

## MUSIC IN VIRTUAL REALITY

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## МУЗИКА ВЪВ ВИРТУАЛНАТА РЕАЛНОСТ

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**Abstract:** Over the past few years, music has got a new medium/ way of presentation, namely a virtual reality that entirely changed its ongoing development. The main subject of this article is to place focus on music and its survival in the virtual reality, providing an overview of various occurrences that affected this phenomenon. Some of those include online system, as well as possible responses to the issues like digitalization as positive or negative innovation, \*struggle\* with the commercial musician trends and their popularity for views and profit, as well as the key question whether we shall become known as a society by the stagnation of music in its development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or shall we use the advantages of the present technologies and develop music in the right direction?

**Keywords:** music, online networks, virtual reality, digitalization, 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Резюме:** През последните няколко години музиката намери нова среда/начин на представяне, а именно виртуалната реалност, която изцяло промени нейното продължаващо развитие. Основната цел на тази статия е да постави акцент

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върху музиката и нейното оцеляване във виртуалната реалност, като прави преглед на различни събития, които влияят на този феномен. Някои от тях включват онлайн системата, както и евентуални решения на въпроси като дигитализацията в ролята на положителна или отрицателна иновация, „борбата“ с комерсиалните музикални тенденции и тяхната популярност за посещения и печалба, както и ключовият въпрос дали ще останем в историята като общество, известно със стагнацията на музиката в нейното развитие през XXI век, или ще използваме предимствата на съвременните технологии и ще развиваме музиката в правилната посока?

**Ключови думи:** музика, онлайн мрежи, виртуална реалност, дигитализация, XXI век.

## INTRODUCTION

Music in the virtual reality is a title of this article and an issue so often discussed in recent time, which brings us to the question: is music as such going to survive in the online, virtual reality? Many years ago, the sound carriers came to being, so-called long play records widely popularized by the US discography house Columbia Records. Those records made it possible to record and play both the classical music pieces, pop music and other music genres. Soon followed the cassettes, CDs, computer/laptop including applications like Instagram<sup>3</sup>, YouTube<sup>4</sup> and Facebook<sup>5</sup> where the whole present world exists and lives, music included, but the real question is: does it actually live? What happens to the emotions, energy and quality if music and its performance is placed into the virtual reality? Is it being transferred, developed or upgraded,

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<sup>3</sup> Instagram is a creative, free application through which the photos and video clips become viral in a very short period of time and spread within the community of the same name. [Systrom, Krieger 2016]

<sup>4</sup> YouTube is a popular network service for sharing video clips where users could upload, view and assess the video contents. [Wikipedia-YouTube]

<sup>5</sup> Facebook is a social network made up of a multitude of various networks like those of schools, colleges, regions that provide easy way of connecting with friends. [Wikipedia-Facebook]

or does it remain as it is? We shall try to find answers to those questions on the pages that follow, along with the soloist and pedagogical analysis that offer the presentation of its advantages and disadvantages. We are witnessing various events, world changes, technological advances, achievements in all segments. Is it true that whatever is new, contemporary, up-to-date, is really the best and most acceptable? Artistic music, along with other forms of art, has survived for centuries because the true values have always been duly recognized. Art in the first place was rarely created with an intention to become a masterpiece, it just existed by itself. In reality, the styles and ways of creation changed due to various economic, political, religious, technological conflicts and interests. However, the changes have always brought about quality, spirituality, authenticity and originality, just in ever-changing new way. Thanks to this fact, today we are performing, listening, analyzing centuries' old music because the true values never lose its quality by the passage of time, on the contrary, they become more important and precious. This all brings us to the question when, how and why music started to get a growing importance in the online, virtual reality.

## ANALYSIS

At first and as a rule, music was recorded as audio, sound phenomenon. This was followed by recording live concert and performances to record the magnificent moments of music performance for eternity. YouTube network is one of the most popular platforms for uploading and viewing video contents. It is a free application, but once you get a sufficient number of views, the video owner starts making money, depending on the number of views. This probably contributed to introduction of creating videos that the audience considered interesting, particularly the video clip viewers, in order to get as many views as possible. Performers increasingly started to record their music at music studios and directly upload their videos without live performances, but why? There are whole range of answers to this question.

