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Remote Intimacy

Popular Music Conversations in the Covid Era

In the spring and summer of 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic forced conferences and other gatherings to cancel or radically change course, whole new genres of discussion about popular music rapidly took shape online. From fully reimagined conferences to brand-new Zoom talk series, scholars, practitioners, and enthusiasts came up with ways to convene remotely, bringing a far-flung community closer together in a time of physical distance.

My initial remit at the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, which I joined as an associate editor mere months before Covid-19 emerged, was to publish traces, transcriptions, and transmogrifications of live discussions from academic gatherings as well as multiplatform music festivals, museums and galleries, venues for music and performance, and community organizations. The pandemic has spurred transformations in our conversations that none of us could have anticipated, and we at *JPMS* are working to register and reflect on what has changed.

The previous issue of *JPMS* (32.4) featured transcriptions of two such online events: a discussion between Shana Redmond and Gus Stadler about their new books on Paul Robeson and Woody Guthrie, and the Pop Conference's "Deconstructing Little Richard" panel that was organized by Jason King and Tavia Nyong'o. For the current issue, we reached out to the organizers of several projects that have held space for conversations about popular music since the pandemic began. We invited them to take stock of how the migration of our conversations online has changed the field, how newly dominant platforms like Zoom are reshaping our discussions, and what lessons from 2020 we might carry with us into whatever comes next.

We checked in via email with Paula Harper of the Music Scholarship at a Distance series; Eric Weisbard and Kimberly Mack of the Popular Music Books in Process series; and Simon Zagorski-Thomas of the London Calling 2020 IASPM UK & Ireland Conference, the Music Production and Creative Technology research seminars, and the 21st Century Music Practice symposia. And Karen Tongson, program organizer of the 2020 Pop Conference, chose to reflect live on the process of migrating that conference online, so she and I touched base, fittingly enough, over Zoom.

As the interviews collected here make clear, the field of popular music studies—both the parts that are firmly lodged within the academy and the parts that cross over into the public realm—has met the challenges of the past year with creativity, generosity, and rigor, inventing and adapting ways to keep our conversations active while widening our circles of interlocutors. Of course, this scarcely begins to compensate for the still-escalating losses that have marked the coronavirus pandemic. But it is nevertheless encouraging to see how much we've learned since March 2020, and how many useful practices and insights we are incorporating into our field as we continue to think, speak, listen, and write our collective way into an unknowable, if everywhere audible, future.

—*Sara Marcus*

KAREN TONGSON: POP CONFERENCE

This discussion took place over Zoom in July 2020.

> JPMS: What online forms has your project taken in recent months?
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> KT: The Pop Conference was scheduled to take place in Seattle in April 2020, the moment when the state of Washington was the national hot spot for the coronavirus outbreak and pandemic. By the time we were about a month out from the conference, we realized, obviously, we couldn't have it in April. We decided we would postpone the conference, assuming that we might be able to get a handle on things by September. I had no sense, in that emergent moment of the pandemic, how much it would have to be rethought and reconfigured.
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> In the initial weeks, people were anxious about the notion of social distancing and therefore trying to create other forums of remote intimacy—which is the term that I use in my first book, and which feels incredibly apt now. So we asked: How do we find a way to gather people together that isn't just ad hoc, but could also build toward whatever future iteration there is of the conference for the duration of the pandemic?
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> That's when we started to do pop-up events. I went through the program and pulled some things that the programming committee put together, and we planned some events on Zoom and Instagram.
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> Then, as the picture became clearer, I migrated the entire Pop Con program to an online conference with almost 200 presenters. The tall order of that was to figure out how to organize it, because we couldn't give everyone an individual time slot if it was all going to be live online without any asynchronous components. So basically, I had to create a hybrid model.

The Pop Conference will take place across six days, over three weeks, in September 2020. I gave all of the presenters three options: You could create an asynchronous presentation that would then have a live discussion component built in during the conference days. You could do a live presentation but with very limited time, ten minutes or less, that we imagined more as a summary, a critical karaoke presentation (speaking over a song, developed by Joshua Clover at one of the earliest Pop Cons), or a workshop. Everything but a formal paper. And then the third option was to drop out. Based on the responses, I ended up dividing the amount of live time we spent on Zoom between discussion sessions for the asynchronous presentations and live presentations that are inclusive of discussion.

We have asynchronous topical streams: Whereas in a live conference format, we can only accommodate a certain number of papers on a panel, here we can have different asynchronous presentations all grouped together. When we get together live (or synchronously) during the days of the conference in September, these streams will get a 30-minute discussion period. People who have preexisting roundtables or panels will get 20-minute discussion periods. That's the asynchronous component, and then in the live component, there are set time limits for each format. A panel with four people gets an hour total of Zoom time, and a panel with three people gets 45 minutes.

JPMS: That's so smart, because it seems to correspond to two major modes of how people do things at Pop Con: Some people do multimedia performance things, and some people are like, "Here's this paper that I want to workshop." It doesn't necessarily break down by who's a professor and who's not a professor, but just what are you working on right now, what stage is that at, and what kind of presentation makes most sense.

