

Five Sonic Artists Practices and Experiences in lock-down

Jenn Kirby

Abstract

During the lock-downs necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, artists have been forced to reassess their practice. This paper presents interviews from five sonic artists in an attempt to document any changes made by artists in their practices, the practical and aesthetic reasons for these changes, and the lasting effects the artists believe these changes will have to their artistic practices. The artists noted that the impact to their activities has been significant and wide ranging during the lock-downs between March and December 2020. They mentioned their need to diversify their sets due to the potential of playing to the same online audience in the absence of live events. Many artists used the lock-downs to up-skill, and some have reassessed the meaning of their own practice to themselves or changed the direction of their practice as a result of the lock-downs. The discussions suggest long-term impacts resulting from a change in focus and aesthetic for some artists.

Keywords: lock-down, COVID-19, sonic art, sound art, artistic practice, online performance.

Biography

Jenn Kirby is a composer, performer, lecturer and music technologist. Jenn's output includes contemporary instrumental composition, electro-acoustic music, sound art, noise music, experimental-pop, laptop orchestra performance and solo live electronics. Jenn has been commissioned by Kirkos Ensemble, Glasshouse Ensemble, Ensemble Entropy, among others. Most recently, she was commissioned by Irish National Opera for their 20 Shots of Opera. Jenn is very engaged in the performance of electronic music as a performer, developer and researcher. Her current research is focused on developing methodologies for achieving performer agency in live electronic music and utilising audio-visual symbiosis to enhance audience engagement. [website](#)

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Introduction

This paper presents the experiences of five sonic artists during lock-down. The purpose is to highlight the impact of the lock-down to the artists' practices and how these artists frame their practices. The five sonic artists are based in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. The artists Stuart Brown, Vicky Clarke, Ceylan Hay, Aonghus McEvoy, and Ed Wright were asked to provide responses to some open-ended questions relating to their practices between March and December 2020. These responses were gathered in January 2021. The discussion that follows addresses how their practices have changed and developed during the lock-down in 2020, what changes have occurred to how they think about their practices, and the potential for long-term change to their practices and sonic outputs as a result of the COVID-19 lock-downs during this time.

Sonic Practices in lock-down

The artists interviewed are engaged in many practices as well as activities that might sit on the fringe of their practices. Many engage as educators, facilitators, and workshop leaders. The time-allocation or weighting that could be applied to different aspects of the artists' practice is something that significantly changed during lock-down, with many of the artists noting how the lock-down prompted them to re-allocate their time.

Stuart noted how, after a busy period, he initially took the opportunity of a break before engaging in exploratory practice:

When the initial lock-down began in March I had just completed Sound and Music's "New Voices" 18 month composers' development programme, premiering my final piece of work, MNDMTH: Convergence at The Edinburgh Festival of Sound in February, in collaboration with digital artist Steve Curtis. The previous two years had been really busy for me work-wise so when lock-down hit I actually took it as an opportunity to take some time out, slow down and rejuvenate... I mostly found myself digging deeper in to the software and technical setup I was using; exploring, learning and experimenting while enjoying the lack of pressure to deliver a live performance or finished piece of work at the end of it.

For Vicky, lock-down was initially an opportunity for experimentation:

When the reality of the first lock-down hit and I knew I was going to be indoors a lot, my first thought was "oh great" I have more time for quiet experimentation and how can I best use this time to learn new things and maximise on the change in dynamic/tempo to my usual time structure.

Similarly, Ceylan describes an intimate exploratory practice:

It has been an excellent opportunity to explore my collection of musical instruments, which previously I spent more time adding to, than actually playing, as I was always away touring. As I don't drive, certain instruments would never go on tour with me as they are bulky and/or fragile, so it was wonderful to explore dulcitone, xylophone, alto glockenspiel and I also found myself diving into synths more.

For Aonghus, his initial response was to focus on two areas of his practice:

During the early days of the lock-down I practiced all the time and made mixes of slowed down disco music for my own enjoyment.

Each of these responses suggest positive aspects to the lack of pressure or expectation from their practices, at least in the initial phase of lock-down. The artists discuss a more exploratory approach for their benefit and interest. This initial freedom that some have experienced does seem to fade with time, as discussed later, and what follows is a period of re-skilling, a re-evaluation of one's artistic focus, and for some, changes in practice, career and outlook.

