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The Signifier of Time: Music and Sound as Public Utility during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article Info.	Abstract
<p><u>Date Submitted:</u> September 2020</p> <p><u>Date Accepted:</u> 23 March 2021</p> <p><u>Date Published:</u> December 2021</p>	<p>A key feature of the discourse surrounding day-to-day life during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the impact that lockdown had on our perception and experience of time. The restrictions imposed on mobility and interpersonal communication as a result of the government's measures meant that the way many of us experienced time over the course of our daily lives changed. This carries implications for our experience of music and sound as performative communicative actions that are in no small part defined by temporal boundaries. This paper explores the intersections between sound and time from the perspective of music and sound-production as facets of public utility and communication during a moment of crisis. We consider the role of music in official public guidelines such as the recommended use of 'Happy Birthday to You!' as a means of measuring the amount of time required to wash your hands effectively, and explore the phenomenon of the weekly 'Clap for Carers' as a mode of performed communicative and communal sound-production that was truly 'live' (in that it was not mediated through technology), but which very swiftly took on a divisive political association. These case studies are contextualised alongside historical examples drawn from literature, music, and public discourse concerning the utility of music and sound in both a physical and psychological capacity, illuminating the extent to which active participation in sound-(re)production is tied to our experience of time and communicative synchronicity, and thereby to the wellbeing of both the individual and the collective in public society during the United Kingdom's first lockdown.</p>

1. The Signifier of Time: Music and Sound as Public Utility during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Though the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken many different forms across the world, the extent to which music has played a role as a coping mechanism in mediating both individual and collective experiences of a moment of acute global crisis is undeniable. Music has been used to offer an escape from anxiety, boredom, loneliness, stress, and uncertainty, and as a means of expressing gratitude and promoting public health. Professionals and amateur musicians alike have documented their lives under lockdown through music, reaching out and communicating both physically and virtually with audiences worldwide. Cultural institutions have employed new and creative ways for engaging audiences by sharing recordings, archive materials, and live streams on digital platforms. The Royal Opera House in London, for example, launched a free programme of curated online broadcasts, musical masterclasses, and cultural insights that offered the public a unique look behind the scenes of one of the world's leading cultural institutions, while jazz clubs around the world including Birdland in New York and Ronnie

Scott's in London continue to host virtual concerts. Outside these organized efforts of established institutions, music took on a prominent role in the day-to-day existence of a large proportion of the population: videos of musicians and singers performing from their balconies, rooves, windows, or doorsteps have flooded YouTube and for a time seemed to define the role that music would play in the lockdown around the world.¹ Virtual performances of musicians playing 'together' were immensely popular during lockdown. In this context, performance acquired new meanings as it came to be defined as much by one's ability to use recording and production technology as it was by traditional performance abilities. Such efforts included weekly virtual performances by Grammy Award winners Arturo O'Farrill & the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra for Birdland, while a virtual performance of 'Befiehl du deine Wege' from J.S. Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*, BWV 244 (uploaded to YouTube under the evocative title 'Through Music We Are Connected') provides a representative example of a performance of core repertoire that might be said to reflect the challenging times.² Alongside expressions of sincerity and solidarity in the face of the unfolding crisis, many humorous, fun, and thought-provoking videos also proliferated on social media under popular hashtags including #coronasongs, #quarantunes, and #songsofcomfort. Musicians entertained their neighbours and toured neighbourhoods to lift people's spirits, while the ex-footballer and current president of Liberia George Weah even produced his own song to inform citizens of the dangers of COVID-19.³ These new forms and repertoires bore witness to an underlying conviction about music's ability to create and maintain social bonds.

Music has therefore been associated with social functions including communication, the formation and expression of identity, the affirmation of communal values, social structuring, and even propaganda and manipulation. It has captured the imagination through its capacity to regulate and articulate temporal processes and influence both physical and psychological states. In this capacity, there are a number of ways that both music (and organized sound as more broadly defined) might be considered 'useful' or 'utilitarian' in a broader sense than might be implied by specific terms such as 'Muzak' or 'Gebrauchsmusik'. Moreover, the traditional borders between what is considered 'music' and what is considered 'sound' might also begin to dissolve when viewed through the lens of their sonic 'usefulness'. They have multiple functions, being used as tools for social regulation yet also being capable of structuring public discourse themselves. This paper first considers the efficacy of music and sound as constructed throughout history, drawing on examples from literature, music, and public discourse to assess the ways in which participation in musical performance and sound-reproduction has been characterized as beneficial to the wellbeing of both the individual and the collective in public society, before turning to two case studies that arose during the first of the United Kingdom's lockdowns.

2. The Utility of Music and Sound

A fundamental aspect of musical utility is the capacity of music and sound to communicate or regulate movement in both an external physical sense and an internal psychological sense—in other words, motion and *emotion*. A simple illustration of this might be the 'lullaby', which derives its name from a combination of the words 'lull' and 'by' which both have physical connotations: a gentle rocking motion and a sense of physical nearness that might be expressed sonically through undulating, often loosely-dotted rhythmic patterns and a 'soft' or 'warm' tone (which, of course, are themselves physical

¹ Countless examples can be found on YouTube, though a representative selection from Italy can be found here: <https://youtu.be/Q734VN0N7hw> (Accessed 5 September 2020).

² The recording of 'Befiehl du deine Wege' was made by musicians associated with Bachfest Malaysia: <https://youtu.be/4nV8NakYNfs>; see also the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra's performance from 14 June 2020: <https://youtu.be/SKmCIXPdDt0> (Accessed 5 September 2020).

