radio-Canada"). In Québec, the Conseil des arts et lettres du Québec (CALQ) offered new funding for "diffusion de spectacles vivants" and made its *Exploration et déploiement numérique* program accessible year-round ("Plan de relance économique"). This governmental largesse focuses on new creative projects to be shared with the public in a digital space and although some artists and cultural workers have refused to go gently into this new world—as playwright and theatre director Olivier Kemeid wrote in a widely-shared letter, "Non, le numérique n'est pas la panacée des arts vivants"—public health considerations suggest that the arts sector may have little choice. As Zeke Emanuel, Vice Provost for Global Initiatives and Co-Director of the Healthcare Transformation Institute at the University of Pennsylvania, noted in an April 2020 interview, large gatherings such as concerts "will be the last to return. Realistically, we're talking fall 2021 at the earliest" (Bazelon).

In this article, I develop the concept of an improvisational aesthetic of imperfection and intimacy for "trebling-effect" pandemic-era livestreams, or webcasts where listeners may interact with each other (and possibly with the performer) during the stream via text chat. Following Auslander ("Digital Liveness"), who describes liveness as a "claim" made upon users by a technology, I argue that livestreams make a claim upon listeners not only to liveness, but also to the affective intensity of participating in a real-time exchange that offers the possibility of feeling heard, seen, and understood; livestreams, that is, make a claim as sites of human connection. I use the term "human connection" in full recognition of the fact that such connections are always

partial and negotiated, and that virtual human connection is, by definition, always mediated (though often in such a way as to belie that fact). Trebling-effect livestreams do not guarantee harmonious human interactions but simply provide, at a time when non-mediated forms of human exchange have been strictly curtailed, a container in which those interactions—frictionless or otherwise—might take place. As such, livestreams function within what we might call an economy of human connection, newly constituted by the pandemic, where simply being able to communicate in real time with another person carries value, and where the ability of artists to perform intimacy via livestream (and thereby generate containers for virtual human connection) is itself a commodity.

I would be remiss not to recognize that the most prevalent function of livestreaming in today's society is as a form of "distant witnessing" (Martini): of human rights violations, of protest, of police brutality. Livestreams of violence or trauma propose their own sort of intimacy by connecting viewers to on-site actors while simultaneously "encod[ing] distance, difference, and separation," as Brandon Hunter notes; there is a "radical disparity between seeing and being, the fundamental separateness of those in proximity to pain, risk, or death from those who watch at a remove" (284, 290). Livestreaming does not eliminate remoteness, but rather foregrounds it, and serves as a technology to "[examine] distance and separation" (293). As I explore below, even music livestreaming may remind us of our loneliness.

From a relatively small or non-existent component of many North American artists' professional toolkits, livestreaming has become the primary mode of performance during the pandemic. Within weeks of the shutdown, *Billboard's* running list of livestream performances typically included several dozen per day (and linked a parallel list of cancelled music events and a "state-by-state resource guide for music professionals who need help during the coronavirus crisis" ["Here Are All the Live Streams"; "Here Are All the Major Music Events"; "A State-by-State Resource Guide"]). In Canada, one of the most prominent platforms for livestreaming was the #CanadaPerforms series launched by the National Arts Centre (NAC) and Facebook Canada on March 19, and it was on this new national stage that Allison de Groot gave her first full solo concert six weeks after her cancelled Norway-Sweden tour.

In a meditation on improvised liveness, Clare Grant describes live experimental performance—"live" in that "neither party can fully know what will take place in the interaction"—as a "moment of improvisation" whose success depends on "rigorous preparations of those landing spots where an audience joins the improvisation" (354). The present article starts from the premise that the pandemic has thrown virtually all musicians, regardless of genre, into the space of live experimental performance. We are co-creating the norms of livestreaming on an unprecedented scale and in real time, while constrained by the limitations of social media platforms; we are inviting audiences to "[join] the improvisation" not only of our performances, but of their own "landing spots."

The first section of this article historicizes music livestreaming, positions it within discourses of liveness, and considers the affective labour required of performers to generate a sense of human connection via livestream. I also place livestreaming in conversation with recent scholarship on the impact of audio streaming platforms on listeners' understandings of the functionality of music.

The second section of this article examines the improvisational aesthetics of imperfection and intimacy proffered by pandemic-era livestreaming and considers video mosaics, by which musicians separated by time and space perform together in an illusion of copresence. I then profile #CanadaPerforms, drawing on an interview with Heather Gibson, Executive Producer of

Popular Music and Variety at the NAC, and Kevin Chan, Head of Public Policy for Facebook Canada.

While both the pandemic and livestreaming are inveterate border crossers, this article is rooted in those musical worlds I know best: that of Québec, where I live, and of North American and North Atlantic fiddling and related traditional styles, which I perform and research. I position my argument within the larger mandate of this journal, to conceive of improvisation not as tied to a particular set of musical sounds, but rather as a set of generative practices that build community and support resilience. I draw primarily on print and social media sources, and on interviews and personal communication with performers and other cultural workers, though my readings of livestreaming and video mosaics are also shaped by my own experiences as a working musician.

## I. Constructing Virtual Presence via Livestream

Go LIVE with your life by streaming anytime, anywhere — right from your phone. Be an eyewitness, capture those first steps, or whip up your own streaming video blog.

—Qik.com, 12 October 2007 (“QIK”)

Livestreaming is the act of recording video on a mobile device or computer while simultaneously broadcasting it to the Internet. As such, it functions as a democratization of live (rather than pre-recorded) “one-to-many” video broadcasting, a form previously restricted to those with highly specialized equipment and limited to diffusion via established television networks—though the extent of that democratization is itself a function of access to certain technologies and may be limited by political or social restrictions on who can film and what content they can broadcast. Democratization through technology does not imply an absence of corporate influence, of course; webcasting is inevitably mediated through a platform such as Facebook or YouTube, for whom it generates advertising revenue. Later in this article, I explore this tension between livestreaming as a form of grassroots media and livestreaming as a source of corporate profit, and the ways in which an aesthetic of intimacy may serve to perform the former while obfuscating the latter.

