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Singing Together, but locked down in WhatsApp. On/Off-site ethnography, social media, and music practices

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Abstract

Chantons Ensemble [Singing Together] is a non-professional vocal formation project held by *Cité de la Musique - Philharmonie de Paris* in the socio-cultural centre of Antony, a city located in the southern suburbs of Paris. The general project fuels various dynamics, such as a repertoire which pushes boundaries of the *world music* and *traditional music* category, with many different regional songs from Brazil, Eastern Europe, Greece and so on. Beyond one specificity, *Chantons Ensemble* concept grew up from a family concept - with children, parents, and grand-parents - to a group composed by 10 to 12 adults, aged between 30 to 66 years old, some having few or no connexions with each other. Chorists come from all around Antony's socio-cultural centre where we practice, which is in a former marginalized area.

During France's first lockdown period, our WhatsApp group *Choeur Antony* [Antony's choir] accumulated text or vocal messages and pictures. This messaging application had many effects on our non-professional vocal formation, *challenging togetherness*, from a collective to an individual perspective, and *music practices and learning*.

Without avoiding any French specificities about lockdown, suburbs, and music institutions, I especially want to capture the essence of an amateur choir locked in WhatsApp, trying to *use technology and social media* to not only provide a bridge between the before/after crisis period, but to simply pursue their music and social life. This article highlights how I used to make ethnography from a three-year *participating/observing on-site fieldwork*, then switched to an *off-site research*. Finally, this detailed micro-sociological/interactional analysis tackles how institutions and *Community Music* may have faced the lockdown situation.

Chantons Ensemble [transl: Singing Together] is an amateur vocal formation project where you can learn a repertoire based on music from all over the world. It has been created by *Cité de la Musique - Philharmonie de Paris* [abbr: Philharmonie]. Known as a concert hall, largely recognised in France,

and Europe as a music institution (Laborde, 2009), it is less known for created programs on Philharmonie's site and 'hors-les-murs' in France, mainly in Paris and its metropolitan area. Started in 2016, *Chantons Ensemble* is one side of 'Traditions Musicales du Monde' [transl: Traditional Music from all over the World] program which began in 2015, and focuses on "building a strong educational tool, promoting diversity in echoes to origins¹(...)" amongst other topics. The other side of the program features traditional music workshops for children between 8 to 12 years old. The program takes place in the town of Antony². However, in 2020, *Chantons Ensemble* choristers went on WhatsApp – a messaging app - during France's first lockdown.

This program follows the transformation of an associative venue called *Espace Noyer Doré* into a socio-cultural centre which now boasts the title of Antony's *Centre Social et Culturel* [abbr: CSC] located in the *Noyer Doré* district. This neighbourhood was shaped with 'grand ensembles', i.e., tower blocks with high-density population built in the '60s. Urban sociologist Pierre Merlin argues Massy/Antony's tower blocks were criticised as "one of the giant and excessive tower blocks projects" in France (Merlin, 2010 :63). After having achieved a twenty-year urban renovation scheme (1990-2010) led by right-wing officials, some tower blocks remain, but the neighbourhood is also hosted to new medium-density apartments and small houses, giving rise to both relocation and gentrification in the area. *Noyer Doré* is still marked by inequalities, unemployment, poverty, and immigration history³.

Antony city officials are trying to connect a segregated *Noyer Doré* neighbourhood to the whole city, but numerous economic, social, and cultural borders exist, visible or invisible. They decided to give a budget for cultural activities to interact with a new socio-cultural centre and engaged it for Philharmonie's patented music program. Social Cohesion and Prevention city officials, the CSC team (Marion Ducleaux, Imane Bouslimane) and the Philharmonie team (Luciana Penna-Diaw and Diana Alzate) are the closest to the coordination of the program and its evolution. The stakes are much higher than a simple music initiative. It is creating activity for inhabitants in CSC, which try to build bridges between a strong and historical neighbourhood location and a cultural activity through Antony's general city policy.

Everyone in the choir knows I have been working for 'la Philharmonie' way before I asked them for permission to present a part of their life in this article. I have long been accepted by this group, even if lockdown made us closer. More than a contract or some personal commitment, those relationships are much influenced by my research methodology⁴. It may be called an 'onboard anthropology', where method tries to reduce social distancing, or a gap induced by social position between the scientist and the investigated people, and still interrogates anthropology (Bonhomme, 2007). I have been ethnographing for four-years with 'diverse participative actions' and 'observation positions' *Traditions Musicales du Monde* program and its participants, and it bound me to them. As part of a grounded theory methodology (Glaser et Strauss, 1967; Strauss et Corbin, 1998), it consists of detailing from the ground up what is making *Chantons Ensemble* project and enriching new theories. As a participating researcher, you clearly need to make a step ahead. For instance, while I was a chorister myself, i.e., singing, laughing, and exchanging with participants, I was observing singing situations from this immersive point of view. It enables me to analyse how both project and program are organised based on music, interacting during sessions with choristers, mediating some resources from Philharmonie to choristers or from choristers to Philharmonie and CSC.

¹ Five guidelines were given by Philharmonie – Cité de la Musique in Traditions Musicales du Monde program presentation in 2015. On the last one, ethnomusicologist Marta Amico – who starts as lead researcher for the program - argues about primitivism (Amselle, 2010) relative to introducing music traditions as original artefacts for inhabitants referred to "their" origins.

² Antony is a subprefecture of Hauts de Seine department (Ile-de-France region). 62500 inhabitants. A city entangled with many other cities in a deep urban canvas, part of southern suburbs of Paris.

³ 62% of households living in below or near the poverty threshold, a high rate of children in school failure and unemployment. Data from Urban Contract for Social Cohesion, 2010, Antony.