KT: It's interesting what the presenters prioritized: If they wanted time to spell something out, they could do an asynchronous presentation. Others just really wanted the liveness of engagement.

JPMS: In the spring and summer before the rescheduled conference, Pop Con hosted a wide range of other online events: a DJ session, guest curators of Pop Con Instagram, the keynote about Little Richard that just happened on Zoom last night so successfully. You've already been harnessing so many different formats within the online platforms that are available to us. Can you speak to those?

KT: I've really tried to be collaborative around thinking about how we could accomplish programming online, using different platforms. In the beginning, people were sort of attached to everything being on Zoom. I looked to the artists in my milieu, like people who are visual artists, people who do other kinds of media works, who are writers and who are affiliated with larger organizations, and I saw that they were using Instagram Live to great effect to do weekly sessions or conversations. And I also looked to my friends who were party promoters or who ran clubs to see, well, how do they run a virtual club? What does that look like on Twitch or on Zoom? Just absorbing that in the first weeks of the shelter-in-place orders allowed me to approach our programming committee and ask them, OK, what modes would you be comfortable working in?

We never had a Pop Con Instagram account, so Oliver Wang started one for us. We're still looking for someone to administer it and give it true attention. Let

me pause for a moment and say that Pop Con is starting to coalesce into a more official organization—that's why all of our socials and our website are some iteration of popcon.org. We are no longer exclusively affiliated with MoPop, the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle. What we do together is much larger than the annual conference at this point. So that's why we launched with a double DJ set on Instagram, which taught us a lot about intellectual property law [*laughs*] or the way people police copyright on different platforms. Because she didn't have her DJ equipment at home, JD Samson decided to do these thematic playlists that were premixed instead of a DJ set. We had discussions and chats about each song together in the chat window of a Zoom while we listened together.

The larger-scale events, the ones officially hosted by MoPop that require registration, are webinars. So we found ways of using the informal social media platforms that people have been using to get together on, and combine that with the institutional responses to the migration online. The Pop Con community is very accommodating and eager, so it hasn't been difficult to get people to join in.

JPMS: Can you reflect on some of the things that have been working well about the online events and some of the challenges that they've entailed?

KT: I think what works well, obviously, is that people who wouldn't normally have the opportunity to get together except at great expense have been able to get together. So for a community like Pop Con, scattered all over the world, that means that we can have one of our regulars who lives in Berlin come and join us for an event. All of those digital utopian promises feel like they've arrived in some way; and bringing a connected world together, cheesy as that is, seems one of the benefits of it.

The primary drawback, though, and I think it's the thing that everybody says about all our online experiences post-Covid, is the whole Zoombombing thing. This directly affected one of the book events hosted by Eric Weisbard, Carl Wilson, and Kimberly Mack. It restricts some of the larger things that we want to do to webinars on Zoom, where you don't get to see everybody's faces, you don't get to interact and engage, you don't get to engage responses other than in a chat window—which is exciting and which feels very early days of AOL, but people miss seeing other people. So it refocuses and reprioritizes presenters and may reestablish certain hierarchies of listening, viewing, expertise. And it fails to adequately represent the fullness and beauty of the kind of community that Pop Con is, which is one that's deeply engaged and conversational. We have the chat windows, but the thing that we miss most in an age of social and physical distancing is that face-to-face contact. And we're deprived of even virtual face-to-face in webinar formats because we have to lock down against the assault on programming about race, gender, and sexuality, because of the heinous climate of hate that has been allowed to percolate and explode in this country. So we're atomized, and we're forced to exist in this securitized format.

It would be great if it was a little more loose and Wild West–y or whatever. It would be great if Zoombombing was like a fun, music show type, mosh pit, stage-diving type thing. We don't have that capacity to be as spontaneous in stricter online formats.

At yesterday's Little Richard event, the only way I could see who was there depended on who commented in the chat window. But that requires a lot of moderation; there were like three moderators there for like 100 people. So part of being successful at this is wrapping our minds around the kind of administrative labor these new platforms require in order to mitigate hostile interruptions.

JPMS: Is there any particular event online that you've organized or participated in over the past couple of months that stands out in your memory in some way?

KT: The accent conference at UMass Amherst really dramatically showed me what was possible. There was a richness of engagement intellectually, but the organizers were also extremely mindful of the time for each presentation. That's where I got the idea for a 10-minute limit, because I realized, oh, that's the attention span right there: an informal and loose 10 minutes. The organizers created ways for people to be present, to be seen, to engage, without the excessive reliance on the platform's security measures. Especially given how early it happened in the pandemic—this was in beginning of May—I thought it was a tremendously agile adjustment to make, and it became the model for me of what I want from events in the future. At that conference, presenters were unmuted on video the whole time—you could see all the presenters—and their audio was unmuted when they were presenting, and during presentations, audience members were asked to mute audio and mute video. But then during discussion, everybody could unmute video—you could at the very least see everybody who wanted to be seen.

It also helped me think about pushing us at Pop Con to figure out what was truly important for us to share. It made me want to push us towards concision. Especially for academics, I think we're obsessed with trying to cram in as much information as possible to demonstrate the depth of our research knowledge, as if brevity means a lack of rigor. I think one of the things short presentations underscore is that concision is a skill, it's an art, and it's extremely rigorous.

