

Music, solidarities and balconies in Spain

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Balconies are not just beautiful architectural features; they also work as a social space for communication (Morant and Martín, 2013). Balconies are political and cultural artefacts and they often become ‘sites of contention’ between residents and authorities (Aronis, 2009). So it comes as no surprise that balconies (and windows) have acquired an extraordinary relevance during confinement in Spain, particularly between March 14th (beginning of lockdown) and April 26th (when relief measures started to be implemented). Through balconies and windows Spaniards have clung to the life they wanted to recuperate. In their *balcones*, Spaniards are organizing dance and theatre competitions, but also in prompt religious parades. Children-made banners with positive messages have been displayed while neighbours organize collective readings of poetry. The call on March 18th to bang pots and pans from balconies (*cacerolada*) against the monarchy was considered to be a great success. Pots and pans are also being banged against the Government, or even against Podemos. Of course Spaniards are not unique in their inclination to use their balconies for expressive purposes; pro-democracy activists in Serbia, for instance, are using them to organize different forms of contentious mobilization during confinement¹. And music has been played; a lot of music². Right during the first weekend of confinement, a growing number of individuals started to play their music after the minutes of collective applause to express gratitude towards health workers and doctors. This involved professional musicians³, but also many anonymous individuals who struggle to see themselves as ‘musicians’. More often than not performances have been posted in social media, by performers themselves, by relatives, friends or by neighbours.

Musicking in balconies

In this short piece we share some intuitions drawn from an ongoing research project of ‘musicking’ in balconies in Spain during the pandemic. As Eyerman and Jamison (1998) anticipated, musicking can connect people with their neighbours and communities, promoting bonds that will last because funds of

¹ https://wagingnonviolence.org/2020/05/serbian-activists-nationwide-anti-authoritarian-protest-covid-19-lockdown/?fbclid=IwARoPXqzMMFeoU9Oc5tdm3pYhvTS94sb2v_7orzUo5Vfj5Q7kbfqH6v815Ew

² <https://www.elmundo.es/comunidad-valenciana/2020/03/19/5e735f2bfc6c83c3188b4657.html>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/life-in-lockdown-spain-curtailed-by-coronavirus-but-still-rocking>

³ <https://www.operaactual.com/noticia/opera-solidaria-desde-los-balcones/>

shared memories have been created. This departing point explains our conceptual background. The socio-cultural approach to music (see, above all, Small, 1999) defines music as a form of social interaction shaped by the particular physical setting where that interactions takes place. Music, as a substantive, turns into ‘musicking’, a verb. Such an approach shifts the emphasis from the listenable to the contextually-contingent dynamics of collaboration and interaction that are fabricated around music. Singalongs, balcony to balcony classical music duos or serenading with traditional instruments express a social message that transcends the quality of the music performed. The focus should be on those social factors, and also on the powerful narrative that balconies help create, when the privacy of home can become the center of public social action. In this view, it does not matter how proficient a performer you are: as a respondent (cheerfully) confessed: “you do this in any other day and everybody would have yelled at you!” We have built a database of 150 individuals who had played or sang in their balconies at least twice. We went the extra mile to identify informers in places with strong regional identities, such as Galicia or the Basque Country, and also with strong traditions of band music, such as Valencia. We have run 51 interviews over the phone. Questions addressed several aspects of confinement, the reasons to play music, and also specific questions regarding the selection of repertoire, staging or the way neighbours reacted to their music.

Community resilience

Political and music movements have often linked. Particular songs have firmly established as parts of the symbolic narratives of various forms of mobilization. Practicing congregational music has been found to strengthen solidarities and senses of collective identity, as in the case of the civil rights movement (Ward, 1998). Youth subcultures, very often glued around musical taste, develop mechanisms that contribute to new structures of mobilization, as in the case of Punk (Moore and Roberts, 2009). Music has been linked to framing and the emotional arsenal of mobilization, and has been found to be a connecting element for people engaged in contentious mobilization (see, for instance, Collin’s 2001 work in relation to opposition to authoritarianism in Serbia).