To livestream, one needs: 1) a device with video capabilities; 2) continuous online access; and 3) a broadcasting service (i.e. a program or application that enables real time dissemination to a web page). While webcasting from a fixed device goes back to the mid-1990s, including for music events such as the Macintosh New York Music Festival (Strauss), the technology came into its own in the late 2000s with the development of mobile broadcasting services, advances in both webcam technologies and mobile-device-embedded cameras, and ever-increasing Internet speeds and coverage.

Many early webcasting services (Juhlin et al.) paired live video streaming with a simultaneous text chat. This combination led to “high levels of engagement” among users and became a “key characteristic” of livestreaming (Rein and Venturini). Pioneering “lifecasting” site justin.tv, for instance, which broadcast the day-to-day activities of co-founder Justin Kan (and which evolved into the popular videogame streaming site Twitch, launched in 2011), encouraged users to comment on Kan’s stream and interact with each other in a running text chat headed by a bold “SPEAK!” prompt. One such chat, posted as a screenshot by TechCrunch on May 22, 2007, shows users discussing streaming quality (“now we’ve lost the video! . . . this happens a lot, something about the laptop heating up”) alongside the mundane details of Kan’s life (“jeez they left the car open”) (“Justin.TV Network Launches”). It is this combination of live video streaming

and synchronous text chat that is the hallmark of trebling-effect livestreams, as I detail below.

Livestreaming reached a turning point in 2015. The apps Meerkat and Periscope both launched in that year, with Twitter purchasing the latter before its public launch. Facebook launched Facebook Live for celebrities and verified pages in the same year, with an April 2016 launch for the general public. Google launched YouTube Gaming in 2015 as a competitor to Twitch (purchased by Amazon in 2014), though it was late to the game with mobile livestreaming, launching YouTube Live to the general public in 2017 (Rein and Venturini).<sup>2</sup>

The digital platforms that host livestreams are much more than mere conduits for grassroots content. Rein and Venturini document the “aggressive strategy” pursued by Facebook early on to advance livestreaming as a technology and increase available content for that platform. In 2016, the social media company had contracts worth \$50 million US with nearly 140 content producers, primarily news media organizations such as BuzzFeed (\$3.1 million) and *The New York Times* (\$3 million), and celebrities such as athlete Michael Phelps and chef Gordon Ramsey (both \$200,000) (Fig. 3, n.p.), but also the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the professional sports team FC Barcelona (Perlberg and Seetharaman). While Facebook’s selection process is well beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting the left-leaning slant of the contracted US news organizations, which contrasts the present-day rightward bent of the platform (Bilton; Roose; Timberg), as well as the focus on large media companies and high net worth individuals and organizations rather than small-scale DIY content creators (as would be the case with #CanadaPerforms, though mediated by the NAC). Contracted content producers committed to a certain number of livestreams in a set time span and some contracts specified broadcast lengths. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, this program was a way for Facebook to play catch-up in a field in which it was still a rookie and to “[position] itself to cash in on a lucrative advertising market it has yet to tap” (Perlberg and Seetharaman).

These livestreaming contracts marked the first time that Facebook had stepped away from its role as a content “transporter” and begun generating content of its own. At the same time, the company began energetic promotion of livestreaming, “tweak[ing] its newsfeed algorithms to favour live video” (Rein and Venturini). While these subsidies from Facebook provided content producers with resources to explore a new medium, they also signaled that pivoting towards that medium might be essential for the latter’s continued success. As a senior video producer at NowThis stated, “When Facebook tells us something is gonna be the new thing we listen, because you know we want to keep that good relationship and generally they tend to dictate what becomes the new trend on their own platform. So, it became clear to us that we should start building a team and start trying it out” (qtd. in Rein and Venturini).

### ***Third Places and “Trebling-Effect” Livestreams***

In an ethnography of Twitch, Hamilton et al. describe livestreaming as a hybrid form that combines “high-fidelity computer graphics and video with low-fidelity text-based communication channels” to generate a “third place,” or an “informal public [space] where people engage in sociability to form and maintain communities” (1315-1316).<sup>3</sup> Third places, as defined by Oldenburg, are spaces outside of home or work where people gather to socialize, and in which “conversation is the main activity” (Hamilton et al. 1318); for some Twitch users, the third places of livestream text chats “compensate for a lack of community in real life” and may support psychological well-being, decrease loneliness, and reduce social anxiety (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 59). The primary activity of Twitch users is thus not viewing but interacting: Twitch streams are participatory communities characterized by a “playful experience of social association” and a

shared history, and regular viewers of a given stream will often use the chat—the stream’s third place—to “[encourage] participation and sociability” by others (Hamilton et al. 1315, 1320).

In this article, I am concerned with music livestreams that produce what I term a “trebling” effect, wherein an event occurs in (at least) three simultaneous spaces: the physical location of the performer(s), the physical location(s) of the listener(s), and a virtual third place in which listeners may meet and—through playful, mundane chat—form and maintain community. This is the Twitch / justin.tv model described above, where the third place is typically created via a text chat running simultaneous to the video stream. While virtual third places existed long before the pandemic, they have gained a new ubiquity as in-person third places—cafés, bars, dance halls, community centres, theatre lobbies—have shut down in accordance with government regulations.