⁴ My research methodology is deeply influenced by Institut de Recherche sur Les Mondes de la Musique research' method whose I am part of, and well known by Philharmonie de Paris's direction. Indeed, our research association, participated on making critics about Philharmonie programs. Besides, I thank Marta Amico, Claire Clouet, Lucille Lissack and Julie Oleksiak for some inquiries they made for Traditions Musicales du Monde program too.

When I started this ethnography about *Chantons Ensemble* project, no one could know we would go digital or online, and all the changes it would bring. To understand this case study, you need to go back to when health policies started being applied in France on early-February-March 2020, which led to a “complete lockdown” in France, on March 17th, 2020 for about three months. With ‘our’ non-professional vocal formation, we should have had a session there on Saturday 14th, 2020. I say ‘our’ formation because I consider myself, as a member of *Chantons Ensemble*. At the time I am writing, we met together and in-person once on CSC site between first and second lockdown. Since October 2021 – twenty months after France's first lockdown – *Chantons Ensemble* went back on-site and is not ruled by off-site/online activities (WhatsApp and video conferences) anymore.

WhatsApp is a mobile instant messaging app (MIM), existing as freeware for smartphones, independent from the network used (Staudacher and Kaiser-Grolimund, 2016: 29-30). You can share images, texts, videos, and voice messages. From an organisational perspective, it enables the group to exchange about the following steps, sessions, events... but what about our relationship to each other and the music activity? What happens when you cannot sing together or what do you do to *participate at a distance* in a music activity? What have WhatsApp group conversations created to keep a music-based community going on?

Reviewing Music, Health and Well-being across subjects, Raymond McDonald highlights the term of ‘participation’ as a pivotal force in music activities, arts as practices led in music therapy, music education and community music empirical analysis schemes (McDonald, 2013). But what does *participate* really mean, especially when you have to apply physical distancing or go into lockdown? What does *participate* mean in such a substantial reflection period of our so-called ‘world before/after COVID-19’ too? Analysing this « participation » term, it clearly appears as a way to tackle art practice and to determine how we act *in* and/or *with* music, and how music making is society making (De Nora, 2000; De Baise et al., 2013). Indeed, focusing on how music activates participation, it also deals with how individuals and groups may be together to make music in a ‘locked down’ context. There are quite a few ways to investigate a “participating frame and statuses”, Goffman would say (Goffman, 1987: 146-153), in a specific “social meeting” that is acting as and being a non-professional choir. If music sessions in a socio-cultural centre constituted the main part of the activity, a pragmatic approach of this ‘participation’ dilemma focuses on people being active, ways of being active and how being active in a messaging platform is also part of a “participating frame” to consider “the totality of the activity in situation” (Goffman, 1987: 156; Quééré, 2015). As far as Alfred Schütz, who greatly considered « extra-musical activity » to make music together in professional orchestra (Schütz, 1964), we will see that WhatsApp is not a simple dialogue support, but also a technology which can have effects and constraints about musical actions.

This article can be understood as a music ethnology about an amateur group in 21st Century France, intertwined with urban planning, social and health crisis, togetherness and interculturality issues. I will not refer much to French studies on choir. Nevertheless, this article enlarges perspective about amateur choir, since choir analysis have often been documented only in some excerpts of socio-cultural or associative studies, and is mainly taken as one variable of the « cultural practices » scale in macro-sociological research for France's Ministry of Culture (Donnat, 1982-2015). However, one large ethnological and historical book, written by Phillipe Gumpłowicz (2001) and Guillaume Lurton's research (2018), gave an economic perspective about choir structure in France.

The beginning of *Chantons Ensemble* [Singing Together] project and its digital transformation.

Chantons Ensemble existed several years before choristers were forced to adapt music practices and continue social bonds via WhatsApp. In this part, I will extract some structural elements from on-site fieldwork/ethnography at Antony's socio-cultural centre [abbr: CSC] to highlight how this amateur vocal

formation had been developed before Frances's first lockdown and made a leap into locked down practices, including digital and home practices.

In 2015-2016, *Traditions Musicales du Monde* 'free program'⁵ in Antony includes a new project with the idea of creating a *vocal formation* in addition to traditional music workshops for children aged between 8 to 12 years old. I am referring to 'vocal formation' as Luciana Penna-Diaw understood it, since she did not want to talk about choir making instead of singing group making, as she explained choir deeply refers "to a stereotype as a formal and strict formation, mostly portrayed as a religious thing too (Bertho-Lavenir, 2009)". This new project wanted to bring families together to sing, picking a nice slogan to attract others. The first name of CSC's vocal formation started as *Chantons en Famille* [Family Singers], but in 2018 it became *Chantons Ensemble* [Singing Together]. It might be explained due to the fact that CSC management thought it better referred to what the vocal formation was becoming. They admit that the intergenerational objective shared by CSC and Philharmonie was not working.

Between 2016-2020, *Chantons Ensemble* evolved as a group, from 7 to 20 participants who came to 12 to 16 music sessions, per year. Some people were coming for one or two sessions, trying to integrate it, then disappeared. Some others came back, remaining for several months or coming regularly. Relationships between participants slowly evolved. It struggled to be a 'family-friendly' activity and became more of an adult vocal formation. Since 2018, a dozen choristers regularly attend, making it like a small community, thought as a choir by participants. The vocal group exists as an in-between unstable vocal formation, opened to new inhabitants and a cohesive and much more closed amateur choir both due to our organisation and music work I will detail further later on.