While there are indications of stages of lock-down for the artists, this cannot be viewed solely within their own practice. The stages encompass wider aspects including opportunities available, what stage some different projects are at, the diversity of their own practice, how lock-down-friendly their practice might be, and as time goes on the financial implications from the halt of one's work. These experiences are not universal, however there are some common themes to the experiences between the artists.

Adjustments to Practice

Live and in-person performances were very minimal during this lock-down period. Online events were more common place. Beyond performances, practices that artists engaged in over lock-down depended not only on what they did before lock-down but on their living situation, the technical equipment available to them and, whether the time and space that comes with the lock-down was actually what they needed in order to engage in different activities. Many of the responses suggest a strong engagement with technology. This is often linked to a greater consideration of visuals and audience, due to the performance being online. This will be discussed in a later section.

Many have been working on or towards studio albums. Some have the ability to do so in their own spaces and therefore their practices can continue in that regard. Others do not have an appropriate space or equipment to carry out recordings at home over lock-down and so that aspect of their practice is paused. Although studio-based work might appear to be lock-down friendly, this is only the case if you have a recording-friendly space where you live. For some artists, the issue is less about technology and more about noise in shared spaces or noise as a result of living in urban spaces.

Ceylan, who was actively engaged with live streaming, noted the difficult technical and space requirements for recording:

I am meant to be releasing new material in spring 2021, but I don't feel confident that my home recording set up is anywhere near the standard that I attain when I record with [my producer], so I'm waiting to see what happens with lock-down regulations.

Aonghus also discussed the issue of recording equipment and space:

A lot of my practice is centred around solo guitar playing so in essence it should be very lock-down friendly. In reality I live in noisy, crowded

accommodation with little personal space so recording is not possible and working effectively has been difficult.

A lot of my time has been spent seeking funding as I lack the financial means to record in the way I want to or the space to work properly.

Ed noted that given the digital nature of his practice, the switch to online was an easy transition:

I'm in the fortunate position that a lot of my work is digital anyway so I can still perform relatively easily. One example would be a monthly event I run which had been live streaming to web from the stage since about 2017. When the lock-down happened, we didn't even miss a gig and simply swapped to streaming only with performers coming onto the stream.

Vicky noted how her home environment might be most conducive to her work:

[Lock-down] made me think about boundaries and modes of operation, so what can I do best at home with my set up/ what only really works at the studio. I also questioned at one point if I needed an arts studio, I'd become used to not being there and without any live projects involving people, interaction and the need of a large space. It made me aware of the types of work I can do best at home – quiet study, online coding courses.

For artists whose practice is highly collaborative, having to shift to work in a different way (primarily online) is not always possible or appropriate. Some artists have had to consider if it is better to engage with online performances, even if online is not their preferred medium. The medium is important because there is a risk that music, sound and/or meaning could be lost through an online medium, which would be detrimental to an artist's practice. Not only have these artists' practices changed, but how they think about their practices might also be changing.

Experimentation, Exploration and Learning

Many of the artists have reported developing additional skills and spending more time on technical practice on their instruments. Vicky has named this "isolation skills." For Vicky, this was learning Max/MSP, Javascript, and Blender (3D modeling). As well as improving her technical skills, Vicky also undertook an academic course online in AI and Neural Networks. Vicky, like Stuart, refers to this practice as experimenting and exploring. Stuart experimented and explored with new software for drum triggers and sound manipulation. Ceylan experimented with lighting, projections, disco bulbs, and sourcing abstract animations. Ed up-skilled on video-editing and optimising broadband connections. Ceylan's learning goal was to "maintain a professional standard and create an imaginary environment that would transport an audience member to another place." She also mentions putting time into instrumental practice. Aonghus also had a strong focus on instrumental practice.

In many cases, these learnings have a direct impact on the artists' work. Some projects took place during lock-down, discussed in the next section, and some projects are

projected beyond this lock-down period. Vicky describes a new work that formed as result of her “isolation skills”:

All [the] learnings and the feelings I had during lock-down led me to develop the idea for SleepStates: a work in progress audio-visual artwork (exploring machine addiction, sleep territories and sonic algorithmic control). Taking my isolation skills and thinking about the machine learning ethics I started to create little vignettes of audio and browser based visuals or sleep states to try to get to grips with these feelings.