Due to a large music market, it has become very difficult to contract a quality orchestra for accompaniment, to hire a concert hall, provide for the required equipment, to succeed in a festival, because of the huge

supply of musicians. Some opt for quality only, some other will hire musicians of lower, more acceptable price, some other a musician who is a showman at the same time...In general, it has become very difficult to fight for one's „place under the sun“. For this, more and more performers started to record and upload their work on the online networks in order to present their work to the public, but also to make profit. On one hand, this makes sense if the recording is of high quality performance, well-conceived and done. Yet, many of those performers tend to focus on the stage only, on the appearance, special effects, lighting, to the detriment of the essence itself. Of course, such a scenario is also possible with live performances where the attention is drawn to everything else but music or performance. Many would say that we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and why wouldn't we make use of all the advantages it offers, to help ourselves with special effects that would make our performance even better? We are getting back to the beginning. We do not have to blindly follow any trend and actual developments. Classical, artistic music is specific for its beauty often lies in the simplicity. One cannot create with the popularity or profit in mind, and expect to get the outstanding composition, symphony, sonata at the same time.

Is this time of ours going to be marked with commercial music striving for views and quick profit that survives in the digital, virtual reality? Perhaps! Yet, as in the past centuries, the changes have always been, at the moment they occur, accepted with either enthusiasm or rejection. The passage of time is needed to crystalize what really brings about quality, revolution, innovation or usefulness, and what needs to be rejected. Every era brings its own innovations that need to be given a chance in order for music and ourselves alike to grow and develop, with its assistance, but at the same time to try as much as possible to differentiate the features that give it a new quality, meaning or dimension, from those that make it superficial or worthless.

In terms of style, artistic music of the 21<sup>st</sup> century features considerable quality, it is different and leaves nobody indifferent. People either like it or not. Sometimes it is based on the rhythm only, some other times on modern technology and electronic tools, on occasions it combines movement, voice. The answer to the question whether it is our era, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that take credit for this or that music, commercial

or super quality one, is: I do not think so. People, artists, performers are always those who have the „tool in their hands“ to either create a masterpiece or ruin it. The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought about many a good „tool“ and material, but it has to be utilized by those skillful hands that would treat it for the right purpose. The artistic music is there to make us more uplifted, more inspired, rather than leaving us indifferent, in a state that makes it impossible to feel or recognize its qualities. The question the musician, the great performers and masters of their instruments or the field they are specialized in are confronted with is whether to continue on the path of live performances, live concerts in the presence of live audience, risking to have from time to time not so successful a performance, or to do online performances making it perfect in terms of technique, intonation, tempo etc. Many segments affect such a choice. There are performers who perform live, presenting various pieces, who have many offers for cooperation, recording, and they opt to have a part of their program performed live, and due to time limitations, they do another part of the program online balancing between the commitments, live and online performances, they make music alive, while utilizing the advantages of the contemporary technologies of their own time. There are artists who, due to financial reasons, cannot afford orchestras, conductors, concert halls, as mentioned before, and opt for a quality equipment and music studio to present their work in the online world which makes it possible for them to live their art and make communication with their audience/viewers.

The next segment is stage fright. Many musicians, though outstanding artists and performers, have never made it to conquer their stage fright. They say that freight is diminished with persistent performance and facing the stage fright hand-on. However, some individuals keep failing in fighting and controlling their stage fright. It is the freight that prevent them from presenting, performing, playing what they have prepared, and it is the very freight that make them opt for performing online. For this reason, they are doing what we have already mentioned – they record at music studios, release CDs, organize online workshops and by doing that, they keep themselves active, at the same time managing to overcome the freight of direct contact with the audience.

I believe those are the positive examples of how digital advances

can help the musicians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and make them tread their own artistic-music path which probably would not have been possible had the situation been different. On the other side, there are musicians, mostly those of advanced age, who find it hard to adapt to those changes, because for the most part of their lives, they acted under the same rules – live concerts, workshops, teaching, and there is no way they can accept the online, digital music performance. Whereas the youngsters born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not even aware of the old way and what used to be there before, they increasingly refrain from attending concerts at the theaters, masterclasses or workshops that require travelling to other countries. Why should one do that if one can do it all online? Because there need to be a balance that will try and make music as much live, imperfect, changeable as possible, but again, provide it with the option, along with all the afore-mentioned segments, to get transferred onto the online world, when needed. Art is not perfect, it has never been and will never be so. This is not its goal or reason of creation. Piece of art is reborn every single time it is performed or listened. There are as many interpretations as there are performances, and as many impressions and opinions, emotions as there are listeners, in a word – endless, and that is where its beauty comes from.