As regular participants, only Eric, a 40-year-old single man unemployed due to PTSD trouble and I, a 30-year-old part-time unemployed/part-time researcher are male choristers. Even if the project has been influenced by a family feel, no father was present at all. Some grandparents may have come. At the beginning, some children aged between six and twelve came with their mothers, but, except for some young newcomers hanging around while the choir sang, only two children would often come. Thus, women are a majority, either retired women (Josette, T  r  se, Caroline, Antoinette), or mothers coming with their children at the beginning, then without them.

Since 2016, Marianne Feder has been *Chantons Ensemble*'s vocal conductor. Marianne Feder has worked for many years for Philharmonie. Graduating in jazz music, ethnomusicology, and a state degree in popular music, she is a professional pianist, singer and songwriter. Also, she is well known for creating and conducting *Les Musi'Terriens* association since 2010. It gathers more than 200 choristers, amateur and professional artists. Multiple choirs exist with a specific repertoire: Eastern European music, International Pop music, Brazilian repertoire, and what Marianne Feder calls "Current Music from the World", which distinguishes itself from "a meaningless World Music' categorisation"⁶, she says. She uses a lot of elements from the *Musi'Terriens* repertoire to build the *Chantons Ensemble* repertoire.

Various aspects drive the vocal formation to be thought of as an amateur choir in process. If Philharmonie observes it as a music education project, the main goal for CSC's perspective is to gather different people from different paths to sing together in a non-formal activity. From a regular group to the extended group in 2020-2021 (10 to 18 members), only five to seven members already had an experience in a choir or a music activity. The first years, most participants talked of the so-called '*singing in the shower*' music experience to explain their taste and interest in singing, but also to demonstrate where their will comes from. It often opened conversations about music in our life.

At the beginning, most choristers do not know each other, except a group of retired women (Antoinette, Josette, T  r  se), who are active in CSC, both through activities and as members of *Noyer*

⁵ To access to *Traditions Musicales du Monde* program, both *Chantons Ensemble* and music workshops for kids, you do not need to pay for one activity, but it is not totally free, since you pay for a membership to CSC for having access to all activity, calculated on your family quotient it costs from 30 to 70 euros a year.

⁶ *World Music* term has been both used and criticized as a globalized music categorisation by ethnomusicologists. It mainly sticks to music industry branding to make music supports and musicians circulating on different market levels.

Doré neighbourhood council, and a group of four friends 35 years of age and above living in suburban cities close to Antony (Nelly, Marianne, Caroline and Mathilde) invited by Marianne Feder, our choirmaster. Indeed, *Chantons Ensemble* is far from a city choir, a *Noyer Doré* neighbourhood choir relating to where choristers come from. They are even far from being “urban outcasts” (Wacquant, 2012), as most Paris suburban inhabitants may be referred, at the exception of the group of retired women which even if they are politically involved and lived here for more than twenty years in *Noyer Doré*, are far from being wealthy. *Chantons Ensemble* is not as multicultural as *Noyer Doré* can be, even if we would detail intercultural relationships through music in a following part. As a comparative example, the vocal formation project did not reach parents I saw bringing their own kids to traditional music workshops at CSC. Families who are part of Senegalese, Malian, Algerian or Chinese communities set up in the neighbourhood, from first to fourth immigrant generations and/or French close-native origins. Besides, we have met this neighbourhood when we have presented our repertoire to CSC’s fair – and to a multicultural audience from *Noyer Doré* - every June since 2017. It gave a kind of *urban citizenship* passport (Carrel, Neveu, Ion, 2009), as we are engaged and recognized as a choir in *Noyer Doré*, even if both CSC and Philharmonie try to make us sing to larger events and city official events, which have been cancelled in 2020.

The origin of *Chantons Ensemble*’s WhatsApp group started in November 2019, before COVID-19 began to be considered a pandemic. It started as an exclusive group from the group of middle-aged friends. At the beginning, Nelly, Mathilde, Caroline, and Mathilde privately used it to exchange news about their presence or absence to choir sessions. On November 7th, 2019, few choristers noticed Caroline recorded some of our singing from a song called ‘*Ju Parana*’ [pronounced *Yo Parana*], a South Brazilian lullaby about the *Paraná* stream. Most of us were interested to get the extract for practice. Marianne Feder asked if we could try a way to exchange data about *Chantons Ensemble*. And Nelly suggested, she could add every chorister to their original group and renames it ‘*Choeur Antony*’ [Antony’s choir] to send them records.

During this session Nelly and I took the rest of the phone numbers to add to our new WhatsApp group, to get access to it. Everyone agreed but Térése. She was sceptical, explaining she was not sure to know how it works. After our music session, Térése and I took a few minutes to go on the Internet, downloading the app, but I felt like she was not confident using it. Even if WhatsApp is presented to stimulate and facilitate communication, in such a mixed group, people can face *network illiteracy* (Shaviro, 2003), not being able to practice new electronic tools or use data from digital resources or smartphones. Even if I welcomed Térése to WhatsApp and the universe of messaging apps, she lacked a diversity of information about uses. And with some constraints and time, she did succeed in using WhatsApp, sending more messages, emoticons, and even funny gifs week after week.

Created two years after the vocal formation debut, *Choeur Antony*’s WhatsApp group shows how the use of this app was neither intuitive nor calculated. Nowadays, mobile instant messaging is a common resource, but relating to a locked down *Chantons Ensemble*, WhatsApp was used to keep socializing and was deeply based on previous social interactions. Let us look forward to analyse how WhatsApp interfered with our choir during the first lockdown.

Locked down togetherness: choristers’ behaviour and participation

Chantons Ensemble’s choristers could have stopped singing sessions for a while or talking to each other. Through WhatsApp, they decided to pursue some contact. Choristers’ initiative had been to expand contact with each other, and it quickly escalated through creating musical activities from March to May 2020. In this part, I will focus on how participants used WhatsApp during lockdown, and how the group’s power and relationship are balanced in this app. It has effects on chorister’s participation. Also, we will emphasise the transformation of collectiveness and individuals amongst participants and how on a daily basis of “locked down” exchanges we discovered each other and ourselves.