Online Performance and Audiences

Most artists have engaged with online performances. With an online performance, the audience can be anywhere and everywhere. This clearly has an appeal and for many artists their projects have further reach as a result of this increased engagement. Vicky’s experience of this has been very positive. She reflects on a piece she did for *Fact Magazine*:

I enjoyed the experience of making this piece in my bedroom that reached so many online. I got such good feedback that it really gave me confidence to develop my music.

One of the downsides of the potential to reach more people more easily is that it might lead to artists needing to create significantly more content, especially where online live performances are available for later viewing. This changes what is often an ephemeral performance. For a touring artist, they might perform the same set night after night. There may be differences from night to night due to how they respond to the space and to the audience, but it does not require much additional preparation. If a stream is available for later viewing, then it might give the artist pause when planning to perform the same set again. Artists with online performance are less able, or unable, to feed off the space or the audience, and feel they have to change the set for fear that the same audience members will see/hear the same set. This is something that Ceylan noted in her online performances, or “digi-gigs” as she referred to them. She said that:

working online feels like it’s one audience, even when I perform for different promoters or arts projects. I therefore set myself the challenge to compose new material for the majority of the recordings, or completely reconstruct the flow.

Ed, who has also dedicated a lot of his time to developing visuals for live performances, wants to engage with the audience despite not physically being in a room with them:

I have had to consider the performative and visual aspect of my work far more as we tend to engage very differently with work on a screen. In an event, it is far easier to create an atmosphere and have a feel for audience reaction. In addition to this attention spans or levels of investment seem to be far shorter. At the most extreme level it is far easier to click away from a YouTube stream than it is to up and walk out of an event.

Both Ed and Ceylan note that they believe audiences to have a shorter attention span for online performances, as demonstrated by Ed’s comment about it being easier for an

audience member to leave a YouTube stream rather than walk out of a concert. Ceylan aims to create an “imaginary environment” because she “didn’t think that someone stuck at home on their sofa would enjoy watching someone else stuck at home on their sofa!” which suggests that the performance has an element of escapism for the audience. If art is to provide a respite in difficult times, then perhaps it must transport us elsewhere, and someone else’s home may not be an attractive destination.

The need to provide some respite and engage audiences with a potentially shorter attention span seems to add additional pressure to performers for online performances. There is an additional pressure of exposing your home space, which might be very private for some artists, or having to make it appear as though you are not performing from your bedroom. At-home online performances require artists to expose this aspect of their lives which they might prefer not the broadcast. Others have noted that they enjoyed creating material from the comfort of their own homes and even bedrooms.

While most have acknowledged the benefits of online performances and were keen to embrace it, there was no suggestion that this would be the preferred choice over in-person performances. However, Vicky did note that she learned that her preference is to deliver talks online rather than in person.

Collaboration

Most artists’ practices over lock-down have centred around solo work. These are clearly the most lock-down-friendly elements to their practices. Some have managed to engage with collaboration.

Ed mentioned that the ability to perform online opened up a host of new opportunities for collaboration:

The ability to play and perform online live with colleges in different towns (or even different countries) has opened up a host of new possibilities and opportunities for collaboration which were previously not feasible from a geographic or financial perspective.

While a lot of collaborations were not real-time, Stuart’s collaborative practice was real-time. He is involved with the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra’s large group improvisations over Zoom. He mentions how they “chose to embrace the idiosyncrasies of the medium and use it as inspiration to create new types of improvisation.” Being part of this international group of improvisers helped him to “maintain the sense of being part of a larger creative community during lock-down”.

Stuart also mentions offline collaborations facilitated by the lock-down situation:

The other project that I developed directly as a result of the lock-down was a new remote double drummer/electronics collaboration with American drummer Scott Amendola called Hummingdroids. We had been following each other’s work from a distance for a while but the lock-down allowed us to connect properly as we both had more free time (and the 8 hour time difference [became] less of an issue). We had a number of long Zoom calls, just getting to know each other better and talking about music, which then

led to us to begin collaborating remotely, sending tracks back and forth which we each added to. I then created visuals for each track and the results were shown as part of GIO Fest XIII online in November 2020.