So when I see pushback about the limited time that we're giving presenters for Pop Con this year, I'm like, honestly, just give it some thought! What truly needs to be conveyed, and what needs to be engaged in a live encounter that isn't just about you vomiting out everything that you know about a topic? Part of what a short format does is it demands a much more empathic relationship to your audience. It demands that you think about your interlocutors in real ways, not just as people who are there to admire your brilliance.

JPMS: What do you miss most about in-person real-time discussions, and are there ways that we can work toward better approximating or compensating for those losses as we move into what could be easily another year of gathering in this way?

KT: What I miss most is not the live in-person presentations or discussions themselves; what I miss most is the scenes of conviviality afterwards. For example, with the Little Richard event we just had, there was an incredible sense of enthusiasm and fun. In person, that usually spills over beyond the time that we share the same room together where presentations happened.

I haven't yet said, "Well, let's set up an afterparty, let's set up one of those weird Houseparties or Zoom afterparties for these things." Because that's

where the real conversation actually happens, I've always felt that, whether it's at academic talks, conferences, or shows. What I miss most is the afterparty: scenes of conviviality, the spillover that allows us to revel in what just happened. Maybe we can see what it's like to append optional let's-continue-hanging-out sessions after these things.

JPMS: I did that with my last class this semester, I was like, "All right, class is over, but usually we would all walk out together. So if anyone wants to stick around . . . ?" Nobody stuck around. It's too awkward, we're not used to it.

KT: Yeah. We're all relearning what that's all about. Even attending Zoom birthday parties. It's like, "Happy birthday!" and then, "What do we do now?" A lot more thought has to go into these scenes of conviviality, but I think that is what we all miss most. The interstitial moments are where the true bonding happens. We've got to figure out ways to do that—I think we're starting to use chat in ways that are fomenting that. Our challenge is to sort out what other ways we can find to feel that togetherness again.

JPMS: The last question is the flip side to what do we miss and what isn't being replicated or compensated for. What has been generative or enabling or inclusive here? Is there anything that we're learning now that we want to hang on to in the hoped-for future when we all get back together and have the opportunity to meet in person when we want to?

KT: I think what we're learning is exactly that kind of digital utopian stuff that I mentioned earlier. But part of what I'm personally learning is to think more about the dissolution of certain distances and boundaries between myself and people who I want to collaborate with. Even just living in Los Angeles, it's like, "Well, if you live on that side of town, I might not get to see you very often." But now if I do want to, say, see my best friend who lives in New York, it's not that hard to do. These technologies have always been available, I guess, but we fell out of the practice of reaching out in that way, probably because the cheapness of air travel made it possible for a lot of people to think of themselves existing in a jet-setting, face-to-face world. We limited how we imagine collaboration in those ways. Part of what the pandemic has shown me is, number one, a greater sense and awareness of the challenges people who suffer a lack of mobility face, and that sense, again, of finding ways to be more collaborative, while shedding our regional biases, or all the other excuses not to reach out to people who would bring expertise or knowledge or that special something to the conversation. There really doesn't seem to be any excuse for that anymore.

That's what I think we're all learning is, that we didn't have to spend thousands of dollars to all meet in this one place to have this one thing. We understand now and have a better sense of what the true value of being physically together might be versus getting the conversation started in a different way before that interface happens. It's also environmentally more sound.

JPMS: I agree completely, especially now from my little home office in Indiana. It's great to feel that nobody's any less accessible to each other than I am here. I used to feel like, "Oh, I'm so out of the loop because I'm in this place where a lot of people aren't." Now it's not as big of a deal.

KT: Yeah, it really has dampened the FOMO vibes! Some people are like, "Oh, everybody's Zooming into this and that and am I not Zooming enough?"—you know, people have *feelings* about this stuff. But whoever used to run around the world to do a bunch of stuff tends to be doing that online anyway. Like my friend who's the director of the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong used to travel everywhere. But now he's still going to art openings in LA and New York, only he's doing it at odd hours from his place in Hong Kong. He used to actually fly out to all of that stuff. It's great he and the environment can take a break from all that.

JPMS: There's so much that's unpleasant and unjust and cruel and miserable about our current times, and the fact that we're learning things, and are managing to talk anyway, doesn't cancel out any of that other stuff, but it's nice to take a moment to just think about what we are learning and how it can actually enrich our discussions during this time, and also during whatever comes next.

KT: I would also say that people are learning about things that they normally didn't take the time to learn. So many people, especially in the wake of this summer's uprisings, are seeking out and going to antiracism seminars. That used to be something that you'd have to seek out with determination in person; it was much harder to learn directly from organizers and activists. But now, you can go to an abolition seminar or talk by Angela Davis, or hear N.K. Jemisin talk about her latest novel, in ways that used to be limited to those who were already looped into certain networks or institutions.

You know, I feel really sad that we never got to have a drink and a meal in LA. Now I have to send you some cocktails! I'll have to figure out some way to get something from LA over to you. My friend was just telling me that they just ordered Hippo in the other day and I was like, "Oh, that's soooo good."