The choir's connection to a digital world has not only been a single relationship with WhatsApp, but numerous digital worlds. This article specifically digs into the subject of using WhatsApp, but Nelly, Nora and Marianne Feder, our choirmaster also coordinated on WhatsApp during the first lockdown to create a Google Drive folder to get access to music sheets and recordings made by our choirmaster to sing along to her theme or soprano recorded voices. Since December 2020, the choir first went on Zoom, then on Microsoft Teams.

Térèse's WhatsApp use demonstrates how the online world and COVID-19 context slowly makes us go to new technologies, but criticizes 'togetherness' since we have lost some due to access and technology modalities.

On WhatsApp, we lost some regular faces, like Josette a woman in her 60s with a husky creole voice. Josette was one of my 'partners in crime', since we shared a bass voice panel with Eric. We often had a blast when she was a bit lost for some songs, always smiling, and laughing. Sometimes forgetting my music sheets, Josette and I helped each other both follow songs on her own music folder in front of us. During lockdown, we only had occasional news from her. She has not replied to any WhatsApp messages since January 2020, before *Chantons Ensemble* suspension at the CSC. She only spoke out with a message in October 2020, to inform us she will "stop the activity for the moment, waiting for better news to come if possible". Going digital to follow the choir seems to not be an option for her, which stands as a peculiar critique about "our digital revolution which tirelessly built on the whole planet a pure myth" (Baricco, 2021: 18) which neither has a universal nor essential impact; whereas it has been drastically amplified during our locked down life and still left deep scars in our daily life (e.g.: TV working, meeting app, board games or having a drink through video, and many other social occasions going online...). However, our world was working on *virality*, before "the Pandemic", Baricco explains. Some participants were attentive to such processes, making a difference between a continuity in music practices and a practice influenced by some 'socio-technical acceleration' (Rosa, 2014:18).

Both Térèse and Josette are in their 60s, but a gap between generation and technology is far from a complete answer to some access constraints. Forms of disapproval or disconnection with our digital world – and even during such periods and crisis where we focus on digital socialisation and activities – could be a way to analyse it. Even if "the right to disconnect" is evolving under Labour Law⁷, it is still underestimated when we talk about non-professional activities or social occasions.

Eric's behaviour in this music choir process is more interesting knowing he is a shy person, even avoiding concert fair or restitution. Eric talked about the fact that every chorister does not know each other so well, after 3 years singing together. A few months before lockdown, he also explained to me he was happy the way we worked on music repertoire, but we both felt like we lack "collectiveness", and he even says, "a lack of complicity". He always has been involved in *Chantons Ensemble* since the beginning. *Chantons Ensemble* represents more than multiple "*moments de confiance*" I documented [transl: trusting moments] (Ogien et Quéré, 2006), as a safe place to improve his self-expression and confidence as a person having PTSD symptoms. On WhatsApp, Eric decided to express himself about music activities suggested by some choristers, like recording our voices and singing. Fulfilling our musical envy, Eric participated in the group in his own way through linked music videos on WhatsApp messaging threads. Eric rejected to participate in singing through voice recording and informed us he will even disconnect for short periods of times.

He rejected some music creativity in WhatsApp with dialogue. Besides, no one ragefully quit the group, bothered by an increase of messages per day during lockdown. *Chantons Ensemble* members are not trapped in WhatsApp. Thus, a safe place does not only come from participants, but also trust in the 'located network' where you participate and what you can do with it. For some, WhatsApp or digital locations have decreased their capacity to act or downgrade their capabilities (Sen, 1979; Monnet, 2007), compared to on-site activity. Even being framed as 'a chorister' - which took years to craft on-site - is largely reduced due to participating at distance. But WhatsApp, as a programmed tool, does not

⁷ In France, "the right to disconnect" has been created in 2017 (Loi El Khomri), to protect privacy and home office.

completely “remove all capacity to individuals” (Ilitch, 1973: 82), in such a context, and even cracks ‘the radical monopoly’ of *Chantons Ensemble* as a music education process, Ilitch would say.

WhatsApp became a part of *Chantons Ensemble*, but not ‘the totality of *Chantons Ensemble*’. Waiting for months created frustrations, but did not raise questions about *Chantons Ensemble*’s ending but instead adapting, but to what extent? “Does digital social networking eliminate previous ‘traditional interactions’?” is even the question approached by Bertille Thareau, in an agriculture and collective action context (Thareau, 2019). Thus, digital accessibility affects and interrogates which collective, and to some extent which community you want to participate in. In 2018, Chantal Charnet who worked on social and pedagogical uses of WhatsApp in distance education, concluded on WhatsApp “being essential for the construction of a social relationship that motivates a learning community” (Charnet, 2020: 27). In our case study, a located practice with multiple spaces and WhatsApp, transferred to WhatsApp as a single network – i.e., from a diversity of interactions to WhatsApp-based interactions – depicts some limited actions and changes in terms of objectives, collectiveness, commitment and even attitudes.

Going online and using new messaging apps, also made changes in the way people are ‘presenting themselves’. The creative playground is changing. WhatsApp is becoming the only stage – I refer here to Goffman’s and Manning’s analysis of theatrical metaphor to explain drama as life (Goffman, 1956-1959; Manning, 1991). Some choristers became more talkative on WhatsApp than when they were on-site. Nora, a woman in her 40s, with a superb voice, getting soloist parts, was acting calm. Even though I have known Nora since 2018, she was really playing with the app, exchanging on WhatsApp emojis but also demonstrating a corky humour through animated videos, which I did not expect. She is also followed by other group members, in transforming the group in a happy battle of animated videos, with or without any links with music.

