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## Place As An Extended Technique The Quarantine Concerts & New Experiential Music Platforms

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Article abstract

In this piece, Ben Zucker profiles Chicago's Experimental Sound Studio and its decision to move online with a series of livestreamed performances known as The Quarantine Concerts (TQC). He examines the meaning of "place" for virtual gatherings such as TQC, and discusses how musicians have had to rethink what liveness means and how it is practiced under the new constraints.

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## Place as An Extended Technique: The Quarantine Concerts & New Experimental Music Platforms

Ben Zucker

“We were all pretty clear from the get-go that this was going to be a completely different experience,” [Elastic Arts](#) curator [Daniel Wyche](#) said when asked about the beginnings of [The Quarantine Concerts](#) (TQC), a series of livestreamed performances hosted by [Experimental Sound Studio](#) (ESS). (Full disclosure: [I performed on TQC relatively early in its existence.](#))

Though started during the wave of cancellations brought about by COVID-19, TQC has achieved prominence greater than a simple remediation for lost shows, including mentions in [NPR](#) (Gotrich), [The Wire](#) (“Watch”), and [The New Yorker](#) (Ross), and a global roster of presenters and performers of experimental music. ESS’s physical space is a compact gallery and recording studio in a relatively quiet Chicago neighborhood; now, on any given night, its Twitch channel hosts far more people than could ever fit into the real space.

When discussing potential lineups with [Erica Miller](#)—who also assisted with curation through Elastic Arts—I had a variety of artists in mind. These were friends and colleagues across the country, the sort of pan-geographical accumulation of people that often results from trying to find fellow nontraditional sound-makers. Ultimately, though, we decided to organize two bills: one with myself and collaborators, based in Chicago on March 31, 2020, and the other presenting artists who used to live in Chicago but had since moved away, held on May 16, 2020. Musical style was part of the consideration, but ultimately the consideration of geography set the virtual stage.

But as [Olivia Junell](#), [ESS’ director of marketing](#), pointed out, “It makes you sort of question . . . what we’re trying to say by traditionally listing things that way . . . I find it interesting that we’re fixated on that . . . What are we really saying in those moments?”<sup>1</sup> It’s true. A musician’s location, past or present, is a floating signifier, meant to convey some sort of essential information about the *what* or *why* of their output, but in fact only gives any real meaning in the context of what or who else occupied a similar space. We make sense of much music by way of its social circumstance: *Persons A and B collaborated, and often played together at venue C, also frequently attended by person D who runs label E with band F on it containing A . . .*

Like any network of people, places, and things, very real material circumstances shape the discursive work that happens around musical events, which themselves offer new reconfigurations of people, places, and things to prompt further discursive work. Given that TQC was associated with ESS, which I thought of as a physical space whose online presence was only an extension, my first inclination was to still think of it as some sort of *place*. In interviews for this article, the ESS staff referred to this virtual space as a sort of venue as well. But for obvious reasons, it isn’t just as much as it is. Nationally recognized performing arts organizations, such as Roulette and Rhizome, coexist on TQC with collective and individually curated sets that put musicians from as many as five different time zones in one place—possibly even more depending on the physical locations of online audience members. Without the difficulties and costs of travel, TQC easily becomes part of our increased diet of digital content in daily life otherwise enclosed by the pandemic. According to Wyche, after a while, people tended to tune into TQC on a given night not only out of interest in any given performer, but simply because they were free. Untethered from issues of mobility, time, energy, or companionship, tuning in can be a simpler, more personal act. With this explosion of content, the livestreaming audience can be more passive than ever, in terms of having readily accessible

options, and yet more active in having to self-curate that far vaster amount of material.