What to do in a situation when we are forced to play, teach, and act online only? At the moment of writing of this article, it has been already seven months that we are faced with the situation that made the whole world move into the virtual living. COVID-19<sup>6</sup> that spread around the world turned many life segments upside down, art and music included. For the fear of infection and a need to prevent it from spreading, schools, public and cultural institutions alike are closed, sport events, concerts have been cancelled, and even this year's Olympics have been postponed. Many countries have imposed curfew in form of a ban of movement of population at the specific hours. The people have transferred all their jobs, commitments, pastime activities, duties into the virtual reality. Now, it is not the matter of choice if someone, be it for the fear, number of video clip views or popularity opt for being an online musician or,

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<sup>6</sup> COVID-19, a virus disease caused by novel Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 – an infectious virus causing a new pulmonary disease. [Wikipedia-COVID-19]

due to his/her habits and years of experience, stick to live performances and lessons. We all had to become online-digital musicians-artists. Some people welcomed such a change, particularly those who had been living such a life already. As for those opponents of the contemporary digital age, they had to learn about the digital world, how to upload video clips onto online platforms, how to do recording through new applications, when the time is ripe to publish those recordings etc. It was „overnight“ that they had to become part of the digitalized world. Just imagine a 70-member orchestra closed up in their homes whose members live on a few continents but were tasked to record a piece, each musician his/her own part respecting specific rules, in order to combine those 70 individual video recordings into one piece that represent a single performance! This is more than a demanding task. To record and piece together multiple video clips into one whole at distance have started before when some individuals felt the need on the social network Instagram to play online along with a performer from another continent. Only they knew the reason for such an enterprise, but it seems as if they predicted the situation the world was about to find itself in, as if they lived their quarantine days much before the actual quarantine.

Thus, for example, some of the Instagram flute players started recording video clips through various applications with the musicians from around the world back in 2016, but also by themselves performing the pieces for three or four flutes making it a one-man trio or quartet. Did it become IN for the lack of communication among people in real life or for the need to display some sort of superiority, power? Since then, the Internet has been flooded with video clips of similar content where a single person makes septet (he/she records all seven parts and piece them together in synchronization into a single piece). More skillful among them used to record even more demanding pieces, which make it very interesting to watch. As the number of views increased (as we already mentioned) many started to opt for commercial-like works (like Super Mario theme for 5 flutes) or started recording film music or parts of the popular songs. It would be quite logical if amateurs, pop musicians, entertainers and alike made this choice. However, quite a number of professional musicians who have graduated from the world academies, attended masterclasses and received a high quality education also did

the same.

The question needs to be asked again if the digital world we live in is to blame for all this or is it the individuals who failed to use the advantages of the contemporary age and started to turn art and classical music into amateurish works. Let us get back to pre-COVID time, as we already said that some people were living for years as if the virus had already been there. Some paths were already there, well-trodden. Many of the 70 members of the orchestra were not familiar with the ways to record a single video at such a distance. When world-class musicians record a symphony in a supreme way at a distance of thousands of kilometers from each other, and what you get as a final product is a sound and picture of the original quality symphony, then one can say that the advantages of the technology and digitalization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been put to good use. All the festivals, concerts, master workshops have been cancelled recently. Some of them have taken place online.

Once such positive example includes „A Festival of New Music” organized by Emmanuel Pahud<sup>7</sup> and Daniel Barenboim<sup>8</sup> at the Boules Hall, Berlin. The festival was finely conceived in a way to offer a chance to young composers to create their music from their homes particularly for this festival. The works have been recorded at the Boules Hall, without audience, and had their opening performance online. Each piece was explained, played and a due trace was left thereupon. The festival constitutes an outstanding example that even extraordinary situations cannot stand on the way of people with great ideas led by the right purpose or goals. We all got the new pieces of art, an outstanding content presented in the virtual context only, without succumbing to commercialization but representing a real pattern of a top festival of artistic music. Another positive example include masterclasses organized online during the coronavirus time through various applications and online platforms. The students have attended those classes, trainings and lectures and communicated and talked to the lecturer and played online from the comfort of their homes, which was again a positive component of the online system.