Looking back on March 13th, when CSC activities were suspended, due to physical/social distancing rules, we talked about how much we were disappointed about not singing together, but different topics were launched almost day after day too. Nora suggested we home livestream and sing, Zoulikha asked how does Tèrese feel since she was not there during the last vocal session, Antoinette in a peaceful way asked us to look at the bright side and maintain positive health, Nelly asked if Marianne was ok since she knew Marianne gave birth in mid-March, and Marianne replied with a picture of her and her new-born baby. Everyone replied to such a shared-private event. Words were really kind, soft and caring. Almost every day our locked down daily routine was shared through text messages, funny videos, and memes about hating to stay home for so long, parodies of using masks, and shopping in restricted ways. Everyone documented their own life in a new way and we learned a lot about each other. The group redefined social distancing and even prevented it, defending this pandemic as keeping us physical distancing rather than social distancing. This is more than a semantic issue, which has even created social science methodological issues, which are deeply rooted in scientist’s social positions and relations. Further, it is a way to understand our reality. “What does ‘social’ mean in a choir?” might be asked by Baudrillard who worked on defining ‘simulacra from reality’, mainly about media events and communication focusing on criticising concepts like ‘audiences’ and ‘masses’ (Baudrillard, 2012). He even talks about “reality disappearance” (Baudrillard, 1981). Here it is embedded in a three-month shift from on-site to a social media world, which makes a lot of urban interaction and singing together interactions disappear.

Sometimes both *Chantons Ensemble*’s energy and heritage are inconspicuously mingled or crossed with private locked down routines. Heritage must be understood here as a concept which explains how certain significant elements are from a relative “*présent du passé*” [presence or memory from the past] (Ricoeur, 1984, 1999). The energy is the way heritage is re-enacted, which for example takes the form of “music memory” such as Denis Laborde wrote about modern Basque improvised songs – called *bertsulari*, based on a 18th century tradition (Laborde, 2005). In this following message, Nora also gives a glimpse of how she can consider herself and how a song learned with *Chantons Ensemble* can shake her up. She lets us know more about a part of her psychological state, and how much this song may impact

her life. In such a context, WhatsApp groups and messages may open us up to discover ourselves and others.

March 29th, 2020

Nora: Like any good hypochondriac who thinks she has all [COVID-19] symptoms for a month, a good *Yo Parana* [Brazilian song in our repertoire] while taking a shower and the pressure goes down. [Signing with a smiley sending love].

As another way to discover the chorister profile, the COVID-19 pandemic enables us to argue about topics and create a shared connection about a general and political view about how the world works, or how they would like it to work, questioning our humanity and our relationships. That information enables choristers to demonstrate their opinions, their feelings, and which citizens they are. It also draws some information about their activities: Eric explains he volunteers to help people do the shopping, and Antoinette explains how her job as a cashier is done during the COVID-19 period. Antoinette is a retired person, which implies she had to get another job to stabilize her finance due to a low retiring pension. Most of that information was known by few participants or even nobody, and it drives a general community vibe. A community is expressed for example by the passionate declaration Zoulikha made about why she chooses « singing together » and the consequences. Finally, they acknowledge what being a music community brought to them in terms of relationships, also continuing to *power themselves* (De Nora, 2000: 46-74) and their relationships through WhatsApp, in a period when relationships are challenged.

April 18th, 2020

Antoinette: Thanks for all the lovely songs you share, and which bound us [smiley happy face] what a paradox than this virus. We are just realising that human beings cannot live without bonding with each other. However, to stop spreading the virus, we are forced to isolate and keep a distance. Let's be vigilant to not trap ourselves!

Zoulikha: You are right! (...) Personally, I chose singing together for all those reasons, giving and receiving, a kind of magic operates when we sing together with our voices so different, our characters and voice tones (...) It connects us together, and it feels pretty good [smiley happy face] Thank you too Marianne [Feder] which harmoniously and masterfully bound this melting-pot together.

The WhatsApp group during the first lockdown enabled us to go further than being in touch in a period where being touched or in contact has been stigmatised and even prohibited. It even brought some efficiency in discovering choristers' personality and drives another path, another shape of *Chantons Ensemble's* participants.

If off-site ethnography is a method thought to describe 'locked society', mostly in repressive countries⁸, messaging apps are being part of contemporary life in a large spectrum of society. WhatsApp shifts perspectives under the COVID-19 pandemic since choristers and the ethnographer are locked down and forced to be spaced apart. Cyber-ethnography or app-ethnography are methodological tools and ways of describing the form where relationships are taking place: "making a shift from understanding the field as a 'location', to grasping the field as a 'network'" (Staudacher and Kaiser-Grolimund, 2016: 31). Mostly used in contexts such as war conflict or contemporary dating and sexual relations (Cousineau, Oakes, Johnson, 2018), this research method depicts how a community in "locked down context", here bound by music, is far from being inactive and still is evaluating and adapting to achieve their creativity and strategies. All along this research, this messaging app analysis works as one ' *stratégie de décalage* ' [transl: offset strategy] (Winkins, 2001: 164-165), and after having been deeply involved into music, voices and songs making on-site, it allows to observe and operate to another position.

⁸ Based on Chowra Makaremi ERC project 2019-2023. URL: <https://offsite.hypotheses.org/>

On/off-site music practices: music repertoire, vocal recordings and new performances.

This shift between an onsite and a social media world does not stop us from trying to ‘make music’. Several years of learning music from a diverse repertoire empowered some choristers to practise music activities using WhatsApp tools such as video or voice recording.