³ https://youtu.be/xEY_PfYAHoY (Accessed 7 September 2020). President Weah had also previously produced a song with Barima Sydney to encourage the fight against Ebola: <https://youtu.be/Oe4J-q8E4qg> (Accessed 7 September 2020). They are essentially the same song with the word 'Ebola' replaced with the word 'Corona', and with the more localized references to African countries in the former ('from Liberia to Nigeria / From Guinea to Sierra Leone') expanded to a more global perspective in the latter ('From Asia to Europe / Europe to America / America to Africa'), reflecting the international nature of the pandemic.

terms adapted to describe sound).⁴ The physical and sonic attributes of the lullaby are thus intertwined with the intention of producing a transformative psychological effect—to calm an anxious or overactive mind in the pursuit of sleep necessary for both physical and mental regeneration.

On a different level, prison songs such as those recorded by Alan Lomax at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) between 1947 and 1948 further illustrate the links between sound, body (motion), and mind (emotion). Of particular interest in this respect are the chain-gang and work-gang songs such as ‘Early in the Mornin’’, ‘Rosie’, ‘Old Alabama’, and ‘Jumpin’ Judy’, since they also serve both physical and psychological functions, guaranteeing physical coordination yet also providing a coping mechanism. The most obvious function is to regulate, synchronize, and navigate the potentially hazardous conditions of hard labour activities (stone-breaking, digging, chopping wood, land clearance, road construction, and so on). The contours of the singing voice—its melodic and rhythmic properties—are punctuated by the pitching and swinging of the work tools that the voice itself in turn serves to regulate and synchronize, thereby synthesizing sound, music, and physical activity. Nor is the mediation of time restricted to achieving physical synchronicity. In an interview with Lomax recorded at some point in November or December 1947, one of the prisoners at MSP, W. D. Stewart (known as Bama), explained how singing made work easier:

when you’re singing, you [...] forget, you see, and then the time—that’s passed on with. But if you just get your mind devoted on one something that look like it be hard for you [...], the day be long [...]. A man wouldn’t have any business to be talking on the job, so to [...] keep his mind from being devoted on this one thing, well you just try to take up singing.⁵

(Lomax, Stewart, 1947: transcribed by the authors)

In addition to aiding physical synchronicity and bearing traces of complex syncretic processes, work-songs and hollers might also help to ease the strenuousness and tedium of a day’s hard labour by generating a psychological refuge in which the experience and perception of time is altered. They also offered a sense of community, since the lyrics might often allow prisoners to articulate and affirm mutual values, experiences, and hardships.

Thus we have an emerging profile of music as ‘useful’ in relation to human nature, relationships, experiences, and survival in a number of ways: quelling anxieties, regulating dangerous activities, mollifying hardship, expressing identity, and building community. In this sense, music and sound can create a conceptual place of refuge—a place where time is momentarily suspended allowing one to escape torment and reaffirm one’s sense of self, as well as a sense of communal solidarity. This is not dissimilar to Tia DeNora’s concept of ‘asylum’, which she defines as ‘situations, moments, or environments which, albeit fleetingly, permit individuals to flourish, to have respite from a troubling world and to have space [...] that can be appropriated for self-development’ and ‘places in which individuals may forge connections to others’ (DeNora, 2013: 262).

The idea that music and sound can have a beneficial influence in the easing of mental and physical suffering has a long history in literature, theatre, and the arts. In one of the best-known passages from *The Tempest* (habitually described as William Shakespeare’s most musical play),⁶ Prospero’s slave Caliban, in a moment of uncharacteristic eloquence, articulates the respite he finds in the magical sounds of the island:

⁴ A similar etymological connection to physical movement is present in many languages including French (‘berceuse’), German (‘Wiegenleid’), Polish (‘Kotysanka’), Spanish (‘canción de cuna’), and Russian (‘Kolibel’naya’), all of which variously derive from ‘to rock’, ‘to sway’, ‘to swing’, and ‘cradle’.

⁵ The full audio recording of the interview is available here: <https://archive.culturalequity.org/node/59550> (Accessed 28 July 2020).

⁶ For a discussion of the original music for the play including reproductions of two songs (‘Full Fathom Five’ and ‘Where the Bee Sucks’) attributed to Robert Johnson (c. 1582–1633), see Shakespeare/Orgel, 2008: 220–226.

Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises,
 Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
 That if I then had waked after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
 I cried to dream again.

(Shakespeare/Orgel, 2008: 162)

The lyrical eloquence of this passage sits awkwardly against Caliban's typically uncouth curse-laden rhetoric. The characters who interact with him for the most part describe him as a monster, and even Caliban himself seems to self-identify with this characterisation. Suffering the privation of a slave at the hands of his master Prospero, he revels in rejecting his master's attempts to 'civilize' him—when Prospero's daughter, Miranda, rebukes Caliban in Act I, Scene ii of the play, he simply replies, 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!' (Shakespeare/Orgel, 2008: 121).⁷ Yet the passage quoted above belies the idea that Caliban is inherently uncouth and can only use language to curse. The momentary beauty of the language gives us a fleeting glimpse of some profound emotional sensitivity and desire for peace buried deep within Caliban that can only be accessed or stimulated through the medium of sound, and suggests that 'this thing of darkness' (as Prospero refers to him in the final scene) has actually been formed in the image of the abuse he receives. Music and sound become Caliban's place of refuge—his 'asylum'—where he can momentarily escape his torrid existence and be at peace with himself. The Elizabethan conviction of music's usefulness in inculcating moral, ethical, and spiritual values was articulated in two musical treatises dating from few decades before *The Tempest* was first performed: the anonymous *The Praise of Musicke* (1586) and John Case's *Apologia Musices tam Vocalis Quam Instrumentalis et Mixtae* (1588). These works epitomized the humanist apologetics of music in the literary corpus of Renaissance humanism and the Reformation. As Hyun-Ah Kim suggests, their apologia of music ultimately concerns the place of the musician as an important agent of education and religious practice (Kim, 2019).