Despite these solid theoretical grounds, however, it is still unclear if musicking in balconies is an expression of mobilization-in-the-making. Many of our informers wanted to remain clear of ideological and party disputes. That is relevant the more the handling of the pandemic by the current left-wing Government has unleashed a ferocious reaction by conservative and extreme-rightist political parties, a reaction that also involves politics from the balconies. What is clear, however, is that musicking is linked to a search for networking and solidarity⁴. For these reasons, we find it safer to address musicking in

⁴ This was a point made in relation to the Italian experience of balcony to balcony singalongs, which in many ways was the model for interpreters in Spain.
<https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/covid-19/trisnasari->

balconies as an example of community resilience, which has been defined as “the collective ability of a neighbourhood or a geographically defined area to deal with stressors and efficiently resume the rhythms of daily life through cooperation following shocks” (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015: 2). The concept has been applied in the context of natural disasters, but also to explain endurance and resistance against forms of cultural and political exclusion.

Music, connectivity and solidarity

A relationship can be established between musicking, solidarity and interconnectedness, one that goes both ways: musicking is likely to be stronger where social capital abounds. But musicking, as a relational practice, can contribute to the development of social capital, a process that can have strong healing properties. We summarize now some data on the motivations for playing music in balconies. Musicking in balconies expresses the search of communities to find collective ways of handling disaster. Performers played motivated by the idea to build a sense of collective strength. Individuals played while neighbours listened, one day after another. They kept playing because neighbours (and later on followers in social media) asked them to do so, sometimes explicitly in the form of balcony to balcony requests of specific music, sometimes by social media or other means. Very often performers and audiences were not acquainted. But they had connected visually thanks to their balconies and the musical experience. We organize our findings following a popular typology that distinguishes between three types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking (Aldrich and Meyer, 2014). This allows us to highlight those elements of musicking that reflect a ‘solidarity agenda’. ‘Bonding’ social capital represents interaction with people with whom you are already connected. This is the least interesting aspect of musicking for our present purposes. On the other hand, ‘bridging’ social capital builds on solitary and networks with people that might be more or less similar to you, but with whom you do not have prior strong connections. In time, perhaps, these bonds might lead to permanent forms of exchange, solidarity and, if activated, contentious mobilization. In ‘linking’ social capital you reach out beyond close groups, making claims with a universalistic appeal.

Bonding: Breaking the tedium of confinement

Not all musicking in balconies relates to a larger purpose. In many cases, performers reacted to informal or formal petitions to sing or play, by close relatives, door to door neighbours or even by brass bands and orquestras. ‘Viral challenges’ have played a part. A professional association of music teachers

[fraser/music-across-the-balconies-social-cohesion-and-community-resilience-in-action-260050](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=Q734VNoN7hw&feature=emb_logo); see also https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=Q734VNoN7hw&feature=emb_logo

launched #musicaviral⁵, an online challenge which invited music teachers to simultaneously play a different score each day. Music teachers spoke about these challenges as a very ‘persuasive’ reason to keep on playing, perhaps in fear of breaking relationships of trust and respect with peers in their profession. Despite differences in professional background, respondents quoted personal reasons to play from balconies. They talked about the need to provide a break to the tedious life of confinement. Musicking helped with children: “I keep the kid busy with this, we look for a song, we arrange this, he helps out”. Performers with children at home, DJs and also music teachers (who in most cases do not seem themselves as ‘musicians’) emphasize the entertainment element of musicking. Some music students and teachers made the most of the obligation to keep on practicing. As a young musician explained to us, “it is a fine moment, neighbours can listen to some live music and I make a case for the value of music, they have a good time and I carry on practicing”. The local media in Bilbao, for instance, reported the experience of a music teacher who organized balcony to balcony study sessions of *txistu* (a traditional instrument popular in the Basque Country that resembles a flute) with students who happened to live nearby⁶. This, however, also connects with the ‘linking’ dimension of musicking, as these practices were also intended to raise the profile of traditional music and Basque culture.

Bridging: Community making

The dominant theme emerging from our data is the need to create bonds with neighbours, and also to help others. This powerful idea came in very many different formats, often intersecting with personal, individualistic arguments (bonding social capital), but also with universalistic, very general appeals (linking social capital). The following quotation exemplifies this:

I like playing, it is a natural thing, I enjoy it. Then I saw colleagues playing on Instagram, and also my parents and neighbours were asking me to play. It is a good thing, it shows that we are united, that we stand together. We get together at 20:00, I play a couple of tunes and then we chat for a while, and we feel ok; they like it, so I keep on playing