At the socio-cultural centre, in room 14, the vocal formation was facing Marianne Feder and her piano, standing in a half-circle. Thus, even if Marianne Feder was teaching us through an oral-tradition methodology, some classical and formal choir aspects were maintained. Not all choristers knew her gesture to stop the music (raised arm, with a closed fist) or to follow metric steps; and, in 2016, only two out of fourteen songs were learnt using sheet music. As our repertoire was mainly composed of foreign songs, most lyrics were transcribed in phonetics and accompanied by a French translation; Marianne also helped us with pronunciation. We almost only sang in foreign languages. Marianne does not speak Brazilian or Romanian, but her own music and music taste are so influenced by Brazilian and Romanian songs, she mimics pronunciation and accentuation like she knew how to speak those languages. Accentuation, yodelling, and vibrato may be hard to master for non-professionals, but it is even harder for people who are not used to listening to a diversity of music. We found ourselves in a situation to talk about culture and sounds. For Arab songs and lyrics, Zoulikha and Nora, whose parents were Arabic speakers, both helped us with pronunciation. Everyone took on advice from each other but struggled with accentuations and rhythms, whilst still having a good laugh.

Each new track is taught through a method. First, we listen to Marianne F. vocal version and piano musical arrangement, then we listen to different recorded versions and interpretations, we talk about what we think, we feel, and Marianne F. tells us the meaning of the song (often love or relationship stories, environmental and nature tales) and how it can highlight a cultural tradition. Although a two-hour session is enough for the vocal group to understand and learn the basics of one song, it may take four to six sessions to perform it with a clean polyphonic arrangement. In 2018, the vocal group is stabilising. Every singer is gradually allocated to a voice group. From left to right, the core vocal formation is presented below:

- Bass voices (female contralto and male singing bass) consists of Eric, Josette and me.
- *Alti* and *mezzo-soprani* group consists of six to eight choristers (main voice group): Antoinette, Terese, Caroline, Nora, Marianne, Maria.
- *Soprani* group: Agathe, Caro, Nelly and Zoulikha.

The musical repertoire is primarily based on the choirmaster’s choice, but it follows TMM’s guidelines about cultural diversity. Most songs are selected from different countries like Brazil, Romania, Turkey, traditional Gipsy and Greek music. The following are just five out of the fourteen songs we have mastered:

- *Yo Paraná*: a South Brazilian lullaby about the *Paraná* stream
- *Nane Coxa* [transl. I do not have skirt]: a famous gipsy masterpiece, of which more than a dozen versions exist. It is spelled ‘*Nane Tzora*’ in *Chantons Ensemble*’s music score in order to know how to pronounce it using French phonetics.
- *Ederlezi*: a traditional folksong from Balkanese Rom minority, celebrating the arrival of Spring.
- *Sanie cu zurgălăi* [transl. Sleight with Bells]: a Jewish Romanian original version composed in 1936 by Richard Stein / ‘*Johnny, tu n’es pas un ange*’, covered by Edith Piaf French version in 1953, also ripped from an English version covered by Les Paul in 1952. *Chantons Ensemble* sings both Romanian and French versions.
- *Ta Zulariaka Sou Matia* [transl. Your jealous eyes]: from Rebetico repertoire (traditional Greek repertoire). Multiple versions exist.

Quickly, music has become much more than a periodical activity. It became a link, a connection. Our WhatsApp group's *Chantons Ensemble* has not only transformed into a tool to talk and connect about music, but also to practise music and organise together whilst being apart. A routine started immediately, when Nora first suggested 'we can just video/record singing'. She directly recorded herself singing *Ju Parana* and named it her 'anticonavirus anthem'. But no one else participated as quickly. A month after she recorded two other songs based on our repertoire. It triggered individuals' response from the choristers to some *social ordering* (De Nora, 2000: 109-120) by triggering their participation in.

April 14th, 2020 [summarising one day of messages]

Nora sings one song from our repertoire *Djelem, Djelem* and records it thanks to WhatsApp recording tool. She sings *a Capella*. She also 'goes further', she said, and out of her comfort zone and sings a song from James Brown we had not practised yet.

Nelly says she is motivated. Agathe records a version of *As Pastorinhas*, from our repertoire. Everyone congratulates each other insisting on how much it is good to hear their voices, but 'the level is high' says Maria. Then Zoulikha sends several recordings, and even Antoinette sends one and reveals she is pretty 'proud of her husky voice'. "Voice tone" is respected, says Zoulikha to Antoinette. "You don't need to 'do like' others, but simply sings through your own voice and personality", she adds. Nora says, "We are hungry Marianne (choirmaster), we want to be fed before we could go out".

Singing takes the form of challenging ourselves and others. This extract on April 14th shows how the repertoire is practiced, and how choristers try to perform a song. For once, it is not our choirmaster who judges us, but chorister themselves. Voice tone on recordings is often correct, based on a repertoire we know well. But sometimes, choristers test new songs. Music creativity, in terms of practice, has often been limited to making references from our unchanging repertoire or suggesting future songs we would like to sing. So, it questions the way we challenge our music practices, in terms of recomposing the way we learn (from) music. If the WhatsApp group is becoming some sort of a music pedagogy tool, it also enables us to share musical tastes, through linked videos. It reflects on Emmanuel Olivier's work, detailing ethnographies about how "digital provide music", through mobile phones in Mali, but here without "monetizing mobile data uses" (Olivier, 2017). Encouraging everyone to participate, Zoulikha says: « we want to hear you boys too ». And Eric replies:

April 17th, 2020

Eric: It is not too much for me this kind of exercise, however, I send you below my two favourite songs of the moment.