The notion that 'Music has charms to soothe a savage breast / To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak', therefore obviously long predates its immortalisation in that now well-weathered turn of phrase that opens William Congreve's short tragedy *The Mourning Bride* (1697). Indeed, going back before Congreve or Shakespeare, the legend of Eurydice and Orpheus—the latter an enduring symbol of music and poetry from Pindar to Rilke—involves music as a central narrative component. Perhaps the best-known versions of the story, in which Orpheus descends into Hades to rescue Eurydice, are derived from Virgil's *Georgics* (Book 4, c. 29 BC) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 10, c. 8 AD). Though they differ in tone and a few narrative details, both Virgil and Ovid allude to the potency of music. In Virgil's account, we find that Orpheus's first recourse on learning of the death of his wife is to seek the 'comfort of his hollow lyre' and to express (and thereby presumably ease) his grief through song. He continues to sing as he descends into Hell, where his song has a miraculous effect on 'hearts that know not how to be touched by human prayer':

But, by his song aroused from Hell's nethermost basements,
 Flocked out the flimsy shades, the phantoms lost to light,
 [...]
 Mothers and men, the dead
 Bodies of great-heart heroes, boys and unmarried maidens,

⁷ It is worth noting that Prospero's immediate reply, 'Hag-seed, hence!' (and the way he talks to Caliban throughout the play) makes it abundantly clear where Caliban learned how to curse.

Young men laid on the pyre before their parents' eyes—
 [...]

 Why, Death's very home and holy of holies was shaken

 To hear that song, and the Furies with steel-blue snakes entwined

 In their tresses; the watch-dog Cerberus gaped open his triple mouth;

 Ixion's wheel stopped dead from whirling in the wind.

(Virgil/Day Lewis, 2009: 124-125)

In this passage, Virgil relates a number of fundamental uses attributed to music: the ability to self-console and simultaneously express and escape suffering through the performance of music; the power to unite diverse demographics; the ability to pacify and move violent or frightening entities; and the momentary mitigation of the suffering of others through performing music (and on the other side of the same coin, the benefit to those in anguish of listening to musical performance).

Similarly, Ovid's Orpheus approaches Prosperina (known as Persephone in the Greek tradition) and the Lord of the Shadows who rules the Underworld to plead for the return of Eurydice, 'plucking the strings of his lyre' and 'enhancing his words with music' (Ovid/Raeburn, 2004: 383-384). Here, the effect produced by Orpheus's music is so intense that it 'mov[es] the bloodless spirits to tears' and precipitates a more comic suspension of business-as-usual in Hades:

[...] For a moment Tantalus

 Ceased to clutch at the fleeting pool, Ixion's wheel

 Was spellbound, the vultures halted their pecking at Tityos' liver,

 The Danaids dropped their urns and Sisyphus sat on his boulder.

 The Furies' hearts were assuaged by the song, and the story goes

 That they wept real tears for the very first time. [...]

(Ovid/Raeburn, 2004: 384).

Despite the comedic tone of the passage, Ovid nonetheless follows Virgil in emphasizing the effect of musical sound in both visceral and cerebral terms; it has the power to suspend activities that take place repeatedly across an infinite eternal temporal plane, and simultaneously exhibits a transformative potential, moving 'bloodless spirits' and the Furies—monstrous remorseless agents of divine vengeance—to 'real' tears. In other words, the Orpheus myth teaches us that music can, 'for a moment', suspend time, bring respite from torture, and transform the monster into a pathetic and empathetic being. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Orpheus often appears as a figurative symbol in Symbolist painting and literature of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, since the mythology traditionally associated with him and his attempt to recover Eurydice from the Underworld not only poses questions about mortality, spirituality, and the perception of reality, but also emphasises the communicative and transportive nature of music and song. The loose aggregation of poets, writers, and artists that formed what has since become known as the Symbolist movement began to impart mystical, transcendental, even magical properties to music and sound, considering them to be capable of lifting the veil on the metaphysical realities that lay beneath our phenomenal physical world. These somewhat mystical aesthetic and philosophical concepts also began to take on a more concrete social and political function in the last decades of the Nineteenth Century. Music and politics have been widely correlated, since music has often been seen as a central component in the expression of national identity and a national commitment to progress (see Garratt, 2019). In her invaluable study of music in the French Third Republic, Jann Pasler addresses at length the utility of music in France—how usefulness came to mean something as all-encompassing and socially legitimizing as the public good, and how the arts (and music in particular) came to be regarded as central to the creation of public social morality. In doing so, Pasler recalibrates our understanding of French history, but also helps us reimagine the hermeneutics of French musical life at the end of the Nineteenth

Century by evaluating the ways in which utility might represent the continuity of Enlightenment ideals from the Revolutionary period right up to the present day (Pasler, 2009: 93).