Whether to commemorate nurses or doctors dead in the fight against the virus, to live up to a challenge, to entertain kids leaving nearby or even to increase the number of followers, respondents acknowledge the powerful effect of music to create new bonds among strangers, and also to help circulate a sense of interconnectedness. Professional musicians saw this as their ‘duty’ as ‘artists’ (*titiriteros*, in Spanish); in other cases, performers simply wanted to do

⁵ <https://musicaviral.weebly.com/>

⁶ <https://www.deia.eus/bizkaia/eskuinaldea/2020/03/21/txistu-rompe-monotonia-durante-tardes/1025977.html>

something for other people. Community making is embedded in emphatic appeals to help. A running theme has been the presentation of music as a stress reliever, a way to cope with anxiety, loneliness of the pain associated to not being able to meet your loved ones. A good number of musicians started playing on March 19th (fathers' day in Spain), as a way to express love and affection. Musicking helped with the celebration of birthdays, in an interesting process where private rituals became a vehicle to connect with neighbours. Helping others has been the most common expression found in our data, a goal that, however, adopts different expressions: performers have wanted to cheer up people hospitalized in nearby mental health centers, to remind senior neighbours that there is someone 'out there', to cheer kids up, and so on. The realisation that music had a potential to do good transformed what was meant as a single-off act into a daily routine.

Community is a fuzzy word in Spanish, not always taking the meaning that is more common in countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom. Respondents referred to communities sometimes in a very general way. In other cases, however, they adopted a narrower definition that relates either to very close neighbours (possible those living in the same block) or to those with whom they had established visual and 'sonic' ties. Underlying this was a sense of similarity with those people living nearby, a commonality that needed to be reinforced in times of distress. The discussion about community-making intersected with the impact of musicking on social media. Respondents shared a call for altruism. They acknowledged the positive consequences of posting their videos, often in terms of a huge raise in the number of followers. This, however, was presented as a by-product of an action that was not meant to give a boost to their popularity. Respondents very often linked their impact on social media with an expanding sense of togetherness that might last well beyond this crisis. A performer living in a rural community explained this idea to us:

new people are now in the WhatsApp group that we have in the village, they do not live here but they want to watch the live streaming when I play; I do not want to get anything out of this, but it is true that a lot of people are interested. I think I entertain them

Are these networks going to last? That is of course a crucial question here. The majority of our respondents were optimistic about the positive social consequences of musicking. Social relations would become stronger, more 'resilient', empowering people to deal with future problems. The crisis creates a window of opportunity to put a limit to individualization, recuperating the value of close ties and collective action.

Linking: A better world after all this?

A strong final theme brings together a great number of respondents, one that frames music-making (and other social responses during confinement) as a

factor engineering changes in the fabric of society. In the case of professional musicians, but also with performers living in rural areas, they addressed a wider audience: “music is a breath of fresh air to all of us”, “if only we could cheer everyone up”, “life music helps a lot to cheer everybody up”, “so very many people are living this on their own, and perhaps my music can help”. We particularly like one quotation about this:

something within me reacted, I was like this is a battle that we must win together, that is what I felt, that we had to go deeper; since I was a little girl I have always found easier to express myself playing the bagpipe, my heart told me I had to play (...) it broke my heart that people were applauding on their own, alone, but we all had the same goal; so I started playing

This effort to link with society connects with intriguing dynamics that cannot be addressed here in full. For instance, musicking appeals to the intersection between culture, values and national identities. Musicians in places with strong national identities, which often involves playing folk song and traditional instruments, see their balconies as platforms to vindicate national identities. A young musician from Galicia, for instance, explained that his serenades with the *gaita* (bagpipe), which were posted on facebook, worked to disseminate “our culture”, and to make people outside Galicia “more familiar with it”. Professional musicians also saw their music during confinement as an opportunity to generate a societal conversation about the role of culture.

Conclusion

Pandemics are not necessarily the cause of social disintegration; as a matter of fact, in most pandemics most people manage to carry on with the lives in more or less normal ways (Jacobsen, 2018), looking for ways to cope and resist. Musicking from balconies is not perhaps the most obvious form of collective mobilization; participants do not have obvious political agendas, and were not explicit about any connections between their own actions and political goals. Musicking, however, is all about solidarity and networks. Music can provide the means for ‘exemplary’ forms of social solidarity (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998) which are so necessary in times of acute crisis. In sociological parlance, musicking contributes to the creation of social capital, a fantastic resource that helps communities to deal with the kind of crises that are likely to become common in the years to come.

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