[He sends to website links opening on *Don't Step so close to me* by Sting and The Roots, and *Coronavirus alert* by Bobi Wine].

It also fully embodies the idea of *being part of – participating in* a community. In a certain way, the musical construction of place processes (Stokes, 1994) which were taking place in a room of Antony's socio-cultural centre, a place where *Chantons Ensemble* started, is now outsourced through WhatsApp's group becoming a sort of music place. Moreover, sharing music videos starts to grow as a way to suggest new songs for the repertoire. On May 10th, 2020, after several videos of different versions of *Djelem Djelem* and *Ederlezi* were sent by different choristers, some conversation began about how they sing and comparing each other's performance. Nora suggests a song called *Lule Lule* (Albanian folksong), which remains connected to our diverse oral tradition repertoire. From our choirmaster being the only one selecting music to choristers choosing a part of the repertoire or exchange with their choirmaster about what they would like to sing, WhatsApp relationships enabled everyone to collaborate for repertoire selection.

Marianne is also accepting it since she launched the idea of creating a platform to stock all previous scores and new ones. Nelly took charge of making it during lockdown. For Marianne Feder,

Chantons Ensemble's choirmaster seems to have operated changes, showing some ambiguity about the WhatsApp group use as a device for music practice or else. Besides suggesting a platform to communicate about *Chantons Ensemble's* repertoire, Marianne suggested “a game she launched with her choir association *Les Musi'Terriens*, where everyone can make their own song about being in lockdown and record it in a video”. Even if an impulse first came from choristers themselves by voice or video recording songs from our repertoire, it participated in the development of music creativity among choristers. Marianne delivered some video from her band, our songs from her album. Even if she used *Chantons Ensemble's* WhatsApp group to then argue about her next album coming out, and crowdfunding in July 2020, she also talked a bit more in depth about her musician path.

Finally, Marianne opened a bit more about how she felt, being a lockdown choirmaster. Between explaining she had read nice messages, sending great vibes, she also argued about how *Chantons Ensemble's* WhatsApp group cannot replace music as a body, sensitive and living experience. The notion of “soul” was more than a music reference, and it related to a core physicality through human expressivities. Thus, she made her point, implicitly explaining in her own way what she cared about the most in music as being interacted during a shared momentum:

April 18th, 2020

Marianne Feder: (...) I'd rather hear you singing in real life... then I do see your soul.

A Community Music's vibe: institutional vs autonomous organization, conviviality, and music resonances

At the origin, *Chantons Ensemble's* project is based on Philharmonie's pedagogical idea. It is articulated on-site by CSC's equipment and regulated by those two social institutions deeply influenced what happen inside *Chantons Ensemble*. The project has been built by Philharmonie, not from inhabitants or participants. However, being locked down on WhatsApp has been largely underestimated by those institutions, and choristers managed to take initiatives. A 'community music' vibe arose from its use.

From an Anglo-Saxon perspective, this case study questions how Community Music [abbrev: CM] research is framed. In France, Community Music as a research theme is poorly represented in music studies⁹, even if music anthropology or applied ethnomusicology give strong feedback as disciplinary methods. To argue about CM through *Chantons Ensemble's* case study, I will ask how it tackles 'community within community music', through the idea of 'hospitality, gathering through music' (Higgins, 2012: 104-105) developed by Lee Higgins, to a more general background. Indeed, CM's participants are depicted as having access to music activities 'outside conventional institutional setting as an objective' (Hallam and McDonald, 2008). So, I will comment on this case study in terms of organisation, hospitality, and conviviality as key elements of Community Music. Finally, I will focus on music as a collective action and how “sounding good” resonates in such context.

March 13th, 2020

Imane Bouslimane: Due to current news, CSC [Socio-cultural Centre] must close to the public. Every activity is now suspended until further notice.

Could you inform inhabitants through your WhatsApp group, the *Chantons Ensemble* [Singing Together] session will not take place?

We just sent an email to our main list, but we may not have every chorister email address.

⁹ One of the last exchanges about the term “Community Music” in the music and research community in France comes from Novembre 2021 Philharmonie's symposium “The social and cultural commitment of the musician”.

On March 13th, 2020, Imane Bouslimane emailed us about CSC's activities suspension. Only a few *Chantons Ensemble* members subscribed to CSC. CSC did not have all of their email addresses, and this information did not reach everybody. In the first section, I explained where members come from. I now highlight that 2/3 of members only have this activity in CSC. Moreover, few members subscribed to CSC and CSC did not have all of their email addresses. On March 13th, 2020, when Imane Bouslimane emailed us about CSC's activities suspension, this information did not reach everybody. In this email, we can understand that the WhatsApp group remains quite independent from social institutions. Philharmonie and CSC had a registered list of members, but they did not have direct access to contact choristers. It questions the making of autonomy and its processes from choristers to the music institution. Indeed, if Philharmonie does not look for WhatsApp data or shows much interest in it, it lets WhatsApp's organisation to choristers without any intervention. I did not convey any information until December 2020, in my annual report to Luciana Penna-Diaw, head of the program "Traditions Musicales du Monde" for Philharmonie, after *Chantons Ensemble* used video conference. The use of WhatsApp fueled a direct commitment from choristers. It gathered the collective and highlighted both the social purpose of the project and its "making music together" part. Finally, it revealed Philharmonie is slightly more attentive about the 'music education side' of the project than its social purpose. Moreover, this digital leap changes both the way I participate and observe and questions my commitment as a scientist for Philharmonie and being a chorister within *Chantons Ensemble*. My attachment to the collective, more than the practice, drove me to keep engaging in it during lockdown. And I lately took WhatsApp as a research object.