JPMS: That was absolutely our sanity-saving—we did Hippo two or three times during the shutdown. When I had eaten in the restaurant, I was like, "Oh, this is fine. I don't really need to come back. It's fine." But in the middle of a pandemic, getting it at home: "This is the best food I've ever tasted."

KT: I've had that same feeling about a lot of delivery. I normally don't even eat fries, but I got some fries with like an insane grass-fed burger from Belcampo and I was like, "Oh my God. These are the best things I've ever had."

PAULA HARPER: MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP AT A DISTANCE

1. What online forms has your project taken in recent months?

With Will Robin, I co-founded a daily Zoom colloquium series in March 2020 called Music Scholarship at a Distance. The goal was to give scholars a chance to share work that they had been scheduled to present at recently canceled conferences, in a one-paper-a-day format. All told, Music Scholarship at a Distance (MSaaD or #MusicColloq for short) hosted over 35 papers in its normal run—everything from scholars presenting their first conference paper, to seasoned veterans, with some alternate format panels and workshops in between—to an audience that daily ranged between 30 and 100 music scholars and supporters. We also hosted two weeks of the Teaching Music History Conference, in

a similar format, and the door is open for us to continue hosting special or one-off events, like watch parties for pre-recorded AMS annual meeting videos.

2. What has worked well about this in general?

Creating a community! To garner participants and attendees, Will and I circulated the announcement to listservs and to our various academic communities on social media. Since we were putting this together early in the pandemic timeline, the colloquium series was something that provided a schedule, structure, and a small degree of academic normalcy to people's early-quarantine days and weeks. We decided on a single daily presentation, rather than a traditional multi-day multi-panel conference format, to try to cut down on burnout and broaden accessibility for presenters and attendees alike—and ultimately, we had a number of people who became regulars, attending every or nearly every day, along with people who only dropped in for one or a few presentations. By a few weeks in, many people knew each other's names, each other's cats, each other's kids and Zoom backgrounds, etc. I know that I wound up creating relationships with people who had previously only been vaguely familiar usernames on Musicology Twitter.

It was really great to be able to make the space—we had a number of scholars give their first-ever presentations at #MusicColloq, and the community couldn't have been more supportive, with questions and feedback and encouragement throughout. Additionally, I feel like we provided a proving ground for some digital conference strategies that other folks have gone on to implement or improve. I hope that we have been useful as a low-stakes tryout for some aspects of higher-attendance society conferences that happened over the summer and into the fall.

3. What's one challenge that going or being online has introduced for your project? Has there been a resolution or does the difficulty persist?

Ours was created in response to the pandemic, so it was virtual from conception. That said, we experienced our share of hiccups and learning-curve problems, from Zoombombings to various other small-scale technical difficulties. In part because we were working so small and so ad hoc, we were able to be pretty nimble and learn quickly from our mistakes—with just the two of us moderating, we wound up crafting an on-the-fly set of best practices that we tweaked whenever necessary, as well as keeping abreast of all the technological changes and updates that the platform itself was implementing.

4. Tell us about one online conversation, one distanced discussion, or some other event that you organized or participated in over the past few months that stands out in your memory. Perhaps it was particularly generative; perhaps it was especially pleasurable; perhaps it felt the most, or the least, like a real-time discussion. What made it special?

Mine is deeply indulgent, but I'm going to indulge! So, for the "regular" run of Music Scholarship at a Distance, Will Robin (my colloquium co-founder) gave the first paper, and we decided that I'd give the last. I'd spent the preceding seven weeks on the administrative side—helping run tech, doing social media promotion, moderating and watching people's presentations, seeing the community of MSaaD develop a crew of

regulars with a wide array of expertise and a weird web of inside jokes. When it came time to give my paper, as the last regularly recurring session of our first run of colloquia, I was pretty emotional about saying goodbye to that community, and it was clear that many of them were as well. As I gave the paper, I saw the notifications pop up for incoming chats—as I mention in a few other places below, one of the joys of Music Scholarship at a Distance was the enthusiasm and collegiality with which the community used the chat function to respond in real time—but I did my best to ignore the notifications as I was giving the paper, of course! The question period came and went, and Will and I said our goodbyes—but then I downloaded the chat log, and had a whole separate record of my paper, from the perspective of a community of listeners and real-time responders. They had clever suggestions, derailing pun-based jokes, and interesting lines of inquiry I hadn't considered, and then the whole thing ended—as chat records of virtual conferences tend to do—with a barrage of encouragement and congratulations. That chat log is perhaps one of my most treasured pandemic objects.

5. What do you miss the most about in-person and real-time discussions of popular music? Do you think there's any way to better approximate or compensate for these missing aspects as our discussions remain online this year?

So far, I miss the fortuitous coffee line or conference bar meetings from big conferences, or the coffee break discussions at small ones—the places where we catch up with acquaintances we haven't spoken to in a while, where by necessity we get drawn into conversation about our work or the paper we just heard. That said, many of the virtual conference spaces I've encountered thus far—including and especially #MusicColloq—have seen attendees make copious use of side-channel functions like Zoom chat, to engage with ongoing papers and with other attendees in productive conversation, resource sharing, and good-natured joking. I know that keeping a chat functionality open is a luxury that, for large conferences, could involve moderation concerns—but I think that my favorite experiences so far have included this component.

