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JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



**Performing and Premiering in spite of a Global Crisis:
Gerd Kühr's *Corona Meditation* and its Usage of Online Platforms**

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INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology

No. 5, Vol. II, December 2020, pp. 127–137.



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PERFORMING AND PREMIERING IN SPITE OF A GLOBAL CRISIS: GERD KÜHR'S *CORONA* *MEDITATION* AND ITS USAGE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS

Abstract: Through the challenges that can arise in connection with a global crisis, in which live performances are prohibited, musicians and music institutions, such as concert houses, have to find solutions in order to give the recipients the opportunity to convey music through a different medium. Gerd Kühr's *Corona Meditation* for any number of pianos was especially composed to adjust to the recently changing situation concerning the typical structures of concert life. The concept offers a direct connection between technology – here in the form of using a conference programme and a livestream platform – and music itself, as the composer was aware of difficulties that can arise through using an online medium. By examining the mentioned composition, this paper focuses on the aspect of relocating music to a virtual space, using online platforms as potential temporary alternatives to real-life performances and reflection of the streaming culture in general. Connected to all that matters are problems and difficulties during these types of concerts deriving through the existing technological limits.

Keywords: contemporary music, Gerd Kühr, global crisis, technological opportunities, streaming, online content, classical concert life, virtual concert

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Introduction

A global crisis, as we experience it at close quarters, caused by a pandemic, has a great impact on everyday life. As one has to adapt to new and ever-changing regulations, institutions have to as well. In some cases, human interaction can be put to a minimum by working at home, which is not easy on some areas such as the cultural sector. Institutions, which mainly focus on live concerts, such as classical concert houses or opera houses, have had to think of other ideas on how to bring music to its recipients, in order to prove that musical events can exist even in these times.

Many quickly transferred their musical content to the virtual space of the internet – sometimes even for the first time – as it was the only possibility to reach others without having them be physically present. It included, for example, “ghost-concerts”, in which the audience was not present in the respective room itself, but instead was listening and/or watching at home, transmitted through radio or online livestreams.

Composers have also had to think differently in that special time, being linked to cancelled premieres of their works or their then work-in-progresses that could not be completed in the intended way. As such, new ideas have had to be formed. One of these was the work “Corona-Meditation” by the Austrian composer Gerd Kühr. It was specifically composed in and for that time to not only meet the regulations of the government by being wholly devised for the virtual space, but also to reflect on collective music making, traditionally and contemporary speaking.

In this paper the composition will be used as a starting point to look further into the sphere of making online music content, particularly live content. As opposed to pre-recorded music, other parameters have to be considered and online production has its own problems that can occur before or during livestreams. The question arises if current online platforms in their current state can be seen as proper alternatives to real-life classical concerts.²

Combining traditional concepts with current events

Gerd Kühr’s “Corona-Meditation” for any number of pianos³ premiered on 30th April, 2020, just about one and a half months after regulations in Austria prohibited live art performances. As quickly as the pandemic had changed the cultural life or life in general, as suddenly Gerd Kühr had the idea for this piece. Coming back from

² I’m hereby only focusing on the classical music sphere, as popular music has its own relationship to social media or other types of internet content and was always connected with the shifts in media culture, to be, in that sense, popular in the first place (see more in Anastasiadis 2019).

³ That it is also not limited to that specific instrument can be seen already at its premiere, where also a guitarist was playing along with the other pianists. The performance can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQ7e2twU1Ig&t=2467s>.

Berlin to his home in Austria, currently working on an opera, he had to go into a 14-day quarantine, during which this composition came to his mind:

By watching the news in Austria, I noticed how the situation here already developed, and then suddenly, during a coffee break, the idea occurred to me: Yes, apparently an incredible number of people are now at home, a lot more than usual – also during the day and during the week. What are they doing? They have more time to think and reflect on how life has changed or with the uncertain prospect how things will continue. And at the same time, as a musician myself, it was of course obvious that I thought very optimistically: Time for domestic music [Hausmusik]. It has to be (Kühr, Chepovetsky and Wagner 2020).⁴