If the participation in and experience of music and sound has always been understood as somehow connected to mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing as well as to the construction of identity and community, then these attributes also imply the ‘usefulness’ of music and sound production as tools for social structuring and restructuring. Pasler identifies four principles that articulate the way in which music was valued for its social and political functions. The first of these is that ‘music could discipline private desires and internalize public virtues’ (Pasler, 2009: 84). This places the emphasis on musical education and participation as a means of inculcating moral virtues with a view to producing a self-reliant and enlightened citizen who, rather than merely obeying a set of civil regulations unthinkingly, was capable (in the words of Félix Pécaut) of “examining and reflecting” and thus “governing themselves” (Pécaut, 1878: viii-ix, in Pasler, 2009: 85). In a similar way to that in which John Case advocated for music to be understood as morally, intellectually, and spiritually beneficial in his *Apologia*,⁸ participation in musical performance was perceived by French Republicans ‘as enhancing a person’s dignity and self-respect’, whilst both performing and listening to music were considered fundamental to teaching the sound critical judgement necessary for the contemplation and understanding of one’s own existence and co-existence with others (Pasler, 2009: 86).

Pasler’s second principle is that ‘music connected people to one another despite their heterogeneity’ (Pasler, 2009: 86). The most important aspect of this principle lies in the notion that the shared experience of an audience attending a musical performance ‘mitigates their sense of isolation’ by establishing moral bonds and a sense of solidarity through the affirmation and of shared values and tastes (Pasler, 2009: 87). In other words, music can help individuals of different social classes or races, with different religions or political beliefs who might have difficulty identifying with one another to transcend their perceived differences through shared experience. Thus, ‘shared musical experiences build a community of feelings alongside the community of ideas, engendering a palpable sense of what it means to be a public’ (Pasler, 2009: 87). The main clause of Pasler’s next (third) principle is that ‘republicans looked to music to help people negotiate conflict and imagine new identities’ (Pasler, 2009: 89), which directly builds upon the previous principle by suggesting that music could also ‘offer a means of confronting these differences, as well as any underlying ambiguities, ironies, and paradoxes’ (Pasler, 2009: 89). Both ideas resonate with DeNora’s account of musical ‘asylums’ in the sense that participation in music is viewed in terms of its capacity to allow individuals simultaneously to build their own sense of identity and ‘forge connections to others’ (DeNora, 2013: 262).

The fourth principle states that ‘music encouraged consensus amid uncertainty’ (Pasler, 2009: 90). The locus of Pasler’s discussion is specifically on actions taken by French citizens, artists, and cultural organizations (such as the Société Nationale de Musique, founded in 1871) to forge a new common national identity that ‘decontextualized and recontextualised’ the complex and often contradictory history of French culture, politics, and society from 1789 onwards. However, with some minor decontextualizing and recontextualizing of our own, these four principles contain observations about the general function and utility of music and sound within a society—particularly one during a period of transition or instability—that can, to varying extents, be transplanted and applied to our recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of lockdown in particular. More specifically, the case studies presented below highlight the ways in which music and sound might be considered ‘useful’ for regulating physical and mental wellbeing, mitigating isolation and the boundaries between private and public spheres, and building a sense of community through the affirmation of shared values during lockdown. Yet contrary to the benefits associated with music and wellbeing, the second case study in particular also reveals how certain sonic practices can engender a degree of political and social tension, and expose fault

⁸ See in particular Chapter III of Case’s *Apologia*, entitled ‘Quod Musica Sit Utilis Ad Omne Vitae Genus’ [‘That Music is Useful for Every Kind of Life’]; Dana Sutton’s 2003 translation is available here: <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/music/> (Accessed 22 March 2021).

lines within society that are more to do with the perception of ethics and morality than with the traditional divisions of social-economic class.

3. Happy Birthday to You!

The World Health Organization's (WHO) official guidelines recommend that 'washing your hands properly takes about as long as singing "Happy Birthday" twice' (WHO, 2020).⁹ A standard rendition of the song takes an average of around 10-15 seconds, meaning that the recommended time for hand washing should be around 20-30 seconds.¹⁰ Though the suggested use of 'Happy Birthday' predates the COVID-19 pandemic, the advice very quickly became common in public discourse around how best to mitigate the impact of the virus in the United Kingdom to the extent that by the 3 March 2020 the Prime Minister Boris Johnson apparently felt the need to apologize for excessively repeating the advice. Using a familiar 'we're-all-in-this-together' rhetorical mode that was carefully chosen to express solidarity with a public that was anticipated to be rapidly losing patience with the situation, Johnson brought his statement to a close with the following:

Finally, crucially, we must not forget what we can all do to fight this virus, which is to wash our hands, you knew I was going to say this, but wash our hands with soap and water. *And forgive me for repeating this* but there will be people who will be tuning into this for the first time: wash your hands with soap and hot water *for the length of time it takes to sing Happy Birthday twice*.¹¹

(Johnson, 2020)

The government's espousal of this advice constitutes one of the clearest examples in recent history of music's role in social regulation. The primary 'useful' function of music in this case is to help the public regulate their internal perception of the temporal boundaries that delineate a specific physical action officially recommended by a global health organization and a national government in the interests of preserving public health. Other attempts at encouraging the public to wash their hands effectively have included renditions of Oasis's 'Champagne Supernova' along with 'Wonderwall' and 'Supersonic', redubbed 'Wonderwash' and 'Soapersonic' respectively. A particularly popular thread on Twitter that has been widely disseminated on social media featured a playlist of songs to accompany the act of hand washing, including classic numbers from well-loved musicals such as 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', and 'The Sound of Music', alongside Culture Club's 'Karma Chameleon', Beyoncé's 'Love on Top', 'Jolene' by Dolly Parton, 'Truth Hurts' by Lizzo, and (perhaps somewhat predictably) 'Hands Clean' by Alanis Morissette. Despite these suggestions, however, the usefulness of 'Happy Birthday' is hard to eclipse. The song is equally prominent in the popular imagination, with well-known performances including Marilyn Monroe's rendition to US President John F. Kennedy in May 1962, the Beatles' 'Happy Birthday Dear Saturday Club', or even the chorus to Stevie Wonder's 'Happy Birthday', which presents an alternative imagining of the same lyrics.