For Vicky, some collaborative work was not possible:

A large part of my practice is participatory, I work with young people and am a music freelancer for Brighter Sound, I did really miss this aspect of my work, sharing skills and the hands on human interaction.

Ceylan engaged in a range of collaborative projects including a radio play, an interactive exhibition, and an in-person project with dancer Suzi Cunningham. A lot of Ceylan's practice is collaborative and she often felt "cut off from others" and missed "seeing people to exchange ideas." She noted how some collaborative projects had been adjusted to work online:

I've been doing some digital facilitating for inclusive contemporary classical project Sonic Bothy and gamelan-based community music organisation Good Vibrations.

Along with Mexican multimedia artist Laura Luna Castillo, I also co-curated an online exhibition and accompanying compilation album of artwork, writing and music inspired by extinct or endangered species, and we raised around £1200 for conservation charities Scottish Seabird Centre and Umbral Axochiatl (in Mexico).

Changes in Thinking about Practice

Many artists reported a change to how they think about their practice. Some were grateful for the time and space (when they had it) to rethink and re-imagine their practices. Some were making changes due to the economic vulnerability.

Some of the artists highlight how they made changes for their own well-being or interest. Aonghus made mixes of slowed down disco music for his own enjoyment. Ed felt that he was contributing to others well-being by "doing something which could bring a little bit of beauty or wonder or simply fun to people felt like something important."

While a lot of the responses show similarities of experiences, changes to how we think about our practices is the response that differs the most. Ed noted a renewed appreciation and value to his practice. Aonghus said that:

Being withdrawn from a kind of specific/niche grouping of people made me consider exploring aspects of my music that might resonate with audiences outside the academic/record collector/musician circles I had been accustomed to.

Stuart acknowledged a need to have a slower paced professional life. The changes to his practice are not only skills development, which is quite common across the respondents, but a more focused approach to his setup and performance.

Vicky used the time to fully engage with academic study and research. She also notes that the depth of her engagement in this was in part due to her grieving the loss of a family

member. Vicky does not appear to reframe her practices, but rather has developed a deeper engagement, stating:

It wasn't a case of forging a new practice area as such, it was more how can I explore what I'm interested in within the framework of these new lock-down confines i.e. what are the tools to hand, what is interesting about this?

This does not suggest that the artists are necessarily inclined to move away from their existing practices. The period of experimentation and exploration seems to largely be welcomed, as it has in some cases provided space and time for artists, but this focus has often been to the detriment of other aspects of their practice: the canceled and postponed projects. Ceylan noted that "she tried to make the best of it all," but the isolation is not conducive to the principles of her practice:

The past decisions I made creatively were informed by a desire to be present in the world, connecting with others and not being stuck behind a computer screen. 2020 has certainly not worked out well on any of those 3 principles.

Long-term Changes and Outlook

The changes to approaches big and small could have a variety of long-term impacts. Aonghus says these changes will "dramatically change what I do in aesthetic terms." Given the necessary adjustments to practice and the reflective period, we are likely to hear something different from the artists compared to their pre-lock-down work. It is too early to say whether or not this will continue long-term, but it suggests a different sonic and aesthetic approach.

The time in lock-down for Vicky has been formative:

The work I made during lock-down has helped me forge this direction in machine learning & music for the next year. I reached out to local academic partners in Manchester to tell them about my work and was offered a residency with NOVARS centre for Innovation in Sound (University of Manchester) exploring machine learning & *musique concrète*, also collaborating with PRiSM at RNCM using their SampleRNN algorithm.

While music therapy is not an entirely new path for Ceylan, it does seem to be more solidified in her outlook:

I am hoping to retrain as a music therapist to future proof my income, and expand the areas of my practice a bit more. I think I just have to keep adapting and try to relax about not being as productive as I was before.

She also notes that she sees "more clearly than ever how community is at the root of my practice."