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<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Pahud is a Swiss flutist, one of the most prominent flutists of the 21. Century. [<http://www.emmanuelpahud.net/>]

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Barenboim is an Argentinian pianist and conductor. [danielbarenboim.com]



Also, it has been decided for many competitions to be held by way of on-line recordings so that every candidate record his/her program and send it over by e-mail to the selected jury. It was mostly a free-choice program due to the specific situation related to correpetition. It is of high importance for the music schools, associations, professors who opted for such a choice and managed to motivate the students and young artists alike not to stop playing despite the COVID-19, to make their best from their homes, to work on themselves and send the best recordings and thereby keep fit in terms of their performance skills. The admittance exams were conceived in similar ways, by sending the online recordings, with a group of teachers review and assess the performance. In a word, life did not come to a stall. The commitments are still there to be fulfilled.

Yet, when we say art or music, whether it came to a stall or not, the question arises if the recorded performance offers a true image of what the musician really is? Would he/she do better or worse if playing live at the competition or admittance exam? Is it simple or very difficult to record a video? It has to be flawless, because everyone has a chance to do it even 50 times, it is expected that no errors were made, but is it what we really want, to have a perfect flawless video or to have the feeling of it, emotion, artistry that make the listeners delve into a new world thanks to the interpretation? Many answers have already been offered. Once the joint rehearsals were allowed, many orchestras mark the opening of new season by live broadcast, still without audience. What is a concert without audience? The audience is not there just to applaud or admire us or not. The audience makes part of the performance, emotions they emit towards us and vice versa, they create the joint energy which results in a unique interpretation at the end. Art is there for higher goal, emotions, energy, rather than the perfect recording, video, applause or promotion. So, on one hand, we have for instance Emmanuel Pahud, one of the finest flutists in the world, of the Berlin Philharmonic, and on other, commercial-type professional musicians. If we make a slight comparison, this is what we are going to see: Pahud has had his YouTube profile for many years back – 11.3 thousand followers, and also 37 thousand followers on Instagram. His most popular Instagram video has had 30,000 views (W.A. Mozart – Concert in G Major), whereas his YouTube recording of the Mozart's Andante has 220 thousand views.

On the other hand, there are professional musicians, outstanding players who publish the commercial videos with the newly arranged popular songs and parts of the film music that have around 200 thousand views on YouTube, or a few million views on Instagram. This is the real picture of the time we live in. One of the best contemporary musicians has much less social network followers or people who are really interested in his work than the musicians who play commercial music. His video clips are classical, they are based on music, the essence of art we are talking about, the quality and interpretation. The number of views on Instagram (mostly used by younger people) is ten times lower than that on YouTube, which indicates that the young people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not find the essence of the artistic music so important, be it online or not, but videos that includes the new arrangements of the popular songs or the aforesaid similar contents. How to survive under such circumstances, particularly in a situation when the only option available is online performance. Is it possible for the world-class musicians and artists with their extraordinary qualities to act for the promotion and views only? Are we becoming so superficial and consider core values as second or third-rate issues? Emmanuel Pahud is one of the best and he manages to „stay afloat“ on these waters, whether live or online. He tries to use every single situation to reap some benefits for himself, for the art and for the audience. By taking part in outstanding online festivals, by embarking on online projects, he manages to find his place with his music and quality only. Is there a way for some average musician who is not the best of the best, to remain on the path of artistic music, make his living and live his dreams? At times it seems like tilting at windmills and the imposed online musicianship is not of great help. Is there enough high quality musicians in the world to carry the load and all the obstacles on their „shoulders“? Plato<sup>9</sup> once said: „The better the music, the better the state“.