Trebling-effect livestreams stand in contrast to some of the most high-profile classical music livestreaming events of the last decade, such as The Metropolitan Opera’s “Live in HD” series, which streams live broadcasts of opera directly into movie theatres (Heyer)—free reruns have been posted nightly during the pandemic—and the Berlin Philharmonic’s online Digital Concert Hall (DCH). Stöber terms the latter “doubling” effect livestreams in that they occur in two physical spaces simultaneously: the concert hall and the listener’s location. I build on her work in my definition of trebling-effect livestreams as those that add a virtual third place for real-time communication between viewers.

The occupants of a livestream’s third place are not Altman’s “constellated community” of genre fans, who may be aware of one another’s presence but are connected in only fleeting and often imaginary ways. Rather, virtual third places are constituted through a steady stream of words, emojis, GIFs, etc., that run synchronously to a live video and dissipate when the stream ends—the online equivalent of the back of the bar. As I explore below, trebling-effect livestreams during the pandemic have put on display both the living spaces and the musical imperfections of stay-at-home performers; in this context, the chat may serve to construct imagined intimacies between listeners and artists.

For streamers, interacting with viewers can lead to financial returns, though still within the inequitable framework of streaming revenue disbursement (Ingham “Streaming”; Pastukhov). Through affective labour that “generate[s] feeling in viewers, and an attendant sense of closeness or association,” video game streamers on Twitch earn income in the form of donations, subscriptions, and, at the highest level, advertising and sponsorship (Woodcock and Johnson). The financial success of a livestream thus rides not on the content so much as on the streamer’s adeptness at what Wohn and Freeman term “relationship development” (12). In making a “creative practice” livestream that appeals to viewers, for instance, streamers may omit some parts of their working process and emphasize others in order to “[incorporate] extra entertainment where they can” (Fraser et al. 49). In short, streamers approach livestreaming as a performance, albeit often one that is designed to read as a casual social gathering among friends. This affective labour can take a toll on streamers, particularly when they are required to project a sense of closeness or intimacy with viewers in a domain with “effectively zero job security” (Woodcock and Johnson).

A personal example illustrates some of the inner workings of trebling-effect livestreaming. On April 14, 2020, I performed as part of a benefit livestream for the Pure Dead Brilliant Fiddle Weekend (Cassel). The musicians congregated on Zoom in what we dubbed the “green room,” each unmuting our mic and performing in turn, while maintaining a steady backstage conversation via the Zoom text chat. The Zoom video feed ran to our broadcast engineer’s

computer in Milwaukee and then out again, about twenty seconds later, on Facebook Live: the “front of house,” where the musicians would typically go once their set had finished, and where they would join listeners in an equally lively text chat. For most of the musicians, it was our first livestream gig. Although many of us had played together at an in-person concert just two months prior, everything felt new and experimental. In real time on Zoom, the organizer and the engineer guided us through the co-creation of “those landing spots where an audience joins the improvisation,” to use Clare Grant’s phrase—in this case, the musical performances, where familiar faces played familiar tunes and the audience joined in on the Facebook chat with typed cheers and clapping emojis—and the experimental spaces in between: moving from one musician’s home to the next; looking into those homes and wondering just how much you were meant to see; navigating the twenty-second lag between beginning to play and seeing yourself playing on Facebook; explaining to audience members, many of whom had purchased tickets to see the same performers two months earlier, that the music was now free but a PayPal address for donations was pinned in the chat.

### ***Liveness and Digital Presence***

In a 2012 commentary on the second edition of his book *Liveness*, Auslander argues that liveness requires that a technology first “make a claim” upon the user to “engage” with it as a live event, and then that the user accept that claim.<sup>4</sup> While websites and other “virtual entities” may indeed feel live “to the extent that [they] . . . respond to us in real time,” real-time responsiveness is not sufficient (“Digital Liveness,” 6). Word processing programs, for instance, don’t feel live. Auslander outlines three such claims: the “demand to be perceived as verbal,” the demand to be perceived as interactive, and the “demand to be perceived as filling a human role” (“Digital Liveness,” 7).

A claim of liveness is a claim of presence, though the idea of presence itself is complicated in today’s digital media landscape. Digital presence is the result of a visual and sonic reproductive act that has successfully induced us to forget that very act of reproduction. We accept the claim to liveness of a screen flashing 30 images per second, accompanied by 96 or 128 kilobits of sound per second, so long as that claim includes a declaration of near-simultaneity in broadcast and reception. This is a low barrier to entry for an assertion of digital presence and easily circumvented, as evidenced by the successful claims of liveness made by pre-recorded video mosaics and star-studded benefit concerts (discussed below) early in the pandemic.

Complicating this reading of digital presence is the fact that digital media platforms position themselves in a temporality that is both “focused on the now and immediate” and also “on-going and open-ended”: the seemingly eternal present of online living (notwithstanding the high turnover rate of online information). Netflix, for example, proposes a “suspended or expanded present” in which any movie is available at any time, while Twitter offers a “real-time, live connected present,” in which a tweet receives immediate response (Coleman 601–02). Trebling-effect livestreams combine these two types of present: while the video content typically remains online and available for unlimited lengths of time, the chat feed offers real-time connections. This temporal space still includes anticipation—for instance, of a future livestream—but offers little space for memories. There is no need to remember a Facebook Live event that is still available via the search bar, or an Instagram Live or SnapChat video that will be replaced soon enough by another.