The old tradition of making and playing music at home that has resurfaced before in the genre of popular music, and is here reflected anew by the current situation, as it is one of the few possibilities to perform music, be it privately or even publicly by uploading it onto different social media platforms. Thus, the term “Hausmusik” is expanded from a local to a global reception as well. Connected to this focal point is the idea of non-professionalism, where families or other social groups could perform together outside of the professional realm. To take this into account, Gerd Kühr had to compose something that can be played by professionals and amateurs. This was accomplished by having a simple fundamental tonal musical structure, using all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, classical periodical structures, and a 4/4-time throughout the work. Not every single note has to be played by everyone. Each pianist can decide how many and which notes he/she would like to play, thus creating a performance integrating every level of piano skills.⁵ This alludes back to the previous – and even today’s – existing isolation, being held at home or in a small radius, limiting direct social interactions. The piece offers a short escape out of this bubble to musically communicate with other people all over the world through us-

⁴ The press presentation was held in German, thus I translated it for this paper, as are all non-English references. Original German wording of Gerd Kühr was: “Ich habe durch das Nachrichtenschauen in Österreich mehr mitbekommen, wie die Lage hier schon ist und dann ist plötzlich während einer Kaffeepause mir die Idee gekommen: Ja, offenbar sind eben jetzt wirklich unglaublich viele Menschen jetzt zu Hause, viel mehr zuhause als sonst – eben auch tagsüber, unter der Woche etc. Was machen die? Die haben mehr Zeit, Zeit wahrscheinlich auch zum Nachdenken und zum Besinnen, wie sich das ganze Leben jetzt geändert hat, oder mit der unsicheren Aussicht, wie es weitergeht. Und gleichzeitig als Musiker war das natürlich ganz naheliegend, dass ich mir ganz optimistisch gedacht habe: Zeit für Hausmusik. Das muss es sein”.

⁵ This linkage of both the professional and the non-professional field can also be seen as a reflection of today’s online content creation in general, on platforms such as YouTube, where this dichotomy is blurred, as everything from professional content, e.g. orchestral concerts or opera productions, to user-generated music by individuals or collectives outside of the institutionalized music industry, can be viewed and listened to at such sites, concerning not exclusively popular music alone (cf. Werner 2018, 138).

age of the internet.⁶

The second point that was mentioned by the composer himself was the aspect of reflection and meditation, as the title of the work already explicitly suggests. As people have more time to think or reflect on their lives and do other things that “have to do with muse and leisure” (Kühr, Chepovetsky and Wagner 2020), a meditative atmosphere or state would be beneficial. Therefore, the music itself should be quiet and calm, which is in this case achieved by a constant quiet playing (*sempre pianissimo*) and a very slow pulse (quarter note = circa 37) throughout the whole composition. To instigate this meditation, to collect oneself in silence as much as possible before playing the first note, a fermata is used. Herein lies an ambiguity itself, as the word *corona* was an old terminology referring to this specific music symbol and its now present relevance regarding the Coronavirus (Kühr, Chepovetsky and Wagner 2020).

The slow pulse is not only related to Gerd Kühr’s basic idea of the work regarding social interaction and personal reflection, but also to the technical aspects of the composition. The composer knew of the boundaries of the currently available online communication platforms, such as Zoom or Skype, especially when playing live together with others in different places, for which these programmes were not primarily designed.⁷ By playing in a slow pace, it can be extremely difficult to play very closely together, but can also ensure that every note has enough room to expand “similar to the expansion of the cosmos” (Kühr, 2020a and Kühr 2020b, 9) by gradually accumulating more and more notes to create a tone soundscape. This expansion of time and space is also achieved as a result of the nature of online content that can be viewed after its initial run on demand. Thus, it is possible to not only re-watch it again and again, but the composition also gives the opportunity to play along even after its premiere, creating a work of art that is unlimited in its framework regarding time and space.

The delay between the different musicians by playing over the internet cannot be fully erased, therefore making a perfect live performance is impossible. Kühr was already aware of this during the compositional process. With this in mind, combining the slow pulse and the imperfect soundscape – not only caused by technical parameters, such as latency that leads to metric fluctuation or various good and poor audio inputs by the musicians, but also by different tunings of each piano – a “shift in the time axis” and the “spatial axis” is created (Kühr, Chepovetsky and Wagner 2020). Today’s streaming culture of music and differentiating it from the classical live-concerts, where other expectations have to be met to please the audience, concerning

⁶ Here can be seen the direct connection of music and society that was always important for Kühr’s compositional work: “If art does not see itself politically as a direct expression of society in the broadest sense – and the artist has to make this claim first and foremost – it becomes decorative, replaceable, ultimately meaningless: it loses its meaning” (Kühr 1995, 312).