Meanwhile, for the staff and volunteers who manage TQC's content, keeping the space "open" in this way took on new logistical dimensions that posed new challenges. Wyche and ESS technical director [Alex Inglizian](#) frequently communicated with artists to direct them on how to stream (first on YouTube, before moving to Twitch), and how to configure constant new arrays of technology (or lack thereof) to produce a performance that was satisfactory to both artist and audience. Inglizian noted that the musicians tended to be either highly technologically literate, or not at all. These instances of in-the-moment mediation and troubleshooting are yet another reminder of how unstable everyday activity has been during this pandemic, even in art that may otherwise serve as an escape. At the same time, sudden necessary expertise in streaming also means that setting up a concert could be as simple as emailing the stream key to someone the organizers won't see until the concert itself. In theory, ESS staff doesn't have to be present at all. Much of the curation is handed off to the collaborating presenters, institutional or individual, and, through the distribution of responsibilities, the logistics of presentation can be passed back and forth as much as the sounds onscreen. Concerts have been set in place months in advance, and in as little time as thirty-six hours. This, combined with the surge in interest in TQC in general, means that now, according to Junell, the organizers "don't know many of the people we're showing."

Yet the reality of performance during a pandemic has not dissolved the networks that nurtured and supported all kinds of experimental music and institutionalized some forms of it. ESS is still a Chicago-based organization and I don't think the aforementioned thirty-six-hours-in-advance concert could have been pulled together as such if it weren't a concert primarily featuring Chicago-based artists in, or adjacent to, the networks ESS fostered before the pandemic. Big-name artists are still a bigger draw, as are certain presenters that had more resources before the pandemic. Nothing is exempt from the trickle-up nuances of disaster capitalism.

Nevertheless, ESS has seized upon the organizational improvisation and spontaneity to advance a mission that is bigger than its home territory. Inglizian recalled that in the initial days of COVID-19 lockdown, individual streaming performances "diluted" the landscape in terms of attention and resources. Consolidating many of these performances within TQC "was the best possible way to get enough people in the room that donations became substantive." Survival, accessibility, and diversity are ongoing concerns for TQC organizers; Junell hopes that the series continues to bring in new artists and audiences in line with ESS' longstanding mission. She says, "We have to be very intentional in the paths we follow and explore. If we don't, we're a failure of an organization . . . we're not truly seeking experimentation." But even without ESS exercising direct oversight, its mission and values play out in the shared place-less values of the performing artists, and perhaps in the online medium itself.

The widely-distributed nature of the online medium remains an increasingly pertinent issue in how experimental musical communities might continue to network and orient themselves even as physical spaces open up again. TQC is still a "venue." But the space it provides for artists to reorient themselves beyond the constraints of real-world association is vast enough in scale and scope that it has called for improvised means of organization, putting us all in uncharted territory for the presentation of experimental music. In addition to the term "venue," the term "platform" is also often used to describe TQC, referencing the ongoing reshaping of networks by new digital economies. Nick Srnicek states it best in the aptly named *Platform Capitalism*:

With network effects, a tendency towards monopolisation is built into the DNA of platforms: the more numerous the users who interact on a platform, the more valuable

the entire platform becomes for each one of them. Network effects, moreover, tend to mean that early advantages become solidified as permanent positions of industry leadership. Platforms also have a unique ability to link together and consolidate multiple network effects. (122–23)

When social practice is built deeply into the network being platformed, i.e., the (non)locality of musical networks, where does venue end, or scene end, and platform begin? In an article for *Flash Art*, Maria Zuazu notes that, in some online performances, “the candor and humor of these direct addresses suggest a familiarity, a community that preexists online co-presence.” How can a platform, torn between locality and delocalization, establish new intimacies essential to community, or at least avoid perpetuating only the illusion of them? More so than place, these intimacies further consolidate the platform for both better or worse. Pandemic realities have only heightened the positive and negative affordances of our networks as they continue to cautiously tread new ground, improvising the necessary conditions to avoid social dissolution and [real economic disaster](#). Place has become another extended technique in this practice, and TQC has become “the shed.” ESS and all the artists involved, including myself, are practicing towards a virtuosity of virtual livelihood against the heightened stakes of pandemic affordances, to make more intimacy out of less on our own terms in real time

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted excerpts from Olivia Junell and Alex Inglizian come from personal interviews conducted by the author.

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