The current digital media landscape, where YouTube videos are cross-posted on Facebook while Facebook accounts are linked to Twitter, forms what Coleman terms an *infra*-structure, or an “*expanded architecture* of texts through which a structure of feeling might be produced” (609;

italics in original). Following Williams, who coined the term “structures of feeling” to describe “different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history” (Buchanan), Coleman notes that these structures are “pre-emergent”—they are “at the edge of semantic availability” and therefore not yet “fully articulated.” In this framing, today’s digital media landscape, which “function[s] in terms of the processual and affective qualities of the present,” is a sort of primordial soup of feeling in which the new norms and values of culture may eventually coalesce (608–09). Pre-recorded music was already an important ingredient in this soup and with the pandemic, live performance—and the bodies of performers—have been added to the digital pot. Later in this article, I examine how trebling-effect livestreams function at edges of semantic availability via an aesthetic of imperfection and performed intimacy.

### ***Streaming and Affect Regulation***

The present-day boom in livestreaming, fueled by the pandemic, comes on the heels of what William Deresiewicz describes as “20 years of digital assault” on the arts economy: “Any content that can be transmitted over the Internet—music, text, still images, video—has seen its price severely cut, often to zero.” Well before the pandemic, physical album sales were at an historic low and streaming revenues provided little to make up the difference (“Canada’s Communications Future,” Fig. 3-2). In the following paragraphs, I explore a recent argument by music theorist Eric Drott that audio streaming and aggregator services such as Google Play Music and Spotify have altered not only the financial underpinnings of the music industry but the functionality of music listening.

Drott brings into conversation the praxiological turn in music studies—the shift from the study of what music “means” to what it does<sup>5</sup>—and historical materialism, particularly the socialist feminist tradition that extends Marxist thought to “the historically overlooked spaces where domestic and reproductive labor takes place” (164). If, Drott argues, music is a technology of “self-construction,” by which listeners may regulate their emotions, define their identities, and shape their social interactions, then audio streaming services offer the option of outsourcing that work via context-, activity- and mood-based playlists (169). This is music as an over-the-counter drug to regulate one’s mental state and social interactions, with the drugstore replaced by the streaming company and the pharmacist’s recommendations by playlists (some of which users may have created for themselves). The result is a new form of music listening, neither active nor passive, but rather music used as an inexpensive and efficient tool for the social reproduction of “a labor force adequate to the demands of contemporary capitalism” (177). Streaming services, according to Drott’s argument, use music to commodify affect regulation.

Audio streaming platforms, themselves a product of technological advances in digital storage and transmission, have radically altered the monetary value of recorded music. For users paying a monthly subscription to a streaming company or generating ad revenue for the company via a free account, the commodity exchanged is not music but access to a “suspended or expanded” present in which any recorded music is available at any time.<sup>6</sup> While music still carries value in behind-the-scenes negotiations between streaming platforms and rights holders, for listeners it is “there for the taking,” a “quasi-natural resource whose un- or underpaid work/energy can be harnessed for keeping other costs down” (Drott 175, 179–80).<sup>7</sup> Scarcity has little meaning in a world of unlimited free streams to unlimited users (though the recent interest in vinyl suggests that the exclusivity of a limited-run musical product may still carry some value).

The rise of streaming, and the accompanying loss of revenue for artists, has been paralleled by a turn towards crowdfunding. Perhaps ironically, artists may also function as emotion regulators for listeners on sites such as Patreon, Kickstarter, and Indiegogo, where they attract patrons by



performing an appealing version of their artistic self. According to one Patreon employee, “[T]he heart of it is everything is always for free . . . I think that changes the way that rewards can be viewed, because it’s not like I pledge this to get this. It’s I pledge this because I love you, and also I get this” (qtd. in Swords 70). This statement begs the question of whether patrons are paying for art or for love and, if the latter, how different patronage platforms are from streaming platforms in functioning as technologies of mood regulation for users.

## II. Pandemic-Era Livestreaming: Intimacy Through Imperfection

I thought it was amazing, and amazing that he was so beautifully imperfect in spots. He showed his own humanity.

—Facebook comment in response to Yo-Yo Ma’s May 24, 2020 livestream of the Bach cello suites

Human mistakes are the flip side of human connection and the pandemic has shown that we are more than willing to live with the former in order to access the latter. The aesthetic of pandemic-era livestreaming is an aesthetic of imperfection—in the sense of “not perfect” and also “still in process”—and of intimacy: both the unexpected intimacy of imperfection and the planned intimacy of virtual performance. Livestreaming offers a “front-row seat” on the “gritty reality of creative work and all its mistakes, happy accidents, and iteration” (Fraser et al. 47). These are improvisational aesthetics: the readiness to err, the opening up of a conversation with no known resolution. What better analogy for the livestream from one’s own kitchen than that moment on stage when one’s creative process has been laid bare for the audience to see, hear, and critique?

Perhaps unexpectedly in an industry centered around sound, this willingness to accept imperfection seems to have extended even to audio quality during the pandemic. At the benefit livestream described above (Cassel), the audio was occasionally excruciating, even with “original sound” enabled on Zoom. As the “front of house” comment feed devolved into a critique of microphones and bandwidth, one listener wrote in: “Let’s not complain about video and audio. Let’s be grateful that we can watch music together at all!”

Still, livestreaming is often a reminder of what we are missing when we replace physical liveness with digital liveness. As Dave Grohl writes in *The Atlantic*, “There is nothing like the energy and atmosphere of live music. It is the most life-affirming experience, to see your favorite performer onstage, in the flesh, rather than as a one-dimensional image glowing in your lap as you spiral down a midnight YouTube wormhole.” Naomi Klein, in *The Guardian*, puts it more succinctly: “What we miss most is touch” (Viner). As we move from in-person performances, which are recorded and distributed to the public only under exceptional circumstances (such as the making of a live recording), to livestreams, which remain online in the default case, we risk undervaluing the ephemerality of in-person art-making and overvaluing those elements that translate well through digital media, such as recorded sound and visuals.