⁷ As live streaming systems used today evolved from video conferencing technologies it is not that odd that such programmes are utilized for other activities than just vocally communicating with other people at other locations (cf. Robinson 2014, 33).

sound or general atmosphere, is thus being emphasized once again.

Escaping the physical sphere. The possibilities of digital content delivery and its drawbacks

While having mostly negative consequences for individual lives and ubiquitous areas, a global crisis can also have a positive impact on other fields, where, in this case, stronger development has occurred in online technologies and their broader utilisation. While they are often the only alternative to conventional concerts, the use of platforms and programmes for different communicative purposes has risen. This is particularly noticeable in the area of classical music. Even before the pandemic, various recordings of live concerts and tracks from different CDs could be easily accessed through platforms, such as YouTube. In recent months even more musical content has been produced with specific attempts to expand the range of it livestreaming performances. Here, two types have to be distinguished: the first being concert livestreams, where musicians perform together in one room, where such events took place before too, exemplified by the so-called “ghost-concerts”. The second being like Gerd Kühn’s “Corona-Meditation”, where many input signals from different sources, located at different geographical positions, are coming together and form one performance at the end-user’s side. Both types need a sound engineer to control the audio signal, but it is much harder when there are several sound inputs with a wide range of quality, which is typical for the second type. This stems from the bandwidth of the individuals playing and from their respective audio-visual setup. Even if someone has a great microphone and webcam, the connection on his/her side can be poor, creating issues with the repercussion on the image and sound for the audience.⁸

Furthermore, a sometimes small or large delay can be present, caused by the speed of light, as data is sent from the input of the user to a content delivery network (CDN) or the server used for the programme or webpage, from where it is distributed to the end-user (see Robinson 2014, 36).⁹ This has to be taken into consideration, which was already shown by the previously mentioned compositional work. Even though the recipients, at the end of the connection, perceive it as a live event, it technically does not directly take place in real-time: Transmitting the data packages takes time, but most of the time we cannot distinguish it, as we do not know or see

⁸ The model “garbage in garbage out” (“GiGo”) can describe such discrepancy of “poor source signal from the encoder to the point of origination on the distribution network”, hence the bad quality for the audience. (Robinson 2014, 40).

⁹ More precisely the delay is caused by the combination of propagation delay and latency, the latter known better under the terminology in the online gaming world as “lag”, when greater discrepancy between input and output commands can be perceived by the player. “Propagation delay is a simple physical effect, specific to the length of network link that the transmission occurs over, and caused by the time the electrons or photons carrying the signal take to traverse that length, whereas latency also includes delays caused by intermediate processes within the network.” (Robinson 2014, 36).

the real input at the other side. Only when multiple signals are being bundled, like in the case of “Corona-Meditation”, can it be quite noticeable.¹⁰ Because of this, playing perfectly together in this scenario is impossible.

Whilst traversing the field of classical music and its connection to online content, the aspect of the respective demographics of such audiences comes to mind. One of the biggest assumptions is that the audience that visits conventional classical music events, such as concerts or operas, is relatively old and tends to get even older. Most studies concerning the audiences of different events in that musical sphere show that the average age lies higher than the average of the respective countries or cities. That has to do with more factors than just the increasing interest in classical music at a higher age, e.g., general demographic changes.¹¹ In this light, the question occurs whether, the demographics of these concerts differentiate themselves from online/live concerts of the same musical repertoire. Though no study has been conducted for this matter, the general belief is that younger people will perceive these types more than the elderly. For example, grandparents in their sixties or seventies (speaking from my point of view as someone in her twenties) are using less technological mediums, such as the internet or computers. Nevertheless, smartphones can give simple access to online content that do not need any other devices. Taking into consideration that middle-aged people were experiencing the evolution of the internet in its commercialisation, this discrepancy is likely to dissolve.