We should not allow our era to be marked with the music whose

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<sup>9</sup> Platon, a highly influential Greek philosopher, idealist, a student of Socrates, a teacher of Aristotle and a founder of the Academy. The core of philosophy revolves around the thought that ideas are the non-physical essences of all things, of which objects and matter in the physical world are merely imitations. [Wikipedia-Platon]

only goal is to collect as many views and as much money. There have been wars, diseases, poverty and great changes in all eras, the artists were not always in a position to do what they wanted to survive. Yet, it has always been some individuals who managed to overcome the obstacles, who managed to tame the windmills, enrich the music by the accomplishments of their time and pave the way forward. All technological innovations, all accomplishments in all segments of life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are supposed to contribute to the artistic music becoming more innovative, more advanced, to create ways forward, rather than digging its own grave in this very 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## CONCLUSION

When we had the lockdown 6 months ago, I was forced myself to online performance, learning and teaching. As a doctoral student I had the opportunity to personally feel all aspects of online life of a musician – as a pedagogue, performer and student. I must say that online education system works very well if both sides (teacher and student) have a proper equipment and appropriate setting for this kind of education to be implemented. Logically, online teaching system proved successful with senior pupils and students. Younger children are harder to animate, keep their focus on the monitor, assert an authority and convince them why they are expected to do so. Many answers have already been given in this article.

This is the era that makes digitalization and online systems inevitable. Truly, it has brought about many benefits and advantages. The life has not come to a stall over the past six months, but it could have had it not been for the virtual reality that we all, more or less, resorted to. As already written many times before, it is the people who create the present and the future. It is we who are to decide whether to use the advantages of the online system the best we can, or not. One need to know which segments could be done online and which cannot. As for the online teaching, little children who are just starting to learn the instrument and music, or anything else for that matter, we'd better avoid it and always prefer classical ways (if possible); as for the senior pupils and students, the artists could easily have their online education, provided the proper equipment, without affecting the quality, whether

we are talking about the extraordinary situations like COVID-19, or if a person wants to attend a masterclass given from another continent, if one wishes to join his/her colleagues and play along at a distance of thousands of kilometers. Competitions and admittance exams, for the specific nature of disciplines, are better organized live, because the recording never present a real picture of an artist compared to playing the music live before you. This brings us to the last segment, that of performance. Given the fact that we expect no perfect and flawless performance, music is to be recorded with all rules in mind. Music is a living thing, changeable, unpredictable, like water, we cannot and should not try to shape it or tame it, let it be free. Public performance would always offer a chance for freedom, creativity, flow of energy, emotions, sophistication. Lessons as well give better felling in a personal contact. The teacher does not only teach us notes, tempo, rhythm. He teaches us how to be better people, musicians, and artists through working together. He teaches us how to breathe as if it were most natural for us, how to move. That is why live performances are much more useful. Music is not just music, it is a spiritual art in which there is indispensable contact with people, audience, and live communication. Beside this, we also must considerate that the sound quality, in online performances, if someone does not have the right equipment, is not good. It affects the interpretation and performance itself. It automatically diminishes its value. On the contrary, one of the advantages of online performances is that everyone can watch it, from home as well, regardless of years, status, financial possibilities. Online concert can be watched by millions of people, which could never be there; nevertheless there is no hall for such number of people. We must also consider that online audiences do not pay any tickets, which can be an advantage for them but a disadvantage for the artists, and thousands of workers behind the live performances, would not be able to make a living from their work.

As for the question if it can survive in the online world, I would say no. Extraordinary situations, like COVID-19 leave no choice and luckily, the total lockdown did not last long, so the change was not felt so much. It is good to have a Plan B, online world that could always help us out in the circumstances like the ones we have already experienced, but let it remain a Plan B. For people who suffer from stage fright it will

certainly become a Plan A, for people who prefer playing commercial music striving for views, it is going to stay Plan A, for people of the advanced age who cannot travel but can still teach, this is also going to remain Plan A. It would be good if we join hands in trying to, when situation arises, make artistic music be presented online, to make it draw the same attention, space and possibilities as the music we already mentioned. Let the online world not be the representative of youth who collect ever increasing number of views and make big money, let it be a representative of true artists, for the world to hear about them, to have the true artistic music spread wherever possible, to connect people and make them be at their best. Let the online, digital world become a tool for good ideas to be even more accessible, for quality music to be ever more advanced and sophisticated. Music is a living thing and it needs a living audience, but when we have to resort to Plan B, it has to be ready for whatever there is to be offered. The youth of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not well acquainted with the artistic music exactly because what they can see most often on the online networks where they spend most of their time, is commercial content. That's why it is of crucial importance for the youth to leave the online world for a while and see what's offered in real life, and for artists to enrich the digital world with high-quality music in order to break the fight of the artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the „windmills „and to establish a balance between reality and online world that would bring about quality, development and progress.

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