Pandemic-era livestreams offer to replace the intimacy of physical presence with a certain voyeuristic intimacy. The California-based duo Paper Wings performed a livestream “tour” of every room of their house, including the bathroom. When preparing for my performance on the benefit livestream, which I streamed from my living room, I moved the coatrack, pulled the curtains, and placed a blanket on the couch. What areas of my home did I want to broadcast to an unknown public, I asked myself, and how did I want the décor—family photos, colour choices, shoes on a rack—to frame my performance? Pandemic-era livestreams differ from pre-

pandemic house concerts in that the artist broadcasts from their own home rather than that of a host or patron and the audience members who enter the intimacies of that house are selected in part by the Facebook or YouTube algorithm and may remain unknown and unknowable.

A series of star-studded benefit concerts (pre-recorded, but presented as livestreams) carried this intimate display of domestic life to a new level. Elton John, in the “iHeart Living Room Concert for America” broadcast on March 29, 2020, told the audience that he would play “Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on Me” on an electric keyboard that his sons used for piano lessons because “it’s all I have” at the Los Angeles house in which he was quarantined (Rowley). A Mother’s Day concert in Québec, “Une chance qu’on s’a,” included Ginette Reno outside her sumptuous home and Celine Dion in front of a wall of what looked to be family photographs (“Émission spéciale”). These intimacies are constructed, of course, and to some extent might be understood as extensions of the artistic performance, offering not just a front-row seat on the “gritty reality of creative work,” but also a chair in the artist’s living room itself. Like the *Us Weekly* tabloid feature, “Stars—They’re Just Like Us!” (with headlines such as “They Drink Beer!” and “They Take the Trash Out!”), these livestreams invite viewers into the homes of celebrities with the artists themselves as paparazzi.

The “iHeart Living Room Concert for America” was first in this new genre. Although the show was necessarily pre-recorded, it signaled improvisational liveness at every turn by emphasizing seemingly spontaneous intimacies. Elton John, as host, describes the event to the viewing audience as an unaffected act of sharing, saying, “Since we’re all hunkered down together . . . we thought that we’d put on a little show for you.” When he later starts a videochat with Lizzo, both wave their hands ecstatically in greeting: “Hello!” “It’s Lizzo! Hey girl!” “Hi! Hey Elton!” “Hi!” “Do you like my glasses?” (iHeart Radio). Brian Littrell of The Backstreet Boys expresses surprise as his bandmates’ at-home videos appear onscreen. Alicia Keys performs in a casual white T-shirt with a small hole in the shoulder, as news media outlets were quick to notice (Flood).

Given that this concert eventually raised over \$11 million for charity, the positioning of the performers as digitally live—as claiming presence—speaks to the monetary value of staged intimacies, particularly from celebrities. The show was presented by Fox Entertainment and, in its same-day online coverage, Fox News glossed over the fact that the show was pre-recorded, instead implying that performers had somehow managed to transcend the technological limitations of online musical collaboration: “Producers expected The Backstreet Boys’ performance to be tricky, since they didn’t live together and were practicing social distancing protocols—but they pulled it off with a remote ‘I Want It That Way’” (Flood). This false trumpeting of liveness is all the more striking in that it elides the actual improvisational work done by producers and engineers in the preceding weeks: contracting artists during a pandemic, devising new at-home recording protocols, editing together performers’ iPhone videos, and even remixing The Backstreet Boys’ submission to sound less polished and more “live” (Schneider).

### **Mosaics**

Perhaps no musical image is as iconic to the pandemic as the video mosaic wherein multiple performers, each in their own home, make music together in a simulacrum of live performance (the Backstreet Boys’ performance on the “iHeart Living Room Concert for America” is an example of this). Classical music critic Christophe Huss describes mosaics as “le symbole d’un partage, valeur qu’un virus n’a réussi qu’à développer.” Even as the split screen replicates the enforced isolation of lockdown, the music transcends these divisions, suggesting the existence

of a mysterious virtual locale in which socially isolated musicians can still meet. During the “Une chance qu’on s’a” concert, the five-piece band Salebarbes was occasionally pictured as a montage of five individuals separated by thick black lines even though they were in fact performing on the same stage.

Sparking this trend was the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra’s rendition of “Ode to Joy,” which had nearly 2 million views within the first week (Rotterdams Philharmonisch Orkest; Huss). Viewer comments were effusive:

“Expected: a melody we’ve all heard many times Expected: the slow build as each musician comes in Unexpected: all of a sudden being overwhelmed by the beauty of it all Art can be so special in these times.” (sic)

“I’m sitting in my bedroom sobbing and marveling at the majesty and the beauty of both the interconnectedness and genius of the human race when we come together.” (Rotterdams Philharmonisch Orkest)

Orchestras, bands, choirs, arts schools, and community groups followed suit: Julliard’s “Bolero,” for instance, featured students and alumni from its music, dance, and drama programs, with the tagline “What can we do together even while we are alone?” (Julliard School). A mosaic from the “Sacred Harp Quarantine Chorus” placed singers in the traditional virtual square of the American shape-note singing tradition (Movers & Shapers). The early power of video mosaics lay in their seemingly miraculous performance of synchronized music-making at a distance, and Facebook and YouTube viewers were quick to ask “How?” Even as the asynchronous processes for creating mosaics became public knowledge, however, these performances retained a certain affective power. As long as social distancing regulations are in place, it seems, watching groups of separated people play music together is thrilling enough to conveniently forget that that is not, in fact, what they are doing.

Mosaics, by the nature of the technology involved, cannot be live. When I created a mosaic with the band Portage for Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre, I recorded my part—the “base track”—in my living room and sent that to the guitarist, who added her part. An audio engineer then combined our tracks and sent the file to the other members of the band, each of whom added her own part. Mosaics are the video equivalent of a studio recording made only from overdubs: no two people are ever in the same space—physical or virtual—at the same time. In the context of the pandemic, however, we seem to have accepted their claims to liveness and revel in the domestic and musical intimacies on display.