Thus 'Happy Birthday' proves particularly useful in the effort to signify the duration required to wash one's hands, since it is easy to perceive as temporal in the sense that it unfolds through time and has

⁹ https://www.who.int/gpsc/clean_hands_protection/en/ (Accessed 20 August 2020). The WHO has created two additional hand-washing songs aimed at children, one enlisting the help of Peppa Pig that makes use of the melody from 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' with the words substituted for 'Wash, wash, wash your hands', and the other in partnership Africa's 'leading children's edutainment and media company', Ubongo: <https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/healthyathome/healthyathome---healthy-parenting> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

¹⁰ This of course depends on the speed at which it is sung. The matter is confused somewhat since the WHO's official guidelines elsewhere suggest that the *whole process* (presumably including drying) should take 40-60 seconds (https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/patient-safety/how-to-handwash-poster.pdf?sfvrsn=7004a09d_2&fbclid=IwAR2RhVIWfmlJhwk7DMSBOXblqFPRW2hXmJw5gKqIhngKVS41_s2UIsQbEY8), while the NHS suggest that two iterations of 'Happy Birthday' should take 'around 20 seconds' (<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/best-way-to-wash-your-hands/>).

¹¹ Emphasis added. For a full transcript of the statement, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-3-march-2020> (Accessed 20 August 2020).

a finite duration—a beginning and an end—and as such can be considered in teleological terms as having a point of destination towards which it progresses by design. Though the same might be said of drama (plays, films) or literature (poems, stories, novels), or any form of semantics or rhetoric that it is possible to recite either aloud or in one's mind, music maintains greater efficacy in this context for a number of reasons. Musical syntax at its most fundamental level is far more limited than speech, making a simple melody such as 'Happy Birthday' easier to memorize and more importantly, much harder to forget than something with specific semantic/linguistic content. Unlike language, which generally relies on grammatical and semantic systems that admit only a small degree of mutual intelligibility, the simplicity of musical syntax means that it can be understood without the need for any form of translation which might disrupt its potential for temporal regulation. Similarly, the basic rhythmic properties of musical syntax are relatively consistent compared to speech patterns that can differ widely even between dialects or regional variations within the same language. This helps to maintain a greater degree of consistency on a global scale than translating a particular phrase. Furthermore, music is both literary and non-literary, meaning that it can be written down or transmitted orally which ensures that those who are not musically literate are not excluded. In certain oral traditions, this can of course be true of poetry and drama, but these nonetheless still lack the universality attributed to music in that they preclude inclusivity through reliance on a unique linguistic system that would require translation.

The performative activity involved in music thus seems well-equipped to aid our internal regulation of temporal processes with greater accuracy than language due to the memorability, accessibility, and relative universality of its fundamental components. This is particularly so of 'Happy Birthday', which is split into four equal phrases defined by four repetitions of the same rhythmic pattern underpinning a simple diatonic melody that is also built on partial repetition (especially in the first two phrases), which makes it easier to remember. The dotted rhythmic patterns and compound time signature (3/4) also establish a strong rhythmic identity, meaning that tempo (and consequently the song's total duration) is likely to remain more or less consistent across repeated renditions. Although the song's origins are often disputed, its composition is attributed to two American kindergarten teachers Mildred and Patty Hill and their popular song 'Good Morning to All' (Figure 1). The song's versatility and simplicity meant that the Hill sisters could modify the lyrics as appropriate, replacing 'good morning to all' with 'goodbye to you', 'happy journey to you', 'happy Christmas to you', 'happy New Year to you', and so forth (Brauneis, 2009: 30).

Beyond the practical application of its musical properties, the use of 'Happy Birthday' in particular rather than other songs or melodies of equivalent duration is significant. Many other musical phrases or songs have the same properties and could be similarly effective in the regulation of temporal process. National anthems, for example, are often concise with simple hymn-like melodic contours and strong rhythmic properties that render them easy to remember. The English national anthem, 'God Save the Queen/King', shares many basic characteristics with 'Happy Birthday'—a simple diatonic melody, repeated rhythmic patterns, and so on—and a typical iteration of one verse lasts for a suitable amount of time according to the WHO's guidelines on hand washing (around 35 seconds). Indeed, in a video clip from his visit to Mologic research laboratory near Bedford on 6 March 2020, Boris Johnson can be seen washing his hands while singing 'Happy Birthday', though he is also advised (somewhat archly) that 'if you know the national anthem, you can sing it'.¹² The issue with national anthems is that, while they are memorable and encourage a certain type of social unity, they are enormously varied and their efficacy is limited to each individual nation. Aside from the issues of continuity that this raises, the inherently nationalistic content of national anthems has the potential to enhance the awareness of international social-cultural divisions and even lead to a higher degree of isolation that would be damaging in a moment

¹² The clip (<https://youtu.be/EWfZGdLeDI4>) is also of interest since Johnson's double rendition of 'Happy Birthday' lasts a total of around just 13 seconds which falls a long way short of official advice given by both the WHO and the NHS. He strips the short song of most of its characteristic rhythmic properties which are crucial in maintaining the consistency of tempo and regulation of time, suggesting a limitation to the efficacy of the practice.

of global crisis.¹³ This sort of damaging nationalist isolationism finds expression in rhetoric used by Donald Trump who referred to the COVID-19 virus as ‘the Chinese virus’ or ‘the China virus’, thereby publicly stigmatizing another nation and engendering an ‘us-against-them’ mentality of the sort that was endemic during the Cold War. This limits the potential for communication and consequently for cooperation in the mitigation of the crisis.