6. Are there any aspects of the switch to online that have proved unexpectedly generative, enabling, or inclusive? Are there any aspects of what we're doing now that we should hang on to even once we are able to return to largely in-person events? Are there any lessons from what we're doing now that we can apply to our work and field more broadly, now and in the future?

Many people have mentioned the increased accessibility in various virtual formats. Presenters who couldn't have otherwise made it to conferences for financial reasons or other reasons can now attend virtually. Virtual formats also enable accessibility options for presentation engagement, like closed captions. These are obviously great, and perhaps the pandemic has made strides in opening up a hybrid conference future, where these are default options. I'm even a fan of the pre-recorded paper with live questions or feedback, which seems like it might limit technological glitches and going-over-time issues in an in-person setting, as well as letting the presenter breathe and focus on responding to questions and engaging in conversation around their work. Finally, I'll

just shout out once again my enthusiasm for the live chat feed, which I've seen used in both deeply productive (knowledgeable scholars dropping links to relevant sources!) and highly amusing (topical puns!) ways. It feels like the best parts of the heyday of live-tweeting conferences, without the distraction of having to be on Twitter, and I'd love to find a way of recreating it at "live" conferences.

7. What's another question I should have asked, and its answer?

I'm a bit curious about the question of platforms. We decided on Zoom pretty early on, and it seems like quite the industry standard at this point, but it has been interesting to observe what virtual projects are making successful use of other platforms. I know the North American Conference on Video Game Music hosted their mid-June conference on Twitch (https://vgmconference.weebly.com/), an inspired resituating of particular scholarship into a platform built around that scholarship's subject matter. I also saw a "Twitter conference" in which people tweeted their papers as threads. On the flip side, there's a danger of overload—it's a lot to ask scholars and attendees to learn a host of new platforms, or to try to treat Twitter as a conference space, or to navigate webs of interlinked platforms in an attempt to replicate various aspects of traditional conference-going. Basically, I'm eager to see new models get tried out, and to continue learning about the successes and drawbacks of other similar virtual endeavors!

KIMBERLY MACK AND ERIC WEISBARD: POPULAR MUSIC BOOKS IN PROCESS SERIES

1. What online forms has your project taken in recent months?

> KIMBERLY MACK: I am one of the co-organizers for the Popular Music Books in Process Series, a collaboration between the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, the Pop Conference, and IASPM-US. The weekly events take place on Zoom.
>
> ERIC WEISBARD: Me too!

2. What has worked well about this in general? What have been the major challenges?

> EW: I have been impressed by the power of combining live sessions with recordings of those sessions. The in-person events, mediated still though they are, give us the chance to see each other, hear each other, participate in a ritual that affirms each other. Since many can't attend live, having the recording means that, on average, three to five times as many people "view" sessions as attend them. That spreads the word and gives our events added influence and accessibility. It's a great one-two punch. Also, I personally like the once-a-week commitment. It was harder for me to dive into the Pop Conference for several hours a day over six days over three weeks, and when it was over I felt a bit drained. The Tuesday afternoon events are now part of my routine; I look forward to them.
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> KM: Regarding the challenges, we did have Zoombombers during one of our events. Eric can probably say more about that than I can since he is the one who hosts the Zoom sessions from the tech side, and he had to handle this

unexpected disruption as it unfolded. Since implementing some security fixes, however, this has not happened again.

EW: A Zoombomb during one session completely took me by surprise, though the attendees reassembled, we taped a second bit, and got enough for a full video recording. Then the fiend returned. Since, I have put in a bit more security and prepped for a return intrusion—not sure that made the difference, might just have been lucky so far. As for the second challenge: when the school year started our live numbers did fall somewhat, as attendees had more conflicts. I wonder if a Tuesday night event might be better than Tuesday afternoon—could be we'll try that in 2021.

4. Tell us about one online conversation, distanced discussion, or other event that you organized or participated in over the past few months that stands out in your memory. Perhaps it was particularly generative; perhaps it was especially pleasurable; perhaps it felt the most, or the least, like a real-time discussion. What made it special?

KM: I am happy to describe the Popular Music Books in Process Series as a rousing success. Having the chance to witness extremely talented popular music writers sharing their intelligent and creative ideas with an enthusiastic community of writers and thinkers gives me something wonderful to look forward to each week. In almost every case, the author has been in a conversation with an interlocutor instead of reading a paper or a very long excerpt from their work, and it is exactly that setup that has made these sessions work so well. I have thoroughly enjoyed the conversations between writers and friends—sometimes one music writer interviewing another, or two writers with overlapping topics/ genres/approaches talking about their works and their processes together. Also, given that it is a book series, there is a focus on methods and processes that does not normally occur in traditional, shorter conference presentations. Another strength of this series, and what has made it feel most like a face-to-face discussion, is both the fact that most people leave their cameras on, and the structure of our Q&As. During the question and answer period, people unmute themselves, ask their questions directly, and even sometimes ask follow-up questions, making for an experience that nicely approximates a face-to-face discussion.