Livestreams engender “digital social presence,” or a sense of virtual copresence with someone who “feels fully present in the context of the ongoing conversation on the platform” but is in a different physical location (Diwanji 2). Mosaics go a step further and add yet another category of virtual space to the mix, by implying that artists in multiple physical locations can gather in a sort of musical third place by allowing asynchronous audiovisual representations of themselves to socialize, synchronously, through music. But the impact has lessened as the novelty has worn off and the phenomenon seems to be approaching its saturation point; notes Christophe Huss, “surprise et émotion n’y sont plus vraiment.” What seemed almost magical at first is now commonplace. Whether the same will hold true for livestreams is as yet undetermined, though a meme that made the rounds of Facebook in September 2020—“The World Right Now” represented as burning buildings vs. “Artists,” with the latter represented by Will Ferrell desperately shouting, “I’m playing a live stream if anyone’s interested”—suggests that the magic

of non-stop artistic livestreaming, such a powerful source of comfort in the early days of the lockdown, may be wearing off as well.

### ***Streaming from Canada's Newest National Stage***

#CanadaPerforms is the highest-profile livestreaming series in Canada to date. As a partnership between the National Arts Centre (NAC) and Facebook Canada, #CanadaPerforms offers one model of a public-private approach to supporting music livestreaming. It also raises questions about the responsibilities of social media companies towards performers who create content for their platforms. With the NAC–Facebook Canada partnership now set to continue for an additional two years to develop “a national platform for artists wanting to experiment and innovate with live-streamed performances” (“#CanadaPerforms Evolves”), #CanadaPerforms has the potential to define, at least in part, Canadian arts livestreaming for the post-pandemic era.

#CanadaPerforms launched on March 19, 2020 and was initially envisioned as a short-term relief fund that would pay select Canadian artists for livestream performances through March 31. \$100,000 in funding came from Facebook Canada and program administration was through the NAC, with artists offered a flat payment of \$1000 per livestream of 45-60 minutes, independent of the number of performers (“The National Arts Centre”).

The project soon took on a life of its own. Additional donations came in from Slight Music (\$100K), the RBC Foundation (\$200K), and SiriusXM Canada (\$200K), and in late April #CanadaPerforms expanded into the literary arts in partnership with the Writers’ Trust of Canada and CBC Books, with an additional \$100K from Facebook Canada (“Slight Music”; “#CanadaPerforms COVID-19”; “Margaret Atwood”).

By May 31, when this first phase of #CanadaPerforms drew to an end, it had received over 6000 applications, presented 700 performances, paid out \$700,000 to artists—musicians, dancers, comedians, theatre artists, and authors—and inspired similar collaborations between Culture Ireland and Facebook Ireland, as well as between the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Facebook in the United States (“#CanadaPerforms Evolves”; “Culture Ireland”; The Kennedy Center). Heather Gibson, Executive Producer of Popular Music and Variety for the NAC, notes that at the program’s height, fifty-six employees of the NAC were working for #CanadaPerforms (Gibson and Chan). Approximately 600 #CanadaPerforms presentations are archived at the National Arts Centre’s “Replay Performances” webpage, including over 400 musical performances.

Artists were selected, in part, to ensure diverse representation along lines of gender, race and ethnicity, and musical genre, including substantial francophone and Indigenous representation. In fact, the livestreaming format allowed the NAC to host more Indigenous artists from northern Canada than it typically does, notes Gibson, “simply because it’s so difficult to tour into southern Canada. We might see some of those Northern artists once or twice every two years. With #CanadaPerforms, we were able to host them all in three months” (Gibson and Chan).

For those performers who, pre-pandemic, toured extensively to make a living, #CanadaPerforms offered a means of maintaining contact with fans worldwide. In some cases, viewer numbers on archived #CanadaPerforms streams would spike as various countries “woke up,” and some artists scheduled their streams with European fan bases in mind. But the series also functioned as a “discovery tool,” connecting artists to new audiences and, in another sort of discovery, connecting new audiences to the NAC (Gibson and Chan). Of 4.75 million views

(including live and replays) for #CanadaPerforms programming, 78% were from outside the National Capitol Region. As theatre critic J. Kelly Nestruck notes in *The Globe and Mail*, “It may have taken a pandemic to do it, but the National Arts Centre has finally become truly national.” Online, the “Replay Performances” page showcases an impressive cross-section of Canadian artists. One can imagine performing arts presenters using the site as a discovery tool in a post-pandemic industry.

Gibson describes human connection, here conceived as the creation of virtual third places via trebling-effect livestreams, as a core goal of the series:

We had a lot of artists, a lot of record labels and managers, who wanted to do recordings so that they could edit. They wanted to present their artists in, technologically, the best frame possible. And we basically said, it's not what it's about. What this whole livestreaming platform is about, is about connection. It's about audiences speaking to artists. Some of the artists also did that much better than others. It was an experiment for them as well, to have that back-and-forth conversation . . .

The great thing that we found, too, is it wasn't just a conversation between artists and audience. The audience started talking to each other . . . [and] that was almost like a house concert or a folk festival where the audience will sit in lawn chairs and meet their neighbours that have been there the whole weekend with them . . .