Figure 1. Music and lyrics of the song ‘Good Morning to All’ with the third verse ‘Happy Birthday to You’, printed in *The Golden Book of Favourite Songs* (1915) without crediting the Hill sisters’ 1893 melody.

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING.—Con. 81

mer-cy mild, God and sin-ners re-con-ciled." Joy-ful, all ye na-tions, rise,
hold Him come, Off-spring of the fa-vored one, Veiled in flesh, the God-head see;
all He brings, Brought with heal-ing in His wings. Mild He lays His glo-ry by,

Join the tri-umph of the skies; With th'an-gel-ic host pro-claim, "Christ is born in
Hall th' in-car-nate De-i-ty: Pleased, as man with men to dwell, Je-sus, our Im-
Born that man no more may die: Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them

Beth-le-hem." } Hark! the her-ald an-gels sing, "Glo-ry to the new-born King!"
man-u-ell
sec-ond birth.

GOOD MORNING TO YOU.
GOOD-BYE TO YOU—HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU.

Brightly. (To be sung standing.)

Good - morn - ing to 'you, Good - morn - ing to you,

Good - morn - ing, dear chil - dren, Good - morn - ing to all.

Importantly, as one of the most recognizable pieces of music across the world, it may be argued that ‘Happy Birthday’ (unlike national anthems) avoids privileging one national community above another and achieves a greater sense of commonality that is productive in the context of a global

¹³ A similar debate on the ethics of performing the contentiously nationalistic ‘Rule, Britannia!’ enshrouded the last night of the 2020 BBC Proms. For an outline of the debate, see <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rule-britannia-faces-axe-in-bbcs-black-lives-matter-proms-0fvhwmwlm>, and, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/aug/25/boris-johnson-scolds-bbc-over-suggestion-proms-would-drop-rule-britannia> (Accessed 28 August 2020).

pandemic, where simple and effective communication of consistent public health information is crucial to establishing a degree of stability. ‘Happy Birthday’ is thus arguably more appropriate than the national (hence local) anthems which remain unavoidably politically charged by their association with specific institutions and discourses. In examining the development of musical representation by drawing on ‘Happy Birthday’, Lyle Davidson, Larry Scripp, and Patricia Welsh (1988), noted that, in their experiments, listeners were able to represent ‘Happy Birthday’ in a number of diverse communicable ways other than conventional musical notation, highlighting in turn the ubiquity and universality of the song. While the song’s lyrics have been translated into at least 18 languages, the issue of translation is negligible since the speech patterns of each language nonetheless remain bound to the same melodic and rhythmic patterns (Figure 2). Moreover, though ‘Happy Birthday’ has lyrics that will be different in every language, the sentiment remains politically neutral and inoffensive.

Figure 2. ‘Happy Birthday’ in translation



Figure 2 provides a striking visual exemplification of the way in which music can transcend traditional divisions between national identities that are in no small part defined by language, implying, if only in a metaphorical sense, that all nations are made equal through the mutual use of the same piece of music despite their inherent differences.¹⁴ But while the use of music in this way can be said to engender commonality and consistency in a conceptual sense, the usefulness of its practical application can easily be undermined by circumstantial factors that tend not to feature so often in public discourse in the United Kingdom and Europe, such as the lack of access to soap and clean water that affects many communities across the world. As such, the extent of music’s usefulness to public health in the COVID-19 pandemic also necessarily depends on local infrastructure as much as it does upon the attributes of music itself, which creates a tension between the universality of a song like ‘Happy Birthday’ and the local circumstances in which it is used.

4. Clap for Our Carers

As an auditory and performative experience, the Clap for Our Carers movement (also known as Clap for Carers), which officially started on Thursday 26 March 2020, was necessarily defined by local

¹⁴ This diverges from Pasler’s observations about musical utility in the French Third Republic, since republicans sought to use music as a way of reinvigorating a specifically French national identity and unity rather than any sense of international unity (which is unsurprising considering the recent humiliating French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War).

circumstances, yet for a moment seemed to defy and transgress locality. Influenced by similar gestures in continental Europe, it involved a mass community-led round of applause to express gratitude for the activities of key workers in the public and health sectors during the peak of the UK's COVID-19 outbreak. Unlike the use of 'Happy Birthday', the Clap for Carers was not part of any official directive or guidance issued by the government or any other public body. Instead, it can be considered a form of grass-roots sound event the origins of which have been attributed in the UK to Annemarie Plas: 'a hugely grateful mum staying at home like so many of us, who wanted to show her appreciation for all the key workers doing their bit to keep the world turning', who has 'no ties to government or the NHS'.¹⁵ As such, the influence of the state is reduced to a more passive role, though, as shall be explored in due course, this is not to suggest that its participation is insignificant.

The act of clapping can be considered a mode of performed sound production that has a number of applications and meanings. While it is not often considered music in its own right (with the exception of certain works like Steve Reich's *Clapping Music*, 1972), clapping plays a prominent role in music, often providing a rhythmical accompaniment to song and dance. Outside musical contexts, clapping is most often associated (when performed en masse) with the approbation of the particular object at which it is directed, though it can also occasionally be used ironically to express disdain. A clap may also be used to attract attention (usually as an intervention of some sort), to express surprise or alarm, and even to test the physical boundaries of a space through a sonic exploration of its acoustic properties.