Without speculating, one can perceive that a global crisis, such as the current situation, can alter these hypotheses. With no alternatives in real-life, the only possibility for people in general – besides making phone calls, though the visual component cannot be replaced – is to communicate via video chat or attending the same events through the internet, recreating somewhat of the social aspect. Because of this, the elder’s usage of digital content might increase, though it is more likely that this is just a temporary change and may dissipate when real-life social gatherings are allowed again, and concerts are being held in their former conventional manners.¹²

As discussed, the internet offers alternatives to the traditional cultural landscape, which takes place more in the physical room rather than the digital, thus pushing this conservative sphere more out of its comfort zone and experimenting with new concert ideas. Like the potentially higher internet use of older people within this special situation, these concepts only provide temporary replacement from real-life

10 This case is further special, as the initial video conference tool, Zoom, is the first instance used to give the ability for all different user signals to be combined in one programme, which is then sent to YouTube, where the livestream is being broadcasted. Thus, causing perhaps even more of a delay.

11 See for example the nation-wide study of orchestral audiences in the season 2013/2014 conducted by the Association Française des Orchestres (AFO). Or Reuband’s survey of the audience in Düsseldorf’s cultural institutions between 2002 and 2004, in which also classical concerts were included. There, the average age for classical concerts was 60, therefore the oldest one of all studied events, e.g., of opera, theatre, museum, or cinema. (Reuband 2019, 164).

12 This can be the case when the attendance of opera productions or classical concerts is purely or mostly because it is part of a cultural lifestyle, linked to the respective circle (in regard to this social aspect see Reuband 2019, 178).

concerts, in a time where performing together or having a full audience is not possible.¹³ The two greatest differences lie in the already mentioned sound quality and the social aspect. Surround sound, similar to a concert room, can be achieved at home, though it needs the right audio setup. Furthermore, the sound received by the end-user depends on the quality of the input and transmission signal, significantly reducing the audio quality for the audience, sitting in front of the screen. The social component cannot be fully emulated either, as music itself is just one element of the whole concert experience. Other things include the general atmosphere caused by the concert house itself (or any other physical room) combined with the gathered audience, or the direct or indirect interactions with other attendees.

Assigning different values to real-life and livestream concerts can be also examined in popular music events. Online accessibility to songs of all genres is even better in that musical sphere, as artists are primarily distributing their work by uploading music videos on YouTube, making it available on respective music platforms, such as Spotify, or even by sharing audio and/or visual snippets on different social media sites. Nevertheless, people still attend live concerts of various bands or artists, regardless of whether they come to a particular town or city, just to get the opportunity to see them live, be it to perceive their music differently or to be part of a collective that listens to the same music as oneself. Seeing that live concerts still exist and have their significance in the popular music industry, despite the huge amount of content (live and pre-recorded) that can be easily accessed at home, this ambivalence (real-life and digital) of classical music life will be unlikely be dispersed given its historical traditions.

New developments regarding online joint music making

Searching for other ways of playing together, be it because of geographical long distances or regulations that prohibit human interactions, musicians switched to virtual rooms. Existing conference programmes can host a large group of people; however, they are not well suited for playing or rehearsing music as they are only primarily voice optimized. Thus, new programmes were created, or already available ones became popular that appealed to joint music making over the internet. In the following section I want to list a few.

The open-source software “Jamulus”, developed by Volker Fischer in 2006, was already used by music groups, which had to virtually bypass a spatial distance (cf. Kurtz 2018). Not known to many people, it became more popular during the pandemic, reaching 2.000 downloads in April 2020 (Kurtz 2020). The audio data is sent

¹³ These views are not uncommon if reading newspaper articles during the pandemic. For example, the German composer Moritz Eggert (2020) describes it in a similar way: “Above all, there is one thing we must not: get used to it [virtual music events] as a full replacement for the previous musical life because it is irreplaceable – the experience of a live concert, opera and orchestral performance, choir singing, club concert ... wherever people come together to make music, not only musical life arises, but life itself.”

to a single server, where it is mixed and sent back to the users. This requires a minimum connection speed of 200 kpbs and a maximum ping time of 40 ms.¹⁴

Emerging from the hackathon of the German Federal Government “Wir gemeinsam gegen das Virus” (transl. “Together against the virus”) during the pandemic, experts and various artistic institutions cooperated together to create “Digital Stage”.¹⁵ As the name suggests, it was developed to enable online rehearsals and performances of music, dance, theatre and performative arts. Three currently prototypes are available: web-based, locally installed or utilising a stand-alone device. It promises to have adaptive audio compression without automatic voice optimization, a capacity of users between 10 and 20 at once, and a broadcast-capable streaming interface, thus combining a conference tool with a livestreaming platform, as this had to be used for Kühr’s “Corona-Meditation”.