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, with people being in lockdown, there was so much to consume that's recorded, that's about watching. This program is about interacting. It's about being able to not just talk to the artist but feel like you have some sort of voice in a room with other human beings. (Gibson and Chan)

On May 22, the NAC and Facebook Canada extended #CanadaPerforms for an additional two years with a \$500K investment from the latter, no longer as a relief fund but rather as a means of “augmenting existing programming” at the NAC and “further exploring the potential of online cultural expression” (“#CanadaPerforms Evolves”). Gibson describes #CanadaPerforms as a “fifth stage” for the NAC (which currently has four physical spaces for live performance), with a focus on dissemination, discovery, and nationwide outreach: “A Facebook Live [event] or a livestream at some point really permits some artists to disseminate their work in a way that they can't normally. That could be because of remoteness, it could be economic. There are lots of artists that don't like being on the road 300 days a year” (Gibson and Chan).

It's not difficult to imagine a future in which free virtual performing arts events are the norm and artists and arts organizations must argue for the monetary value of their products. Numerous authors and artists have described the current turn toward unremunerated livestreaming as the final nail in the coffin for the performing arts: “Tout est gratuit (et c'est épouvantable!),” writes Alexandre Sirois in *La Presse*. “Pour les confinés, c'est merveilleux. Pour les artistes, c'est tragique.” In an article for *The Conversation*, Caitlin Vincent compares the current moment in the arts sector to earlier developments in the media sector: “In the initial panic of moving their artistic offerings online, [arts] companies have undervalued their own product. In this regard, we can see clear parallels with the newspaper industry's shift to online platforms over the last decade. After initially offering online news for free, the industry is still struggling to shift consumer expectations, with major repercussions for both journalists and papers.”

#CanadaPerforms suggests a more positive vision for the future, in part because it offered fair compensation for performers (although, as Nestruck notes, \$1000 isn't as appealing for a nine-

person theatre troupe as for a solo or duo performance). Gibson herself envisions livestreaming as a supplement to live performance, with both contributing to a thriving arts economy:

I don't think live performance is going anywhere. There's something too magical about it. There's something too magical [about] artists on the stage, sitting in a group of people who are [all] feeling the same thing and, in a way, vibrating. That is so crucial to who we are as humans, and our own human existence and human experience. I don't think that's going anywhere. This is just an extra thing. You're going to get to see artists that you've never heard of, who can't tour to your community for whatever reason. It's the access point and the discovery that's really exciting to me.

And it's not going to be for free . . . Maybe it is if the artist chooses, but there's nothing we do [at the National Arts Centre] that's free to artists. It's very much at the core of who we are, to make sure that artists are paid. There's going to be a different economy to this [and] we have to figure that out . . . How does the stage crew get paid? How does the lighting person get paid? Where do all those pieces fit in? We're figuring it out. I don't think anyone has the answer yet. (Gibson and Chan)

While the role of the NAC in a performing arts series such as #CanadaPerforms is clear, the role of Facebook is less so. Social media platforms hold the dubious honour of making transparent the flow of intimacy, or a semblance of intimacy, in online interactions, while keeping the flow of money opaque. Their person-to-person format implies connection without intermediaries; there is something seemingly grassroots or DIY about trebling-effect livestreams, where I play from my living room and you watch from yours while making small talk with other audience members. The currency of exchange is not money but affection via emoji, and voluntary donations. It is easy to forget—in fact, social media is structured in such a way as to encourage us to forget—that we have potentially shared our living rooms and our conversations with billions of others, in exchange for advertising dollars for that social media company.

As it currently stands (in September 2020), the Facebook platform accelerates the exchange of intimacies—granting friendship, liking, and loving—while roadblocking financial exchanges other than fundraisers for non-profits and “personal causes” (Facebook, “Fundraisers and Donations”). Without paywall options, musicians and venues streaming via Facebook must solicit donations and then, in the absence of a donate button, paste their PayPal or Venmo addresses to the chat. I have watched several streams where musicians have taped handwritten signs to the wall. Elsewhere in these special issues, cellist Mike Block argues that digital media platforms are “losing out” by not supporting payment options, such as allowing content creators to impose a paywall after the first few minutes of a livestream. He describes this as a “win-win” option for performers, venues, and digital media platforms. If Facebook were to support ticketed livestreams, however, that would run counter to the platform’s fundamental transaction, which is that users gain free access to the (performed) intimacies of others in exchange for freely sharing their own (performed) intimacies and granting Facebook the right to use those intimacies for targeted advertising.

When, in 2017 and 2018, Facebook signed a series of licensing deals with music companies such as Universal Music Group and Warner Music Group, and with PROs (performing rights organizations), including SOCAN, it was not to launch a new audio streaming platform along the lines of Spotify or Google Play, but to allow users to include copyrighted music in their posts (“Facebook”; Ingham “Game Plan”). Tamara Hrivnak, Facebook’s Head of Music Business Development and Partnerships, described the company’s goal as “fill[ing] a hole in the digital

ecosystem . . . [W]e're looking to put music where people already are, and where they're sharing and connecting" (Ingham "Game Plan"). Facebook subsequently encouraged users to add music to their posts in order to "remember" and "accentuate" moments, or when "the right words to fit your mood, feeling, or personality [are] hard to find" (Beteille).

This vision of digital music functionality both incorporates and moves beyond that proposed by Drott with regards to audio streaming services. On Facebook, users use music not only to regulate their own moods, but to regulate the emotions of their readers with regards to themselves. "[P]in a song to the top of your profile to share with friends and help them learn more about you," encourages an October 2018 press release (Beteille). This is, perhaps, streaming 2.0, with the Facebook–PRO agreements allowing Facebook users to incorporate music into their performance of self on social media.

Kevin Chan, Head of Public Policy for Facebook Canada, notes that these Facebook-PRO deals have "transferred well" for pandemic-era livestreams such as #CanadaPerforms, "although that was never really intended to be the use case" (Gibson and Chan). In May, SOCAN began offering \$150 per livestream for Facebook or Instagram streams of at least 30 minutes and with at least 100 viewers, with funding of up to \$200,000 per quarter derived from Facebook licensing fees. This offered welcome support for Canadian songwriters, composers, and publishers during the pandemic, though it remains a stopgap measure and is set to expire in March 2021 ("SOCAN Gets Music Makers Paid"). Whether there will be a more comprehensive remuneration system for this new "use case" remains an open question.