In the introduction to *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, Brandon LaBelle uses the act of clapping to make a number of observations about the dynamic properties of sound and space that are productive in exploring the dimensions of the Clap for Carers. First, he suggests that 'sound is *always* in more than one place' (emphasis in original; LaBelle, 2006: x). This means that sound exists in multiple dynamic locations other than that at which it was produced. LaBelle suggests that:

clapping describes the space from a multiplicity of perspectives and locations, for the room is here, between my palms, and there, along the trajectory of sound, appearing at multiple locations within its walls [...]. Thus, what we hear in this clapping is more than a single sound and its source, but rather a spatial event.

(LaBelle, 2006: x)

The use of the term 'spatial event' implies that clapping or applause is a performed act that takes place in both space and time, meaning that, like a musical performance, it is somehow defined by its temporal boundaries. However, a distinguishing feature of applause is that, unlike more tightly structured sound events such as a musical performance of a specific song or piece of music, it lacks a clearly delineated point of termination.¹⁶ This temporal fluidity has a couple of implications for participating in the Clap for Carers. Along with the degree of enthusiasm exhibited by participants that might be measured through the rate and volume at which they clap, the duration of applause is commonly understood to be a signifier of the level of approbation being expressed (itself related to the quality of the object at which it is directed). However, because the Clap for Carers expressed a degree of solidarity with key workers as well as gratitude for their activities, the duration of applause could also imply the extent to which participants identified with and valued the necessity of key workers and the institutions that employed them. Participation therefore took on a necessarily public dimension in which to be seen clapping was to confirm one's gratitude and valuing of key workers—in a sense to confirm one's political orientation—to oneself and to other participants and onlookers.

¹⁵ From the movement's official website, <https://clapforourcarers.co.uk/> (Accessed 20 August 2020). This website was live throughout the pandemic but has since been taken down and replaced with a short message that briefly summarizes the origins and aims of the movement but declares that the site is 'no longer updated' (last accessed 26 August 2021).

¹⁶ This is not at all intended to assume or imply that *all* music has clearly-defined temporal boundaries.

The primary benefit of this performative act during the conditions of lockdown is that it helped to generate a sense of community through the affirmation of common values during a time of crisis or suffering. Significantly, it allowed participants to engage in a 'live' performed community event that was not mediated by communication technologies such as Skype or Zoom that had increasingly replaced interpersonal contact. In this sense, the Clap for Carers can be understood as having a beneficial impact on social wellbeing by establishing a weekly zone of refuge or 'asylum' equivalent to those discussed above in which participants could escape feelings of helplessness or inactivity engendered by lockdown and connect with others. In doing so it also responds to a number of Pasler's principle observations about the public utility of music: it 'connected people to one another despite their heterogeneity', it 'mitigate[d] their sense of isolation', it helped 'build a community of feelings alongside the community of ideas', it helped people 'negotiate conflict [read: crisis]', and it 'encouraged consensus amid uncertainty' (Pasler, 2009: 86-90).

On the other side of the coin, however, the public communal nature of the Clap for Carers was also a source of tension, social anxiety, and even division for a variety of reasons. If, as suggested above, participation in a performative event like the Clap for Carers allows an individual a platform to publicly express and affirm a system of values or beliefs, then non-participation can become interpreted as a tacit signifier of an individual's disagreement with the aims of the event. This has the potential to generate anxieties around being perceived or judged negatively for non-participation which, at its most extreme, can lead to a type of witch-hunt atmosphere in which those who do not participate are considered as being not only ignorant or ungrateful, but also counterposed and even detrimental to communal social values. Moreover, if the authenticity of one's contribution is judged not only through participation but also through sincerity and enthusiasm, then the open-ended temporal dimension of applause generates similar problems. Unlike the use of 'Happy Birthday', in which the temporal properties of a sound event were exploited to achieve a sense of stability and reassurance, the temporal properties of the Clap for Carers could also become a source of social anxiety in a situation where being the first to stop clapping could be interpreted as a lack of sincerity. Despite the numerous benefits it can bring, a performed event like the Clap for Carers, though unregulated by any official public body, still carries a clear social (and unavoidably politicized) message, and therefore has the potential to create a divide between those who clap and those who do not.

As the weeks passed, this binary became ever more complex, metastasizing into two distinct but interwoven debates about if and when it was hypocritical to clap, and whether we should clap at all. The first of these is essentially an ethical debate, and arises in part when an individual or institution seen as antithetical to the belief system of a particular community or demographic chooses to publicly take part in the espousal and reproduction of the same specific belief system to which they are considered opposed. In the context of the UK lockdown, the participation of divisive political figures including Boris Johnson and the perennially clamorous Eurosceptic Nigel Farage¹⁷ in the Clap for Carers movement was seen by some as grossly hypocritical, since they were perceived as applauding the efforts and sacrifices of the very sectors they were allegedly attempting to dismantle. Though these fault lines are largely political, they take on a peculiarly moral dimension in which the problem is located in the slippage between one's words and one's deeds rather than resting solely with one's political beliefs.

Nor was this problematic moral slippage limited to the words and deeds of politicians or public figures. Members of the public were also chastized (and readily so given the advanced state of social media platforms) for hypocritical behaviours such as applauding the efforts of the health sector whilst acting in a way that could put additional strain on that same sector such as refusing to wear a face mask in public or failing to observe the protocols of social distancing. To a large extent, many of these accusations must surely have been hypothetical and not aimed at specific individuals, though the debate reached a peak in the eighth week of the Clap for Carers movement in which many across the country decided to hold street parties to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day on Friday 8

¹⁷ Former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit Party.