We started to use Zoom¹⁰ thanks to our choirmaster's initiative, before Philharmonie validated it. Then, Philharmonie's informatic team decided to only use Microsoft Teams, justifying it for "data protection". Despite some critiques from users and involved musician¹¹ about issues with sending documents, but also video and sound quality, this software is now used in every music workshop at Philharmonie de Paris to enable both kids and adults from every music register, activity, and age to get access to online music education. Philharmonie now manages our social media choice because singing on videoconference is observed as music educative condition, which WhatsApp does not seem to be.

Chantons Ensemble's coordination has been built on a horizontal hierarchy between CSC and Philharmonie, despite Philharmonie's being perceived as a music guarantor. But what happens inside *Chantons Ensemble's* activity is mainly based on verticality: Philharmonie and CSC selected a day and hour, Philharmonie's music education program selected our choirmaster, Marianne Feder, chose our repertoire and gave music guidelines. Choristers did not participate in music selection. Repertoire is bound by oral tradition, but some music activity schemes use some European classical music or music theory words to depict music – crescendo, polyrhythm, "going to measure 4th" – our choirmaster does or does not explain. As it also validates some choir's basic language elements, it sometimes privileged looking at written music sheets¹², instead of only looking at choristers, and interacting with body language and vocal exchanges by mimesis.

However, autonomous organisation and choristers' initiatives have been led by previous *Chantons Ensemble's* frame too. Contrary to a strict dichotomy between institutionalized music activity and community music activity, we see that *Chantons Ensemble* on-site empowered participants to make an off-site *Chantons Ensemble* too. It was never created to be used or to be "outside conventional institutional setting" and it was not a primary "objective". Participants rather seized an alternative road, the locked down context, and a shifting setting with WhatsApp facilitated.

First, to accompany this alternative, I would like to counterbalance some rigidity explained in previous paragraphs about on/off-site music activity. During on-site choir sessions, chit-chat is allowed,

¹⁰ Zoom or Microsoft Teams are both video communication tools, originally used for conference and meetings.

¹¹ Philharmonie does not refer to their musician who led music workshop, as music teacher, but 'involved musician' to depict they come for specific reasons, even if the role of our choirmaster, Marianne Feder, evolved between different roles.

¹² Scores are written as graphic artifacts (Goody, 1987), sometimes privileged in music education, and depicted as "a totalitarian" artifact (Bertho-Lavenir, 2009: 167)

and sometimes most of us struggle to not laugh or talk with our neighbour. But Marianne F. often stopped participants' discussions, and the vocal formation remained disciplined. In such qualified moments, the role of Marianne Feder is directed to her "choirmaster" role, more than "a facilitator", as Higgins describes it as "[someone] embracing the notion of unconditional hospitality" (Higgins, 2012: 109). Marianne Feder was quite concerned about the vocal formation's progress to perform well. Nevertheless, she always asked choristers about the way they wanted to participate and progressively did integrate what the choristers suggested. Going on social media during lockdown, she even encouraged us to keep practicing and to carry on making suggestions.

Second, when *Chantons Ensemble* started in 2016, every session ended with soft drinks and cakes, as a family-friendly treat. We could communicate about songs, who we are, and what we do. Unfortunately, budgets were cut, and social institutions did not intervene to gather us after music session. We needed about two years, before some of us autonomously brought little snacks, homemade pastries to share. Moreover, during this period on WhatsApp, we unlocked conversations which would not have happened before. On-site music practices and social gathering can face issues too: people leaving right after the session ends, our choirmaster leaving a session quickly because she lives 45 minutes by car from Antony, or no drinks or coffee to enjoy and celebrate a session, only CSC's step-doors discussion. It highlights a previous lack of social bonding and communication beyond music interactions, showing 'music' in community music is not the only ingredient to share to stimulate togetherness.

Time and shared experience unlocked an autonomous hospitality and conviviality inside the group which I am depicting here through this detail about homemade pastries and taking time to connect when the music activity is over. "Hospitality and gathering", notes Higgins, are key elements for Community Music. Digital gathering is originally depicted through this case study, but even if WhatsApp strengthened relationships between participants and made "their voices" heard, it also closed access to new participants which is "an interpretation (...) of dislocation" into community which may invalidate *Chantons Ensemble* as a community music ensemble (Higgins, 2012: 109). On-site *Chantons Ensemble* group welcomed new participants from different ages and different involvement.

Echoing the idea of institution versus autonomy, *Chantons Ensemble* project and its shifts – 'shifts and changes of attitude in the decompartmentalization process of functions and roles' (Charret, 2020: 17) awakens the concept of 'conviviality'. Higgins roots Community Music into hospitality as: "'community' conceived actively as 'an act of hospitality' [...] it becomes an open-door policy, a greeting to strangers, extended in advance and without full knowledge of its consequences" (Higgins, 2012: 114). "Conviviality" is commonly used as a term to express friendliness or "one society's capacity to endorse tolerance and reciprocal exchanges between people within a society"¹³. In this case study, it reflects both a critique based on Ilitch's idea of 'convivial society' facing 'technocratic institutions' (Ilitch, 1973: 45) where somehow an equilibrium between WhatsApp's uses, Philharmonie's guidance, and choristers' will observed in a community-to-come but also the way each participant from our choirmaster to chorister's reciprocal exchange on what can be sung and how, as a 'co-elaboration' process.

The stake of "sounding good" is not just a matter of intention in music practice or music education, as William Cheng explained it (Cheng, 2016). It gives a deep characterisation of what a 'community music' is as a social form too, and music harmony vibes as a double form of 'sound accuracy' and 'rightness' (Habermas, 1981) - in terms of communication - when people can actively listen to each other and reply as an unmetaphorical 'choir community'.

¹³ Quotation from online-based French dictionary: Larousse.

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