While the complexities of audio streaming and livestream licensing are well beyond the scope of this article,<sup>8</sup> there is no question that the current model for digital music consumption does not work for artists: in 2019, the average domestic digital royalty payment for SOCAN members was \$67 (Willaert). A January 2020 report by the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Legislative Review Panel includes a call for "international online platform providers . . . [to] contribute fairly and proportionately to Canada's national objectives," offering some hope that the current system, which operates under outdated broadcast and communications legislation, will be revamped in the near future ("Canada's Communications Future").

## **Conclusion: Take Me and Extend Me?**

"What now?" proclaimed the front cover of the usually staid *International Musician*, the official journal of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada, in April 2020. The "President's Message" from Ray Hair laid out the crisis in bleak terms:

As of the date of this writing, March 21, the entertainment industry throughout the world, with few exceptions, has been shut down . . . Broadway, Las Vegas casinos, and every other showroom, right down to neighbourhood restaurants and bars, are dark . . . The threat to the entertainment industry across North America and worldwide, to the business it creates and musicians it employs, could stretch beyond these immediate days and have disastrous consequences for months or years to come. (Hair 2)

What now for musicians, what now for listeners, what now for music? Will we still accept the claims of livestreaming, not only to liveness but to human connection, once we are allowed to be physically together again? If livestreaming continues to replace a significant portion of live performances, will we as viewers willingly pay enough to provide a living wage for artists—and, if not, where will that funding come from? Who is excluded, for lack of technology or accessibility, in a future of livestreams? What happens to those forms of music-making

predicated on liveness—such as improvisatory genres—when the pretence of liveness has itself become a commodity?

The *San Francisco Chronicle* paints a rosy picture of a new digitally-enhanced arts sector:

Imagine . . . an augmented reality experience where you encounter different musical acts while walking around your community, like Pokémon Go but for musicians. Imagine being able to karaoke with a deepfake version of your favorite artist, or watch them puppeteer a whole army of characters they dreamed up to tell a story. (Eveleth)

But how many artists will follow the lead of Travis Scott, who recently performed a virtual concert in the video game Fortnite? What are the options for those who don't want to, or don't have the means to, follow the advice recently proffered by Marc Hogan in *Pitchfork* magazine: that artists should “take me and extend me [digitally]”?

The NAC's Heather Gibson proposes a more modest, and perhaps more realistic vision:

I think there's going to be a new artist and it's going to be a livestream producer. I'm currently looking for those kind of people . . . It's not the same as television. It's somebody who understands social media and technology, but also understands video cameras. There are things that are going to come out of this that I couldn't have told you three months ago we were going to need. Jobs in the industry. (Gibson and Chan)

I played what was, in retrospect, my last live gig on March 1, 2020, for a community dance weekend in Québec's Eastern Townships. As a performer, I'm typically paid a flat fee or a guarantee plus a percentage of the door by the promoter or venue. If I'm working with a booking agent, their cut comes out of my fee. The promoter or the venue usually hires a tech crew to run sound and lights. The venue is responsible for paying its local performing rights organization, e.g., SOCAN, for copyrighted music performed in its space. The promoter is responsible for publicizing the event.

These common structures undergird the work of Canadian freelance musicians both nationally and internationally. Now that live performances have moved online, however, all of these are up for negotiation. What happens, for instance, when the venue is Facebook Live, YouTube Live, Instagram or Twitch: what are their responsibilities? The “What Now?” of the AFM applies not only to musicians but to these digital media platforms that have become the pandemic era's de facto theatre spaces, community centres, dance halls, and bars. What now for the already fragile ecosystem of freelancer performers and independent venues? So long as digital media platforms are earning ad revenue from livestreams, they cannot claim to be mere conduits for musical performance, any more than a concert hall can shrug off its obligations towards the musicians who perform on its stage.

For viewers, livestreams offer both the thrill of spontaneity and the comfort of long-term access. For artists, however, the pandemic has raised the spectre of an Internet saturated with free live performances that remain perpetually available in a never-ending online present. Drott's analysis of audio streaming platforms suggests that discussions of fair compensation for livestreams must be embedded in a larger conversation on social understandings of the monetary and affective value of both recorded music and live performance, including consideration of how the pandemic may have reshaped those understandings.



Whether we are moving towards a world where livestreaming replaces live performance or one in which the former merely augments the latter, we have already entered a world where we accept the claims not only to liveness, but to human connection, made by livestreaming, and where artists make money by selling not only their art but their processes of artmaking and the intimacies of their day-to-day lives. We have already accepted live online music-making as a—usually—free and abundant resource. One-time influxes of money offered crucial support for Canadian artists in the early months of the pandemic. As we move beyond the donations-and-relief model of the lockdown and develop new funding approaches for livestreaming, however, a more equitable model of compensation is still to be determined.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article was written in July 2020 (with minor revisions in late 2020/early 2021) and therefore reflects the status quo of livestreaming and the performing arts economy at that time, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> Note that YouTube had offered livestreaming to select partner companies in 2011 (Garrahan).

<sup>3</sup> See McLuhan on “hot” media—high fidelity, low user engagement—vs. “cool” media—low fidelity, high user participation (24-35).

<sup>4</sup> See Couldry.

<sup>5</sup> See DeNora.

<sup>6</sup> See Coleman.

<sup>7</sup> See Kusek and Leonhard.

<sup>8</sup> See Hu for a more extensive discussion on the complexities of audio streaming and livestream licensing.

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