EW: Sixteen sessions in, I refuse to give one the only thumbs-up! To be sure, some were elaborate, like Alisha Lola Jones bringing two singers AND a full panel of guest commentators. Many were simply conversations between two friends or colleagues. But I was just as happy to see Matthew J. Jones, an independent scholar who left academia to teach in a grades 5-12 program in Houston, finishing one book and starting another in the process, present solo and turn out not to be alone at all—he fielded a question from an attendee with a parallel pedagogical experience, who noticed how the way he taught now affected the way he wrote now. In general, the sessions have provided unhurried, low-stakes affirmations that writing a book, however difficult the process, puts you in great company, with other writers and other readers. For 2020, no small compensation.

5. What do you miss the most about in-person and real-time discussions of popular music? Do you think there's any way to better approximate or compensate for these missing aspects as our discussions remain online this year?

> KM: I actually like traveling—flying in planes, staying in hotel rooms, all of it. And, of course, I love seeing old and new friends, going out to dinner, and meeting people for a drink after the panels are over for the day. There is no way to truly replicate any of that, but I do think online events where we can see each other in grid (or Brady Bunch) view, experience smart and dynamic conversations between passionate colleagues, actively participate in the chat rooms, and occasionally unmute ourselves to ask questions and engage in further conversation, help to make the proverbial lemonade out of lemons. And there are probably more creative ways to use the technology to enhance our online interactions in an effort to approximate what we have lost. For instance, in an online conference, we might have happy-hour breakout rooms where people can have a drink (non-alcoholic or alcoholic) while chatting with fellow participants.

> EW: What we lose is the ability to break away with people and find connections in the off-hours, the hallway conversations, the meals. That's real and hard to duplicate virtually without, gulp, still more Zoom time.

6. Are there any aspects of the switch to online that have proved unexpectedly generative, enabling, or inclusive? Are there any aspects of what we're doing now that we should hang on to even once we are able to return to largely in-person events? Are there any lessons from what we're doing now that we can apply to our work and field more broadly, now and in the future?

> KM: The reality is that the whole academic conference structure is inherently exclusive because everyone does not have access to research funds, or other types of financial resources. And even if everyone did suddenly have reliable research funding, or great financial means, there are a finite number of conferences one can reasonably attend in a year. Online conferences—provided that would-be attendees have reliable Internet connections—break those barriers down. I, for instance, was able to attend parts of the IASPM UK & Ireland conference earlier this summer (and I was impressed by what I saw and heard!). If my other spring and summer conference and personal travel had not been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, and the IASPM UK & Ireland conference had remained face-to-face in London, I would not have had the time or money to attend. So whenever we can gather together again, I think we should still aim for a mix of online and face-to-face conferences and symposia. This will allow more people to share their work with national (or even international) audiences, thus taking an important step towards truly democratizing conference participation. Also, I would like to see non-traditional face-to-face conference presentations with much more regularity in the future, including one-on-one interviews and other non-paper-based panels.

> EW: Conferences having revealed themselves to be white whales, I suspect that online versions should now at least alternate with the in-person stuff. But the bigger lesson, to me, is that if the advantage of in-person is space—all of us sharing

it—the advantage of online events is time: we don't have to bunch up and cram a year's worth of networking and intellectuality into one weekend. Who knew that conferencing needed a Slow Food movement?

7. What's another question I should have asked, and its answer?

EW: Maybe a question about what doors open intellectually when you don't have to be in a live space. The chat function on Zoom has become the new Twitter; that's a clear one. The digital lecture has become the new live talk, easily preserved and to me an important new form. And to the extent that an event can stretch out, germinate, it's closer to what I think we do intellectually in gaining our knowledge, hashing out ideas, writing and rewriting, teaching and rewriting once more, doing up journal articles or magazine versions. We're in it for the long haul, right? I think that online scholarship can approximate that better than live conferencing, for all of the latter's carnivalesque rewards.

SIMON ZAGORSKI-THOMAS: LONDON CALLING 2020 IASPM UK & IRELAND CONFERENCE, MUSIC PRODUCTION AND CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH SEMINARS (MuPaCT), AND 21ST CENTURY MUSIC PRACTICE

1. What online forms has your project taken in recent months?

Rather stupidly, I've taken on three online projects since the Covid-19 lockdown:

1. The London Calling 2020 IASPM UK & Ireland Conference, which we ran for 10 weeks from May 19 to July 31, 2020 (https://london-calling-iaspm2020.com)

2. The fortnightly Music Production and Creative Technology research seminars (MuPaCT), which started in May 2020 as an ongoing project (https://mupact.com/). MuPaCT took a break in August 2020 with a plan to restart in September, but the heightened workload of everyone involved has meant that has been delayed until late 2020.

3. The 21st Century Music Practice symposia (http://www.c21mp.org/)—there was going to be a series of seven symposia, but for a variety of reasons the first two were completed and the others have been delayed. I hope to restart them after the IASPM Conference, but that has not happened yet (as of November 2020).