May 2020. This coincided with an increasing number of voices from within the target object of the applause—the key workers themselves—criticising certain aspects of the Clap for Carers movement. On 10 May, BBC Wales reported that a number of healthcare workers had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by people disregarding lockdown regulations during VE Day celebrations, and this was followed a few days later by an article considering the ethical dimensions of the situation entitled ‘When is it Hypocritical to Clap for Carers?’, which reached the somewhat banal conclusion that the behaviour of members of the public who had both applauded the NHS and disregarded lockdown measures could be considered ‘selfish’ and ‘morally dubious’ but not hypocritical (BBC, 2020).

Despite its genuinely positive aims and the very real benefits that the Clap for Carers afforded to many key workers and members of the public alike, the movement gradually became so enmeshed in divisive political and social ethics that the debate shifted to whether or not one should really be clapping at all. A major consequence of this shift of focus was that the debate no longer revolved around the immediate circumstances of lockdown or the COVID-19 pandemic itself, but the way in which the pandemic illuminated systemic issues with the underfunding and perceived dismantling of the UK’s healthcare system and public sector. At the same time as this debate was articulated by the Clap for Carers events, the moral implications of participation in the weekly ‘performances’ itself became the focus of the debate. Variations on the sentiment ‘you can’t eat applause’ appeared in various articles and opinion pieces, making explicit the uncomfortable fact that those on the front line of the effort to contain the virus were amongst the lowest earners in the UK. In hindsight this effectively helped seal the fate of the weekly Clap for Carers, which ended on 28 May 2020 after Plas suggested in an interview with the BBC that it had run its course and become too politicized (BBC, 2020).¹⁸ In the space of ten weeks, the public act of applauding key workers transformed from an act of genuine gratitude and an opportunity to express and affirm positive communal values to being the catalyst for a critical debate about the moral and ethical values of society, all of which was articulated by and structured around the participation in an auditory and performed sonic event.

The actual ‘usefulness’ of the Clap for Carers movement to public wellbeing is difficult to assess because of the complexities surrounding its politicization. Conceptually it can be understood as beneficial to two distinct (though by no means mutually exclusive) demographics: those participating in its performance, and those at whom it was aimed. Participation in the weekly events could bring a tangible sense of community and solidarity that helped to alleviate the attrition of social isolation brought about by increased lockdown measures and help to establish a sense of stability through the affirmation of common values about what was necessary for the common good. Despite the growing number of critical voices towards the end of the ten-week period in which the Clap for Carers took place, many healthcare workers also commented on how uplifting and genuinely moving they found the weekly applause, which raises the question of whether the highly critical debate that arose in its final weeks was a genuine reflection of the way most key workers felt, or whether it instead reflected the political frustrations of a specific group. The answer as always is probably along a broad scale between both possibilities that is impossible to reduce to a simple ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ reaction without obscuring the complexity of the situation. Regardless, it is worth reiterating that the Clap for Carers movement itself was not the direct target of the critical debate. Rather, the criticism was generally aimed at government policy regarding the funding of public services and healthcare and, more intriguingly, at those politicians and members of the public whose participation in the weekly Clap for Carers events was perceived as hypocritical, morally dubious, or selfish when considered alongside concurrent behaviours judged to be contrary to the movement’s core values.

In light of this, it is possible to suggest tentatively that the Clap for Carers was also useful because it highlighted an inconsistency in the way members of society perceive their own actions relative

¹⁸ A revival of the ‘Clap for Carers’ restyled as ‘Clap for Heroes’ in January 2021 was met with a somewhat lukewarm response from the public and failed to take off in the same way as it had the previous March: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55579680> (Accessed 11 January 2021).

to the actions of others, and how they might positively or negatively affect public bodies under strain. In this sense, the Clap for Carers phenomenon might also resonate with the first principle of music as public utility outlined by Pasler above, namely that it helped with the internalization of public virtues, gave individuals the opportunity to examine, reflect, and govern themselves, and opened a public discourse which encouraged greater contemplation and understanding of one's own existence and actions in relation to the existence and actions of others in public society (see above and Pasler, 2009: 84-86).

Though the full extent of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be assessed, it is clear that participation in temporally regulated (and regulating) performative acts, whether defined as musical performance or as a sonic event such as the Clap for Carers, has played a huge role in our experience of the crisis thus far. More pertinently, the crisis has highlighted the capacity of music and sound to regulate both public and private processes, as well as the extent to which the act of performance has been both the subject of public discourse surrounding public health, community, identity, and the ethical and moral codes on which our society is founded, and also the vehicle through which public discourse is articulated. The sense of community and solidarity engendered by the participation in collective performance that can be said to transcend traditional boundaries of class, race, gender, and so on would surely have been recognized by the republicans of nineteenth-century France as being valuable and highly useful in structuring a healthy, stable, and progressive public society. Yet while music and performance have been effective in mitigating feelings of isolation, anxiety, and helplessness (which easily degrades into hopelessness, and worse still, worthlessness) imposed by the strictest lockdown measures, the active participation in musical or sound performance has brought with it its own potential anxieties and uncovered some less obvious fault-lines that divide society not in terms of what one believes, says, or does, but rather along the judgement of what one *should*, morally and ethically, be doing for the continued benefit of public welfare and society and, indeed, for the global community.

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