As well as the shutdown to the cultural landscape, universities were forced to close as well, therefore switching to online lessons. Especially in art universities solutions to work and play together were sought after. The Institute for Electronic Music of the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz developed a virtual rehearsal room specifically for group practices of the study programme “Performance Practice in Contemporary Music” (PPCM). It virtually simulates an acoustic room and the teacher can control the audio of each musician, therefore creating dynamic sound. Not only does it offer an opportunity to rehearse in a group, but it can also be perceived as a project in its own right to “teach musicians [or students] how to work virtually”, as it is “an increasingly important competence, and at the same time a requirement that many outside of the corona-situation rarely want to face.” (Kunstuniversität Graz. Ein virtueller Proberaum für neue Musik 2020).

Final Notes

The current pandemic still wields influence over our everyday lives and the cultural landscape. Admittedly, regulations and curfews have been loosened over the last few months, although the currently rising numbers of people infected by the corona virus hints to stricter rules again and/or another shutdown phase. As the end of this global crisis cannot be accurately estimated, further adaptation is necessary. Therefore, the effect of this pandemic on cultural life should not be diminished, be it its bad side by paralyzing whole seasons in opera or concert houses, or its good by developing new concert ideas or using online platforms more often, thus creating a better digital global music network.

Corona-Meditation by Gerd Kühr is both reflecting on old music traditions within the present timeframe and using new media (in a sense that beforehand it wasn’t primarily targeted by musicians) to further reflect on today’s streaming culture and

¹⁴ See for these requirements the project homepage: <http://llcon.sourceforge.net/>.

¹⁵ More information about the project can be found on their homepage: <https://digital-stage.org/?lang=en>.

online content-making with its participatory and connecting elements. The utilisation of programmes not suited for this application clearly demonstrates the imperfections and problems of this kind of music transmission, but also illustrates the different reception approach between real-life and live online concerts distinctively.

Only time will tell what this global crisis means for the future of the cultural landscape in general, and perhaps how much it will alter. At the very least, it has showed us that shutting down the cultural sector did not keep institutions and individuals from finding solutions to the cultural emptiness that had struck us. These ideas can still be employed after the pandemic, perhaps leading to further technological progress especially in the field of performing classical or contemporary music.

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PERFORMING AND PREMIERING IN SPITE OF A GLOBAL CRISIS: GERD KÜHR’S CORONA MEDITATION AND ITS USAGE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS (Summary)

Associating a global crisis with just the negative effects that occur at that time and can have severe repercussions, one has to also look at the positive developments, in this case focusing on the online output of classical music that has risen, whilst, for example concert life as it has been known, was shut down. During this time, solutions had to be found, in order to reach audience at home, either by recording music even if musicians were dispersed from each other, or by livestreaming music in different formats. At the latter problems and technological parameters have to be taken into consideration, especially if musicians aren't playing together in one room, as it can be seen in the work of Austrian composer Gerd Kühr. *Corona-Meditation* for any numbers of pianos faces the limits of using online platforms, like conference tools, and directly embraces the imperfection of joint music making through the internet. Aesthetically using delay (that throughout streaming occurs, but is not always perceivable) and mixed quality audio signals (caused by the several audio inputs from the musicians that can vary due to the respective audio setup and the bandwidth), Kühr reflects

on the special situation today and its impact on conventional concert life and the emerging importance of live online content as an temporary alternative to real-life joint music making. It shows, how these platforms can be used, though a full replacement of concerts cannot be achieved by these options. But as can be seen by different projects that emerged during this global crisis (“Digital Stage”) or were even developed beforehand but gained popularity through these times (“Jamulus”), the interest of improving the possibilities of joint music making beyond the conventional way is getting stronger and can perhaps lead even after the end of the current situation to new ways of playing music together and give new classical concert ideas the technological foundation to prosper.

Article received: September 15, 2020
Article accepted: November 15, 2020
Original scientific paper