These have all been based on WordPress websites and have involved a combination of video presentations (mostly embedded from Vimeo and YouTube) and text/image/audio content. The videos have been made and uploaded by the presenters themselves, except for the online discussions which have involved using the record function in Zoom meetings and, occasionally, YouTube Live.

I am also the series editor for the new Cambridge University Press Elements series on 21st Century Music Practices. This is a dual-format platform—online and print—for monographs of 20,000–30,000 words. The first four outputs are currently in the peer review/production machinery and the first is due for publication before the end of 2020.

Most of the existing Elements series are in the sciences, but Rupert Till is currently starting one on Popular Music, and I am also on the advisory board for that.

2. What has worked well about this in general?

3. What's one challenge that going/being online has introduced for your project? Has there been a resolution or does the difficulty persist?

Rather than talk about pros and cons separately, I would like to highlight some particular aspects that are unique to online formats and talk about how they not only have positive or negative aspects but also make you respond in a different way, alter the social dynamics, and/or allow or force you to think about the process in a different way:

- Synchronous/asynchronous. Obviously, being able to choose between engaging in real time or post hoc is a huge issue. One of the most striking things about the IASPM Conference has been that the online Zoom sessions typically have fewer than 50 people present and yet there are over 450 people registered on the conference (and you don't need to be registered to view the content, so there may be many more viewers). It's quite difficult to track (and to be honest I'm not very interested in tracking) the number of viewers, because they happen both "live" in the Zoom sessions and YouTube live streams and "post hoc" in the views on the website and YouTube directly. Despite what universities and government departments feel about metrics, the influence of a presentation is only tangentially related to the number of people who see it. Likewise, with comments and questions, these take very different forms in the Zoom sessions and in the website comments section (based on the WordPress blogging features)—and people have different levels and types of motivations; plus, each format encourages different types of question and levels of detail. It's hard to quantify, but I would say participants engaged with both "live" questions and comments sections equally—obviously people had individual preferences but the overall usage was roughly equally divided. The comments sections involved mostly one-to-one conversations while the Zoom Q&A sessions encouraged more group discussion. The comments section also allowed for the "deeper dive" that is more characteristic of the conversations that continue into the coffee breaks at "face-to-face" events. The more variety there is, the richer the potential for experience, but that leads me on to . . .

- Energy levels and engagement. In designing all of these events—and partly because of my experience in running research communities online and two previous online conferences, for my Performance in the Studio project in 2012 and the Classical Music Hyper-Production project in 2015—I was very aware of the problems of user fatigue. Sitting on your own with a computer, no matter how interactive the technology/process, is far more draining than being in a room with people. Also, no university is currently (as far as I am aware) allowing staff a week "away" to "attend" an online conference. Indeed, my impression from anecdotal/personal communication is that there is a clear danger that universities can use the switch to online events as a way to squeeze more work out of faculty staff and to shift more research activity into their

personal time. The logistics of current teaching (for staff delivering courses entirely online or through a blended approach) makes it far more difficult to keep work separate from "life." The majority of the IASPM activity and all of the MuPaCT and C21MP events have taken place during evenings and weekends. I was therefore conflicted about the idea of turning IASPM into a 10-week part-time activity, because it de facto established it as something to be engaged with outside of your customary workload—just at a time when everyone's workload was increased exponentially by the online teaching requirements of COVID-19. However, at the same time, it has proved to be an escape and a morale booster—a reminder of what we're about. The other thing about these events is that, despite any branding that is applied to them, putting them online distances the ownership from any university and gives a stronger sense of ownership to the academic participants. One side benefit is that I haven't had to deal with the usual nightmare of room allocation/booking, logistics, catering, student helpers, etc. It may just be my personality, but I find a WordPress site infinitely simpler than that.

- <u>Parallel forms of discussion</u>. One of the interesting aspects of Zoom (and Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Blackboard Collaborate, etc.) is that the chat function creates possibilities for public and private streams of "note passing in class" and metacommentary. These are mostly not captured in the video recordings and so they become ephemeral and fleeting as well as potentially invisible and selective/exclusive. And, of course, the asynchronous forms of discussion and comment are usually editable by the participants—allowing for the archive that remains for posterity to be tidied up, corrected, or even sanitized. As has become usual in recent years, there has been a whole load of social media going on in parallel with the sessions—mostly to promote engagement rather than to discuss—but this doesn't seem to have been affected by moving the conference online. It is interesting to me that so little academic discussion happens on social media while so much political discussion does—but maybe that's just in my bubble.