Ed's considerable focus on the meaning of his practice over lock-down is set to continue and to shape his practice going forward:

I would like to incorporate the enhanced understanding of the social and humanitarian role of the work that we do. It is not always about trying to look

clever or cool or be the best at something but it is about bringing something to the minds and souls of those who have taken the trouble to listen.

There are a lot of positives from the move to online, though these positives clearly do not replace a lot of work done by these artists, in particular in the area of collaborative practice. Given the option of online or in-person performance, it seems that artists would opt for in-person. However, they have not been given that option during this time. Given the option for online or in-person talks in the future, some might choose online. What is lost in live music and sound performances appears to be less of an issue for talks and presentations. However, it is often the networking before and after these sessions which can be really important for artists connecting and sharing on a more one-to-one basis. It is not clear yet if this can be facilitated online in a way that meets that need for artists.

Some artists have valued having more time and may opt to give less time for traveling in favour of focusing on their practice, particularly if an online option is available. Some may have missed in-person events and collaboration so much that they will soak up as much as they can get when the COVID-19 pandemic is over. When we come out of the lock-downs, postponed activities and new opportunities will emerge as a burst of new activity. However, it will likely take some time for the artists to settle into new means of artistic practice.

Interviewed Artists

Stuart Brown

I am a drummer, composer, improviser, experimental electronic musician and multimedia artist. Currently my main focus is on creating solo and collaborative work utilising drums and percussion as a means to trigger, control and manipulate digital sound and/or audio-visual elements in real time, challenging the traditional role of the drummer and re-imagining the drum kit as a multimedia performance tool. [website](#)

Vicky Clarke

I'm a sound and electronic media artist from Manchester, UK. Working with sound sculpture, DIY electronics and human-machine systems, I explore our relationship to technology through sonic materiality, live audio-visual and browser-based artwork. My practice/work is usually split between self-directed work and studio practice, I have a home studio for music production with electronic hardware and home is also where I do reading and research. My art studio at Rogue studios is where I do more hands-on work creating sonic objects, working with electronics and rehearsing. I also work part time at FutureEverything as the Creative Associate and was on furlough for 3 months. [website](#)

Ceylan Hay

I am quite slapdash, and do a bit of everything. Prior to the pandemic, I toured a lot, mostly with my solo project Bell Lungs. I occasionally guest with other groups or collaborate with other artists, scientists, dancers, writers, film-makers, etc. In the past few years, I've been composing more for theatre & dance, and creating live scores for silent films. The bulk of my income outside of touring comes from community music projects, and I truly love facilitating music sessions, which are usually rooted in freedom of expression and exploring new sounds, often trying to work as non-verbally as possible. I find it really hard to think of these multiple identities as separate, as they really inform each other for me. They're all about close listening and observation of other collaborators / participants / the audience to inform the way in which I approach my playing in the space we share together. I'm very inspired by free improvisation which absorbs and reflects the present moment, and the conceptual basis of progressive music, although the music I make probably reflects more of my interest in ambient, minimalism and folk music, often consisting of looping textures which evolve and evolve. [website](#)

Aonghus McEvoy

My practice consists of improvisational and compositional work, it swings between both approaches and more often than not uses combinations of each. I've worked with electronics and installations but have focused on playing guitar for the past few years. I play guitar in ad-hoc improvising groups, long-term improvising groups, experimental folk bands & solo. I'm interested in both exploratory and traditional approaches to the instrument. I've been composing a lot of solo works for guitar and playing pieces by other composers in the past year. While there are certain things that are common to all areas of my practice and I think reflecting on the reasons as to why I'm doing something is important I like to have an irreverent attitude to stylistic/idiomatic approaches. [website](#)

Ed Wright

My work is mostly focused on a blend of electronic and live sound. I originally come from an instrumental background chiefly that of playing the violin however through composing I became interested in acousmatic work and my current practice is a blend of those two approaches. Deep down it probably draws on western classical avant-garde routes but hopefully is a bit less “precious” than that description would suggest often relying on homemade electronics and programming while often sitting in more of a gig as opposed to concert format. Over the last few years I have released a number of works both as myself and as part of an improv trio, while fulfilling a number of more mainstream commissions. I also run and curate a monthly event focusing on experimental electronic music, and teach violin along with music tech. [website](#)