Maurizio Agamennone

Preface

Maurizio Agamennone is Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Florence. His interests span theoretical issues in ethnomusicology; poetic improvisation and other forms of sung poetry; living polyphonies; the activities and productions of migrant musicians; the compositional and performance practices in the European musical avant-garde; and intercultural exchanges in contemporary music. He is co-editor of Sounds of the Pandemic (Routledge, 2023).

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This special issue of the Journal of World Popular Music gathers essays originating partly from an international conference held online in December 2020, during the most difficult period of the Covid-19 pandemic, and partly commissioned from scholars working on phenomena and events related to the monograph’s chosen topic. The Sounds of the Pandemic conference was promoted by Come suona la Toscana (How Tuscany sounds), a research unit operating in the Department of History, Archaeology, Geography, Art and Performing Arts (SAGAS) of the University of Florence. This research unit, which I am pleased to coordinate, counts among its members Antonella Dicuonzo, Daniele Palma, Ludovico Peroni, and Giulia Sarno, who all contributed in many valuable ways to the conceptualization and realization of the current special issue. More generally, the unit is conducting research on a range of sound expressions linked to the most diverse forms of sociability and rituality: seasonal festivals and practices such as the Scoppio del Carro in Florence; historical re-enactments such as Calcio in Costume; and activities linked to the identity performances of specific groups—for example, musical practices linked to organized football supporters (ultras) and those detectable in so-called total institutions such as asylums and prisons.

The 2020 Sounds of the Pandemic conference featured the crucial collaboration of Tempo Reale, a preeminent Florentine centre for musical research, production and didactics, directed by Francesco Giomi, who is also a member of our research team. A number of scholars from many world regions attended the conference, most of them young, smiling, and visibly pleased to finally
measure themselves against other young and curious researchers, and to share opinions and perceptions on surprising and highly innovative practices and behaviours, of which the attendees themselves were protagonists and attentive observers during the first lockdowns of spring 2020.

Indeed, the drastic changes in interpersonal and social relations imposed by the severe governmental restrictions profoundly affected the multifaceted experiences of music. These experiences have always been understood as eminently social practices subordinated to dynamic processes of reciprocity and exchange, and relations of direct confrontation characterized by a strong investment of the body, a sudden and immediate sensory reactivity, and processes of action, observation and listening that music makers experienced in the shared space-time of live performance.

The drastic interruption of “direct contacts” between people and social groups produced, on the one hand, a necessary and general realignment towards unprecedented and unexpected communication perspectives; and on the other hand, in particular, it led many observers and performers to verify and evaluate what consequences this might have on the usual ways of making music. Quite a few scholars and practitioners engaged this perspective, with a strong presence of young and early-career researchers; it was probably this very feature, coupled with a greater familiarity with IT and an almost spontaneous “digital” sensibility, that favoured a rapid and euphoric commitment to surveying and evaluation. This profitable methodological flexibility allowed us to draw on sources and documents mediated mainly by online channels and platforms. The result, in turn, was a powerful expansion of netnography, digital or virtual ethnographic experiences: undoubtedly experimented with already in the past, such experiences were greatly enhanced during and after the pandemic lockdowns, as they were the prevailing—if not the only, at least momentarily—means to investigate music-making.

As for the current issue, among the themes of investigation explored, I would like to point out the reflection on the creation of new spaces of communication through livestreaming. From the perspective of providing experimental and innovative opportunities to keep “being together” and maintain active ties and relationships otherwise destined to loosen or fade away, livestreaming was intended as a substitute scenario for live concerts. Moreover, some of these experiences were further refined and enhanced after the end of the restrictions, and can be understood as effectively complementing the gradual resumption of “in-person” activities—namely, as useful spaces for the integration, comparison, preservation of experiences and the documentation of practices. Of equal interest is the reflection on the creation of meeting occasions characterized by greater “sustainability”, through the establishment of circumscribed spaces of interchange supported by egalitarian and horizontal
relations, and therefore removed from the direct pressure of profit-making interests.

What seems crucial to me, then, is the methodological reflection on how to conduct a convincing ethnographic survey in the face of pandemic-induced restrictions, the impossibility of direct exchange between “observed” and “observer”, and the related phenomenon of performers who prefer to forgo the relationship with an “external observer” to become ethnographers of themselves. Seeming to move in the same direction are those who, during the pandemic, practiced or observed musics habitually oriented towards a deep and dynamic interaction among the participants (for example, in some improvisational processes built on a constant and rapid reciprocity, or in a close polyphonic integration and combination), learning to evaluate different forms of delay in the perception of the telematic signal, and measuring individual responses in relation to the need to compensate and “harmonize” any uncertainties or insufficiencies of the technologies used. Once again, some of these experiences can be enhanced and elevated into new creative actions well after the end of restrictions—actions that before the pandemic might have been understood as experimental, utterly marginal, and very unsatisfactory.

It seems to me that all the research experiences and reflections gathered here converge in perceiving the “infosphere” as a scenario that is eloquent insofar as it effectively accommodates given procedures of self-representation by musicians, and enhances modes of “offering” a “digital performance”, in which technology allows a treatment of sound that may be unattainable in live performance. Also included in this perspective are certain transformations of acoustic expectation on the part of users, who are progressively accustomed to a sound that is proper and exclusive to online enjoyment. The behaviours of some performers who prefer to act primarily, if not exclusively, online, also changes too.

Finally, as everyone now knows, the internet welcomes and offers a huge and ever-growing mass of information, such that it cannot be effectively processed and selected by its “surfers”, be they individuals or groups. This results in a formidable imbalance of power, to the full advantage of large international corporations that control data and information in order to promote their own business activities, while relegating web users to a totally subordinate role of passive and unsuspecting “consumers”—a phenomenon that may have serious consequences for the resilience of democracy and aspirations for self-determination.

Nevertheless, if it is true that the diffusion and fruition of events and contents in the infosphere, through livestreams or podcasts, seem to be the usual and now prevalent ways of acquiring information and producing meaning,
in the same scenario one can also detect interesting and dynamic perspectives of resistance and opposition. Some individuals and small groups (very lively niches and mobile micro-networks) are tending to build and maintain frequented multiform spaces of expressive, relational and political autonomy, removed from the invasiveness and hegemony of the “lords of the net”, and oriented towards egalitarian and “horizontal” practices. These contrast euphorically to the ruthless verticality imposed by the large information enterprises. This now happens even beyond the usual circadian rotation of individual waking/sleeping relationships, a trend that seems to me to have been further accelerated by the space-time constraints and perturbations generated by the closures and self-confinements triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.