- <u>"Flattening" of the social process</u>. The fact that the technologies of online distribution restrict all the visual and aural sources to a single point source (the screen and the speaker) and, in addition, have created a series of protocols that attempt to mitigate this, creates various issues. Our ability to "look around the room" is limited by the constraints of the two main formats (Presenter and Gallery in Zoom) and by the ability of participants to make themselves invisible by switching their cameras off. The existence of breakout rooms is something that we haven't used in IASPM-UKI, MuPaCT, or C21MP, because they are designed for workshops and therefore managed by the organizers rather than being user-controllable. That will change no doubt (if it hasn't already) and will allow multiple social interactions to happen simultaneously on the visual level as well as via chat. Similarly, the audio protocols are somewhat editable at the moment, but the default—of the loudest signal being used as a switch to reduce the volume of any others— makes normal, overlapping conversation much more problematic. Obviously,

breakout rooms would mitigate this to some extent as well in that conversations can split off from the main group, and by switching off the audio-ducking technologies the overlap problem can be slightly reduced. However, the low quality of microphones and speakers on computers and the fact that all sounds emanate from the single source (speaker)—and, of course, the data compression that streaming audio and video requires when bandwidth gets strained—these all mean that our ability to understand the social dynamics of a situation through details of spatial audio, vocal timbre, etc.—anything other than the semantics of the words—is reduced by these technologies.

- <u>Conference presentations as publications</u>. Although there has always been a certain amount of variation in the level of peer review and post-event publication of presentations at conferences, the creation of websites full of conference presentation videos throws up some interesting questions about the nature of publications. Conferences have often provided a forum in which to try ideas out as part of the developmental process for future publication—and, indeed, their ephemeral nature has also allowed academics to present the same materials with only limited variation in different fora. These new formats put academics in the same dilemma as comedians when they started to release their stand-up shows as DVDs (or on YouTube)—you can't keep performing your DVD material in the live shows, because the audience has already seen it! It does then mean that we have to have a discussion about the position of conferences and online versions of them in the broader context of research publication and dissemination.

4. Tell us about one online conversation, distanced discussion, or some other event that you organized or participated in over the past few months that stands out in your memory. Perhaps it was particularly generative; perhaps it was especially pleasurable; perhaps it felt the most, or the least, like a real-time discussion. What made it special?

There are two that stand out. One is the first MuPaCT event, which went on for nearly four hours because we were all so glad to have found a way to talk about our research. That was back on May 6, so before all the others, and there were several people there who I only ever see at conferences and who it was great to catch up with. We turned the recording off after a while and just had a really good chat about research and teaching. The other was the first C21MP symposium which was, in some ways, the opposite: we were all people who would never usually get into the same room together because of geography, musical styles, and academic disciplines, and so the discussion had a really interesting edge and vibrancy for me.

5. What do you miss the most about in-person and real-time discussions of popular music? Do you think there's any way to better approximate or compensate for these missing aspects as our discussions remain online this year?

I'm probably having more sustained real-time discussion about popular music than ever before, but I certainly miss the face-to-face aspect—I've talked about some in the

"flattening" section above. Some possible future changes are technological: multiple speakers and screens might be possible in hybrid events where small groups convene in different countries/regions—I believe https://music-psychology-conference2018.uni-graz.at/en/about/ did this in 2018 and are doing it again. That would allow for more sustainable conferences when the restrictions do get lifted. Some are about protocols: setting and managing expectations about the level of engagement with discussion/comments, number of hours, etc., etc. I think improving the audio would be a big deal, but perhaps more important would be allowing participants to hold events where they can exercise some control over the social situation—e.g., being able to hop from "table to table" via breakout rooms in Zoom to hold individual and small group chats. In other words—going to the coffee shop or the pub with the other participants. This is still not an option as far as I can see on platforms such as Zoom and Teams.

6. Are there any aspects of the switch to online that have proved unexpectedly generative, enabling, or inclusive? Are there any aspects of what we're doing now that we should hang on to even once we are able to return to largely in-person events? Are there any lessons from what we're doing now that we can apply to our work and field more broadly, now and in the future?

I think the two features I outlined in answer to question 4 are important in relation to:

1. Creating funding-independent and ecologically sustainable communities who can "meet" regularly without the expense, pressure, and formality of a conference.

2. Allowing conversations among people who would rarely or never choose to use up their limited travel resources to meet because their relationships are cross-disciplinary or about limited levels of overlap between their research interests. I think there are many things I'm currently involved in because of Covid-19 that we can maintain in the future—MuPaCT is actually an ongoing project anyway—to allow a small but open group of nerds from around the world to exchange research ideas and talk about the subject they love.

The reasons that we chose to move the IASPM Conference forward from September 2020 to the summer of that year were twofold. First, we didn't (and still don't) know what was going to be happening in and beyond September, and so partly it was a question of working with what we knew we had. Secondly, I wanted to use the 10-week project to keep the flame of research burning during what was going to be a very troubled and lonely spring and summer for many people. For many of us, thinking about our research is often a release from the strictures and boredom of administration and assessment (although assessment can and should be fun too). The reasons for the other two projects (MuPaCT and C21MP) were to bring two other communities together. I had hoped there might be more interaction between the three projects, but the simple truth was that I took too much on and had to scale back.

In some ways, the lesson is an obvious one. We had to rush into this for various reasons and so—despite learning from my previous online conferences, working with Katia Isakoff and Shara Rambarran on the Art of Record Production conferences, website, and journal and from Rupert Till putting Crosstown Traffic 2018 papers on YouTube—this was an experiment. We are all researchers, and we have to now look at the "data" that this experiment produced, conduct an analysis, and produce some conclusions that can suggest further experiments and practical implementations. ■